The Spirituality Revolution
The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality

David Tacey

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The spirituality revolution is a spontaneous movement in society, a significant new interest in the reality of spirituality and its healing effects on life, health, community and well being.

*The Spirituality Revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality* recognises that we have outgrown the ideals and values of previous times and reveals an image of the spiritual situation of our era. Recent discoveries in physics, biology, psychology and ecology have begun to restore status to previously discredited spiritual visions of reality and this book illustrates the ways in which we might uncover a universal spiritual wisdom that could transform our splintered world. Topics explored include the current state of the Western experience of spirit, our need for spiritual guidance when we cannot turn to organised religion in their traditional forms, and the creative potentials of spirit in education, personal experience, contemporary philosophy and popular feeling for the environment.

*The Spirituality Revolution* addresses a major social issue which requires immediate attention if we are to creatively respond to spiralling outbreaks of depression, suicide, addiction and psychological suffering. It is a much-needed contribution to the field, of great interest to analytical psychologists, counsellors, educators and social workers, and to all those interested in spirituality and the future of religion.

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To the memory of Molly Scrymgour who introduced me to the interior life.
the spirituality revolution

—the emergence of contemporary spirituality—

DAVID TACEY
## CONTENTS

EPIGRAPHS  

INTRODUCTION: The spirituality revolution 1

**Part 1 — The present situation**

1 Rising waters of the spirit 11
2 Spirit without form 29

**Part 2 — Youth spirituality**

3 Going to the underground stream 47
4 Student spirituality and educational authority 57
5 Mind the gap: youth spirituality and religion 73
6 Spiritual education: a difficult kind of bliss 89
7 Losing my religion, recovering the sacred 103

**Part 3 — Discernment**

8 Post-religion: the return to beginnings 123
9 Authenticity and spirituality 137
10 Towards a new image of God 149

**Part 4 — Concluding reflections**

11 Youth, cultural crisis and ecospirituality 169
12 What can religion do? 183
13 The spirituality gap: credibility and supernaturalism 193
14 Winning back our connections 209
Whatever side one takes in this debate about the ‘return of the religious’...one still must respond. And without waiting. Without waiting too long.
Jacques Derrida, Religion.

To the surprise of many, the term spirituality has become democratised. Ideals that for centuries an elite viewed as virtually unattainable now prompt spiritual growth in everyone. In a word, a ‘spirituality revolution’ during the past thirty years has democratised pursuit of holiness.
William Johnson, Recent Reference Books in Religion.

So the secular, this present, empirical epoch, this phenomenal world, studied by science, does not eliminate the sacred after all; to the contrary, it urges us on a spiritual quest.
Holmes Rolston, Spirituality and the Secular Quest.

The ‘soul of Britain’ project found that seventy-six per cent of people in the UK admitted to having had a religious or spiritual experience. The figures contrast radically with statistics showing how church attendance is declining in all the mainstream Christian denominations. But if one looks at the figures on spiritual experience, they might suggest that we are in the midst of an explosive spiritual upsurge.
David Hay and Kate Hunt, The Tablet.

Spirituality has rarely enjoyed such a high profile, positive evaluation, and even economic success as it does among Americans today. If religion is in serious trouble, spirituality is in the ascendancy and the irony of this situation evokes puzzlement and anxiety in the religious establishment, scrutiny among theologians, and justification among those who have traded the religion of their past for the spirituality of their present.
Sandra Schneiders, The Santa Clara Lectures.
INTRODUCTION

The spirituality revolution

What is the spirituality revolution? It is a spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and well-being. It is our secular society realising that it has been running on empty, and has to restore itself at a deep, primal source, a source which is beyond humanity and yet paradoxically at the very core of our experience. It is our recognition that we have outgrown the ideals and values of the early scientific era, which viewed the individual as a sort of efficient machine. We now have to revise our concepts of life, society, and progress, while preserving the advances that technology and science have given us. Significantly, the new revolution is found at the heart of the new sciences, where recent discoveries in physics, biology, psychology, and ecology have begun to restore dignity to previously discredited spiritual visions of reality. Science itself has experienced its own revolution of the spirit, and is no longer arraigned against spirituality in the old way.

This book presents an image of the spiritual situation of our time. It is my attempt to explore what is happening today in the West in our experience of the spirit; and to suggest ways in which we might uncover a universal spiritual wisdom that could transform our fractured world. The spiritual life is no longer a specialist concern, confined to the interests of a religious group. No membership is required to relate to spirit. Spirituality is now the concern of everyone, religious or secular, young or old, atheist or believer, educated or otherwise, because we inhabit a different world in which spirit is making new and quite extraordinary demands.

The spirituality revolution thrusts us into a new social situation. We have not only outgrown the values and assumptions of mechanistic science and humanism, but we can no longer situate ourselves comfortably in the containment of the traditional religions. We need spiritual guidance, but for a variety of historical and social reasons we cannot return to organised religion or dogmatic theology in their old,
premodern forms (this is explored in Chapters 2 and 8). This makes some people shudder with horror, while others rejoice at the new feeling of liberation and freedom from the strictures of the past. But Western society cannot be expected to return to antiquated systems of meaning that have not themselves been part of the long line of historical changes and revolutions that society has experienced over the recent period.

We are caught in a difficult moment in history, stuck between a secular system we have outgrown and a religious system we cannot fully embrace. We are feeling the sting of the ancient Chinese curse: ‘may you live in interesting times’. However the birth of the new has never been easy, and our experience testifies to the agony and disruption of changing times. At this point, regression to fundamentalism is always a real but counter-revolutionary possibility. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic about the future, and I believe the creative potentials of spirit will break through. We see this already, not only in the new sciences and the arts, but in education (Chapter 4), personal experience (Chapter 7), contemporary philosophy (Chapter 8), and popular feeling for the environment (Chapter 11).

The spirituality revolution is also discovered in the recent upwelling of spiritual feeling in young people throughout the world, who increasingly realise, often with some desperation, that society is in need of renewal, and that an awareness of spirit holds the key to our personal, social, and ecological survival (Chapters 3 to 6). It is expressed in students of all ages including spiritual themes in their essays and discussions, and secular-trained staff not quite knowing how to respond (Chapter 4). It is found in afflicted patients and suicidal youth often telling health authorities that ‘spirituality’ might have something to do with their malaise, their lack of orientation and their radically compromised sense of wellbeing (Chapter 13).

The fields of public health, social work and psychology are now facing a crisis situation, where secular-trained therapists are no longer sure how to respond to this new and urgent cry for spiritual meaning. Psychiatrists are speaking about a ‘spirituality gap’, a discernible schism between the professionals who are trained in secular knowledges and methods, and the wider soul-searching community who are no longer content with reductive answers to human problems. Some educators and social scientists fear that this new cry for spirituality is itself part of the sickness of society, that we are becoming deluded and losing the plot. But this is not the case; instead, some of our established social attitudes have been mistaken: as a community
we have forgotten, buried, or repressed too much of our human heritage, too much of our ancient past (Chapter 14).

In our arrogance, we have imagined that we have outgrown the sacred, and that notions of soul and spirit are archaïsms of a former era. When the hunger for the sacred erupts in our time, we don’t know how to respond, and are often unable to determine what is sickness or health, what is wisdom or delusion, in ourselves or others. It is we who must change the myths and narratives that we live by, we who must invent a better form of sanity, a new kind of normality, so that spirit and soul can be included again in the common understanding of what it means to be human. In this time of transition, many people are the victims of deep structural change. Some have their concepts of reality overturned, others cling to former notions of sanity and order, while others succumb to depressive illness when they see through the lie of the modern world. Spirituality is a major social issue and requires immediate attention if we are to creatively respond to the spiralling outbreaks of depression, suicide, addiction, and psychological suffering.

**A DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT FROM BELOW**

Is the spirituality revolution the same thing as the New Age? No, it is larger, broader, and more encompassing than the New Age, which is a specific and highly commercialised ‘wing’ of the new spiritual movement. What is called the ‘New Age’ is a kind of parody of the new world about to be born. The New Age, as this term is currently used, is frequently an exploitation of the new public interest in the spirit, rather than a creative response to it. The spirituality revolution is rising from below, and not from above. As such, it is vulnerable to commercial manipulation and unscrupulous interest. There are many organisations and groups that seek to capitalise on the shifts taking place in society, and we have to be alert at every turn to possible abuse, violation, and distortion of the spiritual impulse.

This is a people’s revolution. It is taking place because society’s loss of meaning is becoming painfully obvious, especially to the young, the disenfranchised and to all who suffer. It is a counter-cultural revolution, a romantic rebellion against the rise of materialism, inhumanity, and economic rationalism. Because this interest is rising from below, it may take some time before the mainstream institutions in health, education, politics, journalism, and religion are able to catch up with it. To date, there has been much suspicion and resistance, and a tendency to lump everything spiritual into the category ‘New Age’, where it is damned and forgotten. There has not been enough
discrimination, because we do not know how to see this blurred and repressed area of our own experience.

Most of our public institutions are secular and are not prepared for a revolution of spirit. The mainline churches are apparently unable to take up a dialogue with the new spirit of our time, partly because they only acknowledge conventional ideas of the sacred (Chapters 10–12). Things may change, and I certainly hope they do. But the field of spirituality is wide open and largely unexplored: we have yet to see any committed institutional response to the challenges posed by the new spirituality.

This revolution involves a democratisation of the spirit. It is about individuals taking authority into their own hands, and refusing to be told what to think or believe. It is about personal autonomy and experimentation, with the use of direct experience of the world as a kind of laboratory of the spirit. There is a new desire to observe, create theories, and test these against the facts of our experience. We seem to be applying the scientific method to our spiritual lives. Not all this investigation is happy or profitable, and this is all the more reason why public institutions must eventually take up a dialogue with popular spirituality.

The spirituality revolution is also about finding the sacred everywhere, and not just where religious traditions have asked us to find it. Things previously considered worldly or even unholy are being invested with new spiritual significance, such as the body, nature, the feminine, sexuality, and the physical environment. This is not an escapist or otherworldly movement, but a direct political and philosophical challenge to traditional notions of sacredness and the holy. It therefore belongs to the long line of democratic revolutions, and is the spiritual counterpart to former and continuing revolutions in politics, society, law, race, education, and gender. It is a forward movement of civilisation, even though it is an advance that is paradoxically achieved by revisiting and reconnecting with the ancient past.

BEYOND FUNDAMENTALISM

The regressive appeal of the religious fundamentalisms has to be taken seriously at this time. After 11 September 2001, and the collapsing of the World Trade Center in New York, all of us should be concerned about the rising tide of fundamentalism, especially within the three monotheisms: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In the contemporary world, where so much is open and uncertain, where traditions have
been shaken or overturned, where we stand almost naked before the spirit, there is a strong counter-revolutionary force: a desire for absolute certainty, religious security, and nostalgic traditionalism (Chapters 1, 8, 9). Fundamentalisms offer us a parodic version of our need to turn back to the past, only here the turn back is a full-blown regression, a deliberate and systematic retreat from the demands and revolutions of the modern period. This is not going back in order to move forward, but going back to escape the tensions and complexities of a difficult present.

Fundamentalism also supplies a distorted version of the past: its past is largely invented, a projection of regressive social values and anti-modern perspectives into an imagined former era. In the same way that the New Age seeks to ape our spiritual future, so fundamentalism seeks to mimic our past. Today ersatz formulas, escapisms, parodies, fakes, phony gurus, false prophets, and frauds surround us. It is hard for the earnest seeker to steer a successful course through the pitfalls and dangers of the spiritual landscape.

My main interest here is to reach behind the clashing ideologies and fundamentalisms that threaten to dehumanise and destroy the world, and access a mystical source from which all belief systems emerge. This is our immediate hope: to retreat from the rivalry of dogmatic beliefs and uncover a universal spiritual wisdom that might transform us from within. If we dare to enter the mystical ground of our being, we might find a source from which peace and compassion arise. This is the hope of the mystical traditions: to withdraw from the social violence of claim and counter-claim to access the life-giving currents that flow beneath a divided world, offering it an opportunity for healing and renewal.

WHERE I STAND

I write this report on the spiritual situation of the West from a place in the East which pretends to be West: Australia. Here I witness the gradual disintegration of the colonial West, and its transmutation into new forms. On the one hand, there is the powerful influence of the East and the great Asiatic religions: on the other, there is the challenge of the Aboriginal people, and their concern for a spiritual relationship with the earth. From the East we are learning the art of interiority and the psychological basis of faith. From indigenous people we are learning to bring divinity out of the clouds and into earthly experience. The East is teaching us how to transcend the ego, and indigenous people are showing us how to overcome our otherworldliness.
The influence of the East and of indigenous cultures is felt everywhere, perhaps most strongly in new world countries like America, Canada and Australia, where such forces seem to rise from the soil and from surviving local traditions. But the old countries of Europe are experiencing similar processes: established religions are being overturned, deconstructed, and forces long suppressed or banned are awakening with new and surprising power. The ‘Very ancient’ is now contemporary, and the established is being displaced. It is a time of enormous spiritual turbulence, and the spirit has spilled out of old vessels, and surprises us with its capacity to reveal itself in new ways.

I would describe my own personality as mystical, anti-fundamentalist, and humanist. I was born in Melbourne, of Anglo-Irish ancestry, and I received a Western education and a British colonial upbringing. At twelve years of age, the time of initiation in tribal cultures, my family moved to Alice Springs, central Australia, a town of seven thousand people of mixed racial origins, in the middle of a vast desert with few signs of European civilisation. Here, in a place long ruled by Aboriginal law and cosmology, my Western ideas of divinity and reality were challenged and transformed by the local indigenous traditions. I tell the story of this dramatic upheaval and reorientation in another book, *Edge of the Sacred*.

In my spiritual journey I started with the Christian West, and this was challenged by the ancient indigenous world. Then, after a tertiary education that proved disappointing in its inability to engage the sacred, I felt the need to become psychological, and I moved to the United States, where psychology is a dominant cultural force, a kind of modern mythology. Religion had taught me to find God in heaven, Aboriginality had shown me to find the sacred on earth, and now I wanted psychology to reveal to me the possibility of finding the sacredness within.

I was attracted to the Jungian tradition of depth psychology, and a Harkness Fellowship from New York enabled me to work in Texas under the supervision of James Hillman, and with the support of Thomas Moore. Texas may seem like the most unlikely place on earth to search for the sacred, but spiritual experience is always full of paradox and contradiction. Depth psychology proved remarkable, and provided a dimension that neither theology nor indigenous religion could deliver. But by itself psychology and therapy are not enough. They give us access to the internal process, but we tend to lose the world, community, nature, and the environment, not to mention the transcendent dimension of the sacred. Hillman and Moore have themselves outgrown psychology in its narrow form, and have contributed enormously to a more expansive and environmental sense of soul.
It seems to me that no one path can give us the full picture, we have to travel on many roads, invite many perspectives, to see the spiritual life in its totality. My university degrees were in literature, philosophy, and art, and I followed these with post-doctoral studies in Jungian psychology and mythology. Then I felt the need to educate myself in the fields of theology, sociology, and the history of religions. I have explored seven or eight areas of thought in my bid to follow the spirit in our time. Like an outback tracker in a desert landscape, I have gone in search of spirit in the wilderness of secular society, finding hints and clues along the way, and motivated by the belief that spirit is alive and present in our midst.

I appear to some people to be optimistic, given my conviction that we exist in a living connection with a spiritual reality, whether or not we notice it. We might not see spirit directly, but indirectly we have enormous evidence, especially in the domains of culture, history, and human feeling and intuition, which by themselves are not considered 'scientific' proofs, but nevertheless constitute the main foundations for belief in the spiritual. I am no longer sceptical about the existence of spirit, although I have lived through periods of doubt and questioning. Suspicion and doubt yield poor rewards, but if we enter into life with an open heart and a recovered innocence, the world of spirit unfolds before us.

In August 2000, I attended the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, at the United Nations in New York. It was interesting to notice at this Summit the concern among religious leaders for a universal language of the spirit, a new language that is respectful of traditions, but capable of reaching people who are outside religious structures and who belong to the expanding secular society. Something new and different is emerging in our globalised planetary culture, and everywhere I observe a general sense of expectation and awe: something is taking its course, but what?

In the present global culture, with the need for common values and visions in a multicultural and plural world, the time is propitious for the discovery of a universal spirituality. To this end, not dogmatic religion but mystical and poetic vision is needed to release the potentials of spirit in an increasingly secular society. Spirituality is by no means incompatible with religion, but it is existential rather than creedal. It grows out of the individual person from an inward source, is intensely intimate and transformative, and is not imposed upon the person from an outside authority or force.

David Tacey
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PART 1

*The present situation*
CHAPTER 1

Rising waters of the spirit

The spiritual awakening that is taking place counterculturally will become more of a daily norm as we willingly break mainstream cultural taboos that silence or erase our passion for spiritual practice.

Bell Hooks

A spirituality revolution is taking place in Western and Eastern societies as politics fails as a vessel of hope and meaning. This revolution is not to be confused with the rising tide of religious fundamentalism, although the two are caught up in the same phenomenon: the emergence of the sacred as a leading force in contemporary society. Spirituality and fundamentalism are at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Spirituality seeks a sensitive, contemplative, transformative relationship with the sacred, and is able to sustain levels of uncertainty in its quest because respect for mystery is paramount. Fundamentalism seeks certainty, fixed answers and absolutism, as a fearful response to the complexity of the world and to our vulnerability as creatures in a mysterious universe. Spirituality arises from love of and intimacy with the sacred, and fundamentalism arises from fear of and possession by the sacred. The choice between spirituality and fundamentalism is a choice between conscious intimacy and unconscious possession.

Spirituality ultimately produces a state of mind that the poet John Keats called ‘negative capability’:

when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

This is surely a condition to aspire to in our torn and broken world, especially since the ‘sacred’ is being invoked by warring parties and
hostile forces who are absolutely sure that God is on their side. If we were less certain of our beliefs, and more receptive to mystery and wonder, we would paradoxically be closer to God, more intimate with the spirit, and more tolerant of our fellow human beings and their differing conceptions of the sacred.

SECULARISM UNDER PRESSURE

The confusion of spirituality and religious fundamentalism causes many reasonable people to reject both, in the belief that humanity is better off without the sacred, since it seems to be at the heart of contemporary conflicts. This desire to distance society and its institutions from the sense of the sacred has underpinned the creation of the modern secular state, which has chosen to put 'religious matters' to one side, so that the business of living, educating, informing and governing the people can take place 'unimpeded' by irrational impulses. But the ideals of secularism, however well intended, are inadequate for life, since our lives are not rational and we are hugely implicated in the reality of the sacred, whether or not this is acknowledged.

What we are seeing in so-called ‘secular’ or worldly societies is a return of the spiritual impulse, which can cause a great deal of strife and turmoil if it is not consciously integrated into social reality. The purely secular condition has proved inadequate to contain, nurture or transform the spiritual impulses in human lives, and if the fundamentalist state represents an appropriation of the religious instinct for political gain, the secular state represents a repressive denial of the same instinct, also for the sake of political control. We urgently need to discover new ways of being political and social, new ways of defining, describing and living human reality.

Secular nations of the world are feeling the strain and seeking to hold back the tides of spiritual water. Some of our best minds are suspicious and cynical about the eruption of spiritual feeling, as commentators fear we are reverting to the premodern past, regressing to outmoded forms of thinking and losing our grasp on rational civic order. Churches notice an explosion of spiritual interest, but fear it could be an outbreak of gnosticism, while universities complain that people are retreating into the solace of ancient superstition. The waters of the spirit are rising, and this is disturbing to social institutions that thought they had reached an understanding of the human condition.
FACTS, FIGURES, TRENDS

In practical terms, how do we know that spirituality is rising? Initially, it may be easier to notice the radical decline in organised religion and in political idealism than it is to actually quantify the rise of interest in spirituality. Part of the problem is that our established institutions are not very concerned with this social phenomenon. Spirituality which is not attached to church or state is seen as too vague to be of interest, or too threatening for organisations to take seriously enough to analyse and interpret. Church life surveys are usually concerned about which ‘denomination’ or ‘tradition’ individuals or families belong to. But the majority of people in secular societies are not bothered about such forms of designation or belonging. They are mostly on individual quests for meaning, so that the questions asked by the religious surveys are frequently out of touch and inappropriate.

Similarly, the secular state is not interested in learning about the spiritual strivings of its citizens. It is content to know that citizens belong to this or that church or tradition, but if they have fallen out of traditions, it is simply assumed that they are secular and therefore have no spiritual interests. Dealing with spirituality ‘outside’ tradition is too scary, dangerous and annoying for secular nations, for it suggests that spirituality might not be contained in its old forms, and may even be inherent in the nature of human experience. If that is true, where does this leave the secular beliefs of the state and its humanist philosophy? And what of the disruptive possibilities of free-floating spiritual urges to the social and political order?

The nation state is happy to remain with the conventional idea that spiritual interest can be handled by the old religions, and it is pleased to hand such interest over to those traditions, rather than be sullied by it itself. Typically, census forms invite citizens to tick the box that corresponds to their affiliation, whether Baptist, Mormon, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, and so on. One of my students said she was forced to tick the ‘Anglican’ box in a recent census questionnaire, because she could not find anything which came even remotely close to her own spiritual identity. ‘Why’, she said to me, ‘do these forms never assume that the citizen can think for herself? Why is it always assumed that personal spiritual identity and religious affiliation are the same thing? Why is there no recognition that people could be on spiritual journeys outside the formalised traditions?’ The honest answer is that the government offices that invent these forms do not have the creativity or imagination to understand what its own citizens are doing with their lives.
In my own case, I found out about the extent and popularity of spiritual interest simply by talking to people. We sometimes have to resort to anecdotal evidence, if the revealing statistics are not available, or if they are not made public. In March 1998, I surveyed fifty of my students who had enrolled in one of my literature and psychology courses. An impressive forty-seven students indicated that personal spirituality was a major concern in their lives, while only two students said that religion was important. In 2002, I surveyed 125 students in my undergraduate subject, and 115 expressed personal concern for ‘spirituality’, while only about ten said they were pleased to be designated as following one of the religions. If our social institutions want to stay in touch with the people they are supposed to serve or govern, they ought to kick themselves out of their lethargy and pay attention.

There are statistics available about the spirituality revolution, but they are frequently buried in academic journals and not made public, because institutions do not like to notice them. Surveys of students in the religious schools indicate widespread defection from faith practices in favour of personal quests for meaning. In Australia, Catholic students who abandon formal worship within eighteen months of graduating from school amount to a staggering 97 per cent of the student body. These are not figures that any institution would be proud of, and consequently they are not broadcast.

But even in so-called ‘religious’ countries such as the United States, the defection rate from the formal religions, among both the young and the mature-aged, is astronomical. The defection rises dramatically with increased exposure to educational opportunities, so that today the number of people in the States who espouse personal spirituality far exceeds the number who subscribe to formal religious denominations. The best I can do here is refer the interested reader to the statistical sources, especially to the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, and in particular to the useful study by Brian Zinnbauer, ‘Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy’. The situation in the United States is best summarised by Sandra Schneiders, theologian at the Jesuit Theology School, Berkeley, California:

Spirituality has rarely enjoyed such a high profile, positive evaluation, and even economic success as it does among Americans today. If religion is in trouble, spirituality is in the ascendancy and the irony of this situation evokes puzzlement and anxiety in the religious establishment, scrutiny among
theologians, and justification among those who have traded the
religion of their past for the spirituality of their present.5

Across the Atlantic, the situation is similar and even more compelling,
because of the dramatic rise of popular interest in ‘spirituality’ among
the British in recent years. The British are unlike the Americans; they
are generally not known for their interest in spiritual or mystical
matters. And yet extraordinary figures have been released quite
recently. Researchers David Hay and Kate Hunt, based at the
University of Nottingham, have been monitoring these changes:

Something extraordinary appears to be happening to the spiritual
life of Britain. At least that’s what we think, after a first look at
the findings of the ‘Soul of Britain’ survey recently completed by
the BBC. The results show that more than 76 per cent of the
population would admit to having had a spiritual experience. In
hardly more than a decade, there has been a 59 per cent rise in
the positive response rate to questions about this subject.
Compared with 25 years ago, the rise is greater than 110 per cent.6

These figures seem to defy logic, given the typical reticence that the
British often feel toward things that are non-empirical and hidden, and
also given the continued dramatic demise of public participation in and
membership of the churches. While 76 per cent of the population are
interested in spirituality, only about 7 per cent remain committed to
regular church attendance. Hay and Hunt continue:

The figures [on spiritual interest] are startling if only because our
lengthy research experience at the Centre for the Study of Human
Relations at Nottingham University tells us that English people
are very shy about admitting to spiritual experience. This makes
it even more remarkable that the responses were obtained in the
relatively uncongenial circumstances of a national telephone poll.
Why might this be happening? Is it to do with the move away from
the materialism of the 1980s? Is there more social permission
today for admitting in public what was until recently something
too intimate or embarrassing to be shared?7

THE COMING AEON

We are entering a new aeon, governed by a new ethos and a new spirit.
The secular period has peaked and is drawing to a close. The dry, arid
wasteland of the modern era is being eclipsed by something new, and it is still too early to determine exactly what it is.\textsuperscript{8} For decades there have been various intimations of a coming age. In the 1960s, the hippies claimed that an Age of Aquarius was about to dawn, but this myth was so highly idealised and based on such grandiose expectations about a future of love and peace that it lost credibility. In the same decade, French intellectuals felt we had entered a postmodern stage, in which the values and certainties of the ‘modern’ period had been shaken.\textsuperscript{9}

Although postmodernism became an elite enterprise that few citizens could understand, it did signify that the familiar world was over. From a spiritual point of view it loosened the structures of rationality and provided openings for the return of mystery and spirit.\textsuperscript{10} And while the ‘Age of Aquarius’ is a faded ideal of a bygone decade, it too can provide clues to our present condition, especially if we look at the significance of Aquarius as a metaphor.\textsuperscript{11} The symbol of Aquarius is the Waterbearer who pours the water of life upon a thirsty world. The Waterbearer holds the upturned jug aloft, and humanity is renewed by what he pours forth.

Strangely, years after the hippy dream has faded, we see signs of spiritual renewal in ordinary people and mainstream society. The idea of spirituality and personal contact with cosmic forces is no longer confined to the eccentric fringe or to dropouts, but is experienced and discussed by ordinary citizens in secular societies that have not seen such interest in spiritual matters in living memory. We have become so used to the secular dryness of modernity, or to the non-spiritual aridity of institutional religion, that we have forgotten what spirituality is and what blessings it can bring. We do not know whether to celebrate the rise of these waters of spirituality, or to guard ourselves against them. Neither ‘postmodernism’ nor ‘Aquarius’ can define the radical shift that is taking place, but these ideas do contribute intuitions about our world and its departure from the previous sense of social order.

Our institutions are troubled, since they are not in control of these floodwaters, and they worry that people will be carried away by them. They worry also about their own survival, since so much appears to be happening outside their boundaries and without their ‘permission’. Because they do not control this revolution, the faith institutions can deem it heretical and dangerous and the knowledge institutions mad and regressive. The mainstream media only becomes interested when something controversial or crazy takes place, in which case the rise of ‘irrationality’ can be lamented, or the ‘New Age’ can be bitterly attacked. For the most part the new spirit of the time does not even
appear on the radar screen of social reporters, who are either oblivious to the changes or are deliberately repressing what they find too difficult to understand.

RECOVERING THE SACRED

The consequences of the spirituality revolution are far-reaching, and they are being registered most profoundly in the human heart and personal identity. We live in an unstable and even anarchic phase of history, where significant dimensions of human experience are not contained by institutions, and where individuals have to move beyond conventions to meet the challenges of the time. Poets, philosophers, artists and reflective people can see what is happening and what is to come. In particular, the spiritual challenges of the time are discerned most dramatically by the young, since they are the ones who are most directly exposed to the zeitgeist and show the least resistance.

But why is the secular structure of society breaking down? Why are so many people recovering a sense of the sacred and a primal thirst for the waters of the spirit? There are several historical reasons.

We are by nature religious beings, and the secular modern period has witnessed a general repression of our sense of the spirit. After a self-imposed ban we are remembering our sacredness and our dormant religious life is awakening. As David Hay and Kate Hunt said of the situation in Britain:

We suspect that the spiritual awareness we are uncovering has always been there, but is only now coming to light as we witness the breakdown of a taboo.12

We are in the presence of a great historical shift, as the secular period which arose with humanism and the intellectual enlightenment draws to an end. Most of our knowledge institutions are products of the enlightenment, and as such they do not reach out beyond the present or show us a way into the future. They are frustratingly inadequate, with little to tell us about our situation. The old cultural wineskins cannot contain the new wine of the spirit, and that is why we have so much instability, uncertainty, disruption, and anxiety. We need to make a new pact with the sacred and its archetypal forces. How do we do this when society still operates as if God is dead and spirituality mere superstition?
THE COLLAPSE OF IDOLS AND FALSE GODS

Why are the waters of spirituality flooding their banks now? It could be that our religious substitutes and our false gods are failing us. The secular society worshipped reason and enshrined logic and science. It proclaimed that rationality would deliver us from the superstitions of religion and liberate us from mythological thinking. Science, logic, and reason (logos) would eradicate the old gods (mythos) and create a brave new world, where we would feel free and satisfied. But what happened? We became free of religion, but we did not feel freer. Instead, we masked our spiritual urges and gave them new names, and new social and political outlets. A host of liberation ideologies, beginning with the natural sciences, progressive economics, and Marxian communism, were invented to cure our ills and overcome our afflictions. For a while, we told ourselves that these ideologies would work, that they simply needed more time and a better chance to prove themselves. Politics would deliver liberation to the people, and economics would bring about a better world. Science and reason would triumph over unreason, and utopia was just a little way ahead.

Our liberation ideologies did not set us free, but just produced monsters. Socialism produced totalitarian fascism, repression, subjugation, mass murder and tyranny. Western liberalism produced gigantic industries, globalism, terrifying levels of consumerism, social exploitation, pollution and the desecration of the environment. Our various forms of cultural materialism were meant to deliver a better and more humane world, but instead we fell victim to new kinds of enslavement and oppression, and old mythology has become reality as giants (in the form of monstrous corporations) stalk the earth.

Do we need to turn beyond the human in order to discover a more humane world? Paradoxically, it may be the extra-human and the spiritual that delivers the liberation and justice that we seek. We might need to draw from the transcendental and its lofty ideals so that we can become more fully human. Certainly, it has become increasingly difficult for people to have a faith in politics, science or humanism. We can see evidence of this in the decline in voter turnout in the United States and United Kingdom, and disillusionment in party politics in most of the democracies. We know that the promises secular authorities make are inadequate, that they cannot be trusted, that they fall prey to corruption. We can no more invest our hopes and dreams in utopian political programs.

The state or political cause has little to offer the desire for liberation and freedom, for unconditional love and support. The secular world is
running on empty, and it has run out of answers. Every one of our institutions has ‘experts’ and futurists who claim to see the way through this depressed phase to a brighter future, but few of us are taken in by their claims. In this depleted state, with less to believe in, we are ready to reconsider what we had once thrown out: religion and spirituality.

**CAN RELIGION RESPOND TO THE NEW LONGING?**

Formal religion is somewhat dazed and confused by these turbulent times and by this shift of social direction. Religion is so used to being self-protected, to smarting under the attacks of science, reason and secularism, so deeply withdrawn into its defensive cocoon, that it can hardly imagine that the people really do need the gifts of the spirit. The conservative elements in religion are quite suspicious of what is currently taking place. They suspect that this new taste for spiritual nourishment is just another consumer fad or fashion of a desperate society. Western religion is extremely judgemental of the new rise of spirituality, especially as this popular movement is not ‘churchy’ and does not fit in with formal religious expectations. It looks upon the wider community and sees confusion, witchcraft, occultism, esoterica, and various kinds of archaic or atavistic enchantments. The new revolution rarely consults religious doctrines or seeks the counsel or authority of religion. It appears to the church to be wild, feral, and derailed. As one clergyman said to me, ‘How can the churches get excited about the new spirituality if it is not putting bums on church seats?’

This is a short-sighted response to the present social predicament. How ironic if the ball of Western civilisation is now back in the religious court, but the court of religion does not know about it, or has stopped playing ball with the world. What if it ignores the present challenge or does not care enough to take up a dialogue with the world? The yearning for sacredness, spiritual meaning, security, and personal engagement with the spirit are the primary needs and longings of the contemporary world. What is happening if the institutions of faith are so bound up in themselves and resistant to change that they cannot make some contribution to these needs? Our contemporary situation is full of ironies and paradoxes. Chief among these is that our secular society has given birth to a sense of the sacred, and yet our sacred traditions are failing to recognise the spiritual potential.
The historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, was not especially sanguine about the ability of formal religion to recognise the sacred in secular society. Writing about the youth culture of the 1960s, Eliade commented that the religious impulse was making a new and genuine appearance in the cultural forms of the day, but that religious tradition seemed incapable of recognising it:

In the most radically secularised societies and among the most iconoclastic contemporary secular youth movements (such as the hippy movement, for example), there are a number of apparently non-religious phenomena in which one can decipher new and original recoveries of the sacred; although, admittedly, they are not recognisable as such from a Judeo-Christian perspective.14

The fact that religious tradition fails to recognise another expression of the religious instinct is hardly a recent phenomenon. The old religious form often despises the new, not only because the new revelation challenges the authority of the old, but because the old religion thinks of itself as complete and absolute. Religion is sometimes ‘full of itself’, and this is what Paul Tillich, the influential theologian, referred to accurately as ‘the sin of religion’.15

The ruling tradition in any era does not grasp the fact that if God is alive and active in the world, then God will be creative in the world, beckoning us to new transformations. The old tradition may in some ways prefer God to be ‘dead’, because then the sacred body of God can be laid out, dissected by systematic theologians and pedants, and pinned down in precise and scientific ways. But if God is alive, our experience of the sacred is going to be uncertain, creative, imprecise and full of surprise and astonishment. If God is alive, God will always be revealed as mysterious, unknowable and unable to be contained and captured.

RISING WATER IN THE WASTELAND

We might get a better understanding of our present predicament if we return to the metaphor of spiritual water and explore it for its social meaning. In 1867, in the poem ‘Dover Beach’, Matthew Arnold proclaimed that the ‘sea of faith’ was at low tide, and seemed to be ebbing away from the dry land of consciousness.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.  

Arnold laments the sadness and misery wrought by the sudden loss of faith in his day. It had been replaced with natural science, economics, and a positivist belief in progress and social advancement.

Today, I would argue, we are in the opposite situation. We are at high tide again, only the sea is somewhat chaotic and unruly, the water is murky and polluted, and it is not the crystal clear water of spirit that could be recognised by an ethical religion or a puritanical awareness shaped by 19th-century religiosity. Our social scene is full to the brim with individual and esoteric spiritualities, with personal searches for meaning and sacredness, most of which bear little resemblance to the conventional experience of religious faith. The waters of the spirit that subsided and withdrew during the secular period, are now rising with a tremendous force, perhaps even with a vengeance.

When I think about the dramatic rise of popular spirituality in our world, I sometimes think about the flooding of a river in a desert landscape. When I was a boy growing up in the arid regions of central Australia, I occasionally witnessed a wonderful phenomenon. After we had experienced significant rains and storms near Alice Springs, the normally dry and sandy bed of the Todd River would suddenly be transformed into a raging torrent, and the people of the town would behold the mystery of a gushing stream rising up from what seemed like nowhere. The high school I attended stood on the banks of the river bed, and after storms we sometimes received an announcement from the headmaster that we were to walk quickly and quietly to the banks of the Todd, to watch the river coming into flood. This might occur only once or twice a year. During drought the river might not flow for several years. It was a spectacular and unusual event, which brought a great sense of renewal to the town and its people.

We were told by our geography teachers that the Todd River was actually flowing all the time, but that we could not see it. Just below the ground and beyond our sight, there were bodies of moving water or underground streams, and in times of flood the water-table would rise from its subterranean depths and become a visible river. Students and
workers alike would cheer, whistle and applaud when the wall of water appeared. To the people of the town this was something of a mystical experience, a kind of apparition, and a dramatic event that brought excitement, interest and unity to the district.

CYCLES OF THE SPIRIT

I am reminded of the flooding Todd River when I think of the rising waters of spirituality. After a long season of spiritual dryness, in which faith and intuition have atrophied, a new river of spiritual possibility is rising from below, with potentially great benefits to society and life. The river of spiritual life is paradoxical. In one sense it is always present and available to those who wish to gather at its banks, but sometimes whole societies and periods of time choose not to see it or be replenished by it. This rhythmic cycle of spiritual life is something that has puzzled many philosophers, including Hegel, Nietzsche and Derrida. Hegel wrote about our contemporary thirst for spiritual water in these terms:

The spirit is profoundly desiccated, and like a wanderer in the desert it craves for the merest mouthful of water. By the little which can thus satisfy the needs of the human spirit we can measure the extent of its loss.17

In his recent essay, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida speaks of ‘the return of the religious’, of ‘its interminable and ineluctable return’.18 The reasons for the strange appearance and disappearance of spirit are many, but postmodern thinkers are recognising that spirit is on its way back again.

In the past, our spiritual water was contained by, and made visible in, religious rituals, liturgies and sacred observances. Indeed, the word ‘ritual’ is from Latin *ritus*, meaning ‘to flow, run, rush or stream’. A ‘rite’ is a river; *rivus*, a rushing stream. As Thomas Moore said, To be in ritual is to be in the river’, and to gather in sacred community is to gather at the river.19 In religious rituals, we are told of the living water that we do not see, but which, once we allow ourselves to taste it, would give us eternal life and replenish our souls. The widespread demise of religion throughout the educated countries of the world has brought with it a great impoverishment and aridity to the human soul, which thirsts again for living water. The river of spirit is becoming evident partly because our resistances are breaking down and our thirst is so great.
MURKY WATER AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

According to St John the Divine, the revelation of the glory of God on earth will be occasioned by rising waters of spiritual life:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and flowing crystal-clear down the middle of the city street.

(Revelation 22:1)

I can see spiritual waters flowing down our city streets today, but our waters are not clear. As those who live in desert areas know, a river that bursts into flood, after leading a life below the surface, carries ahead of it a lot of froth and bubble, brown debris and murkiness. The rising water pushes ahead trash that had been dropped in the dry river bed, and the water is, for many hours and days, brown, colloidal and fall of silt and dirt. The river of spiritual interest in our society is also murky, dark, impure, and certainly not ‘crystal-clear’. But that is no reason why religion should not take up a dialogue with it. Formal religion looks at the murky stream rising in secular society, and it is inclined to throw up its arms in horror and cry, ‘God help us’.

What we are witnessing is the return of the repressed, and such a return, as Freud knew, is anything but glamorous or civilised. What Freud discovered about the repression of sexuality can just as easily be applied to the repression of spirituality. As the visionary Marxist, Joel Kovel, has said: ‘The denial of spirituality, like any form of denial, tends to distort spirit’. The return of the repressed is not a pretty sight, and it is attended by many distortions and aberrations. We must be patient and sift through the mess to the potential within it.

As we stood on the banks of the Todd River and craned our heads to see the miracle of water, it was not all romantic or mystical. We could see empty cans and bottles bobbing in the froth and foam, together with plastic bags, used condoms, and other odd bits of rubbish. It is the same with our spiritual river today. Many of our emerging spiritual impulses and ideas are archaic, malformed, nascent or ugly. These longings have been buried for centuries, and many have acquired a ‘gothic’ appearance. Some have reverted to archaisms of the past and are premodern, uneducated and silly. When cultural contents are buried, they often regress to the ancient past, which Freud referred to as the atavistic regression to type. That is, contents that are repressed seem
to turn ‘primitive’, so that when spirit is repressed we will notice its reappearance in forms that take us back to ages past. Hence the popularity today of archaic and esoteric forms of spirit that predate modernity by thousands of years.

We see this especially in the New Age spiritual interests and industries, some of which are positively infantile and deeply regressed. By ‘infantile’, I mean that the world of the spirit is taken literally, as a kind of supernatural wonderworld similar to that imagined by late night television shows. And some New Age methods are regressive, in that they strive for the extinction of consciousness and its problems in an oceanic realm of bliss. The New Age movement is to some extent a parody of the Coming Age, and in this movement we see the most nascent, literal and crude interpretations of the living spirit. However, we must not condemn the New Age movement, but strive to educate it beyond its crudity. We must not condemn the river because of the rubble and mess it is forced to carry.

What wells up from secular society is not dressed in the costume of formal religion, but sometimes seems to draw on pre-theological contents. Hence in popular spirituality, we find people who are interested in primordial religious movements, in ancient esoteric sects, in long-forgotten initiatory or mystery cults. There is great interest in indigenous tribal religions, in paganism and wicca, in ancient Egypt, Greece and Tibet, in hermeticism, alchemy and astrology, and in long-buried divinatory systems and gnostic traditions. These ancient realities do not emerge from the secular unconscious as pure spiritual contents, but they come tinged with our narcissism and power-drives, with impure motives and consumerist desires. In the New Age market of technologies, everything is filtered through our pathologies and complexes, and is designed to appeal to egotism and pride. There are gems of wisdom buried there, but they are contaminated with infantilism and encrusted with hubris. The task of religion is not to stand on dignity and rail against the inferiority of spirituality. Instead, it has to get down to ordinary experience and build bridges of communication between the new flood and traditional mystery.

**DANGER IN THE WATER**

In his essay ‘The spiritual problem of modern man’, Jung offered an explanation for the rise of spirit in our time which is of interest, especially in view of the metaphor of the rising waters and their freight of ‘rubble’:
Through his scepticism [about the rational organisation of the world] modern man is thrown back on himself; his energies flow towards their source, and the collision washes to the surface those psychic contents which are at all times there, but lie hidden in the silt so long as the stream flows smoothly in its course.23

Under stable social conditions, our energies move outward into life and the world, and the ‘heavier’ contents fall to the bottom of the stream of life and ‘lie hidden in the silt’. But when our forward flow is blocked by disappointment, wars, depression and doubt, then our energies ‘flow towards their source’, libido is reversed, and the ‘collision’ between our introversion and life’s stream ‘washes to the surface’ those psychic contents that normally lie hidden.

This is a fascinating argument as to why spirituality should arise at critical periods of history, indicating that spirituality is not itself a sign of decadence or decay, but a consequence of enforced inwardness and the withdrawal of hopes and dreams from the world. This also gives us a psychological basis for the sudden lifting of the bans against the spiritual dimension of life. The lifting of these bans is not actually our own conscious doing, rather we are reluctantly forced to lift them because there is so much ‘new’ material that is rising up from within, compelling us to take notice of what we would normally forget.

Although Jung was viewed as a mystic or romantic by his Freudian detractors, he certainly held no romantic illusions about what was being brought to the surface by our inner turmoil. He saw clearly the murkiness, darkness and danger of the post-Christian unconscious, as he wrote in his essay on the Aquarian Age, in *Aion*:

> What is now welling up from the unconscious [is] the end-result of the development of Christian consciousness. This end-result is a false spirit of arrogance, hysteria, woolly-mindedness, criminal amorality, and doctrinaire fanaticism, a purveyor of shoddy spiritual goods, spurious art, philosophical stutterings, and Utopian humbug. That is what the post-Christian spirit looks like.24

Jung recognised that the post-Christian unconscious was not a thing of beauty. It would take some getting used to, which is why he introduced the idea of ‘befriending the shadow’ as the first stage in the process of coming to terms with the unconscious.25 ‘To rediscover his spiritual life, modern man is obliged to struggle with evil, to confront
his own shadow, to integrate the devil. There is no other choice. Jung would regard as delusional the idea that everything that issues from the unconscious is goodness and light.

But Jung would see some value in today’s naive receptivity to the unconscious, recognising that what a learned person might dismiss as abhorrent or loathsome, as dangerous or bizarre, may have something of enduring value and worth, not only for the individual but for society. Jung wrote:

In view of the present widespread interest in all sorts of psychic phenomena, an interest such as the world has not experienced since the last half of the seventeenth century, it does not seem beyond the range of possibility to believe that we stand on the threshold of a new spiritual epoch; and that from the depths of man’s own psychic life new spiritual forms will be born.

In an interview shortly before his death, Jung said:

What comes next? Aquarius, the Waterpouri, the falling of water from one place to another. And the little fish receiving the water from the pitcher of the Waterpouri... But there is danger in the water, on the banks.

Jung understood that the water of spirit would become plentiful in the near future, that there would be a ‘falling of water from one place to another’, as expressed in the symbol of Aquarius. Yet he recognised ‘danger in the water’. After the drought of reason and the desiccating heat of logos, we now face the opposite danger of spiritual flooding. T.S. Eliot wrote in ‘Death by Water’:

A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He past the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

This dangerous regression is now possible for civilisation as a whole, which may be returned to ‘the stages of [its] age and youth’. There are signs already that we are going back to the infancy of civilisation in a bid to recover the sacred awareness that we lost when we decided we were too clever to believe in the gods. Religious fundamentalism is a foreboding sign of our cultural regression.
LACK OF CONTAINMENT

Spiritual water becomes dangerous when we have no containers to hold it, and no symbols to transform it. ‘Spirituality’, that is the careful and reflective art of developing a relationship with the sacred, cannot find its mature expression unless the water of spirit can be contained and transformed. ‘Man today hungers and thirsts for a safe relationship to the psychic forces within himself.’ The safe containers of the spirit are the religious symbols, and until such time as we recover a shared, public spirituality, many of us will feel ‘at sea’ in the spiritual realm.

There is no guarantee that spiritual water will work towards the good, or lead to the benefit of the community. These waters can be unruly and disintegrative, especially when they well up from great depths and have been contaminated by repression. The waters of spirit need guidance and direction, to ensure that they work towards wholeness, rather than disintegration. If uncontained, such water can sweep through people’s lives with uncanny force, leading to irrational behaviour.

Various kinds of fascism have expressed ‘spiritual’ movements, that is social myths of revival and renewal. They have employed spiritual language and used mystical ideas about blood, soil, race, and fatherland or motherland. Fascism, and others kinds of fanatical behaviour, including religious fundamentalism, racism and cults, are to be expected if spiritual energy is not transformed by culture, or guided into humane forms by tradition. If not recognised by culture, it will be taken by dangerous ‘subcultures’, who will exploit the spiritual vitality for power, corruption and domination. When the official culture loses its capacity to attract and hold spirit, the forces of evil and power appropriate the rising spirit and all hell breaks loose. Thus the response to the upwelling of spirit determines whether or not it will be a force for good.

SOCIAL VISION AND PUBLIC MORALITY

Spiritual energy can set society alight with enthusiasm, but such energy needs to be directed towards the good and history has shown that this is by no means automatic. Popular idealisation of spirit can mean a refusal to see danger, an inability to discern good spirits from bad, inundation from renewal, or safe from unsafe engagement with the spiritual world.

We are as naive and gullible about spirit today as we have been in the past about liberation ideologies and political programs. This is
because we have transferred our idealism, hopes and dreams from one to the other. Now spirit, rather than politics, will bring liberation and deliver us from evil. Politics has failed, so we turn to spirit with the same innocent enthusiasm. We have a need to elevate an ideal beyond criticism. When spirit enjoys good press and public endorsement, it is almost impossible to say anything critical or discerning about it.

When spirit ‘Visits’ us but we do not recognise what it is, we have a tendency to appropriate it for our own needs without due reverence for its origin or goal. Without a recognition of the sacred source from whence this energy comes, we inflate our own significance beyond normal boundaries. When this occurs, we do not become ‘spiritual’, but we become demonic and maniacal, that is, less rather than more human. The history of fascisms, cults and fanaticisms show the tragic results of outbreaks of spiritual energy that lacked a mature goal. We are candidates for such evil transformations today. We have plenty of spiritual water at our disposal but few ideas about what to do with it, contain it, transform it or use it for the benefit of others.

Our responsibility is to find a new social language for this spirituality, as well as to define community outlets, goals, objectives and possibilities for this energy. The responsibility lies with the educated, the informed and the tolerant to show leadership in this field, and to grasp the meaning and opportunity of spirituality in our time. New languages, understandings and practices need to be sought, so that ‘spirituality’ does not become another word for narcissism, fanaticism, or self-aggrandisement. When there is a rise in spiritual water, there must be a corresponding rise in public morality, social meaning and responsibility, otherwise we might remain the victims of a flooding rather than the emissaries of life-giving renewal. We urgently require spiritual knowledge, education and culture so that we develop a creative relationship with spirit rather than become possessed by it.
A statement often heard these days, particularly from young people but by no means confined to them, is, ‘I am not a very religious person, but I am interested in spirituality’.

I have heard this said throughout Australia, Britain and Europe, and Sandra Schneiders reports that the same remark, reflecting ‘intense interest in spirituality and alienation from religion’ is ‘often expressed’ in North America. It would have seemed puzzling a couple of generations ago, when much of Western society was embraced by religious tradition, and when the distinction between religion and spirituality would not have been understood in this way.

In the past, spirituality was felt to be the living, emotional core of religion, and those who were ‘very’ religious were often said to be ‘spiritual’. Today, those who are ‘not very’ religious are claiming to be spiritual. What has happened in society and culture to bring about this radical split? Why have religion and spirituality, or religious practice and religious feeling, parted company, and what is lost and gained by this splitting?

**SPIRIT AGAINST FORM**

In philosophical terms, we are reporting on a cultural crisis in which ‘spirit’ has been divorced from its traditional ‘form’. Spirit without form is free and spontaneous, but it is also invisible, and of ambiguous social value since it is difficult to harness something invisible for the common good. We live in a time in which form is discounted and spirit is highly
valued. Form, we often hear, merely hides or disguises spirit. We have to tear away the form and allow spirit to be set free.

But form is not just a hindrance or encumbrance, it allows the spirit to be shaped, expressed and experienced. Without form, spirit wanders shapeless and without coherent expression. It turns occult, invisible, and has to be hinted at or inferred by abstract concepts. Form is not just an added extra, or a hollow presence or mask, but an organ of the spirit. It is how spirit shapes, contains and reveals itself.

Our time undervalues form because there is a perceived rift between religious forms and the intuited reality of spirit. At least, this is the impression I have received over years of discussions with students, and in books dealing with this subject. Spirit is felt to be spontaneous, freely available and democratically structured, whereas religion is perceived to be doctrinal, regulated and authoritarian. Spirit is felt to be holistic and urging us towards wholeness and completion, whereas religion is perceived to be promoting perfection, one-sidedness and imbalance. There are numerous other rifts and divisions which I will explore in a moment. But my point here is that when form no longer expresses ‘spirit’ as intuited by the age, it is mercilessly discarded, and its sacred status is forgotten or even repressed. There is little regard for the fact that spirit once took up residence in this form, and little feeling extended to, in T.S. Eliot’s words, the ‘heap of broken images’ in the contemporary junkyard of symbolic forms.

THE MAGIC CIRCLE OF RELIGION AND THE INNER CORE OF SPIRITUALITY

In stable cultural times, spirit is successfully contained by symbolic forms, and spirit is ‘at home’ in religious tradition. In unstable times, the symbolic forms are experienced as constraining, limiting or anachronistic, and spirit struggles to break free from tradition. Ours is a critical and unstable period, in which spirit frequently reverts to informal or non-religious expressions, and it is therefore hard to see, discern or measure. When spirituality is no longer ‘religious’, sociologists declare the times to be secular, but psychologists and therapists report a great deal of religious feeling often ‘buried’ in the inner lives of individuals.

In stable societies, religion is like a magic circle that surrounds and nurtures our lives, binding us into indissoluble community and protecting us from potentially harmful incursions of the living spirit. In such times, we do not choose to belong to our religious tradition. We are simply ‘born into’ the religion of our parents and grandparents, are
ritually inducted as an infant, and life moves ahead in its rhythms and cycles in an almost automatic, unconscious way. Our natal faith tradition relates to us like a cosmic parent, caring for our spiritual well-being and providing spiritual nourishment and support at every major life transition, including baptism, confirmation, marriage, the birth of children and death.

To question or doubt the validity of such all-inclusive religiousness is to risk one’s place in the extended and immediate family, and to face the possibility of social ostracism, isolation and rejection. Religion is the very basis of our human identity, and our task is to keep the faith at all costs, to pray fervently, to maintain a devotional attitude to the creeds, and to support the spiritual authority of ministers or priests. If we do this well, and with perseverance and conviction, our souls will be cared for by religious tradition, and we need not have to risk a personal encounter with the spirit nor a ‘fall into the hands of the living God’ (Hebrews 10:31).

In stable times, spirituality is the personal and lived experience of the revealed mystery celebrated in religious services, prayers, liturgies and sacraments. Spirituality in this context is a unique, exclusive activity and a rare achievement. The majority of people are expected to lead normal lives in conformity with religious doctrine and guidelines, and are not encouraged to discover a personal relationship with God. But there are always some individuals who aspire to a higher life in communion with the spirit. This elite group generally aspire to a state of spiritual perfection in the lived experience of the spirit. As Sandra Schneiders writes, by the 19th century the term ‘spirituality’ referred to ‘the practice of the interior life by those oriented to the life of perfection’, and spirituality was radically distinguished from ‘the ordinary life of faith’.36

**TENSIONS BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND DEVOTION**

We know that individual appropriations of the faith were regarded by the churches as a mixed blessing. In one sense, such personal experiences had the capacity to revivify and renew the tradition, and to give new direction and impulse to faith. But from an institutional point of view, individual experiences of the spirit could lead to variation and diversity that the churches might deem heretical or dangerous. For example, mystics like Meister Eckhart or Francis of Assisi were strongly criticised by authorities in their time, as they were felt to be departing from tradition. If spirituality led to new interpretations of
faith that contrasted with or contradicted the dogmas of the church, they would be seen as a threat to the authority of the institution. Consequently, as Schneiders explained:

The term ‘spirituality’ often carried pejorative connotations; it came to be associated with questionable enthusiasm or even heretical forms of spiritual practice in contrast to ‘devotion’, which placed a proper emphasis on sobriety and human effort.37

Devotion does not ask questions or raise doubts, but places the individual in a subordinate position to a mystery that the faith institutions seek to control. Spirituality might give new vitality and direction to the spirit, but if it comes at too high a price for the institution, spirituality is banned or even persecuted, leading to a perverse situation in which the church seeks to destroy the very thing that could bring it new life. Thus there is, even in relatively stable times, an essential and underlying tension between the spiritual core and the religious periphery and its over-arching tradition. The creative spirit is a headache for religious authorities, since it is sometimes iconoclastic, original and radical.

FORM AGAINST SPIRIT

In a creative culture, form and spirit are in constant dialogue with each other, and this conversation ensures the stability of religion and society alike. But when religious form stops having dialogue with the spirit, it becomes frozen, petrified and does not feel alive. Religions might shut out the spirit in a bid to bolster their own forms and give them eternal validity, but this attempt to eradicate change and to place form above the movements of the spirit has disastrous consequences. When religion sees itself as eternal and beyond change, this can lead to idolatry and bigotry, rather than to creative religiousness. For while God may be eternal, religion, as a cultural response to God, is necessarily subject to time and place, and cannot escape these realities.

God may be eternal in ‘heaven’, but ‘on earth’ God moves through the spirit and enters into the rhythms and cycles of nature and everchanging creation. Spirit manifests as ‘the spirit of place’ and as ‘the spirit of the time’, that is as the mood, essence or dynamic of a particular period. A religion that seeks to emulate eternity, and to view itself as eternal, is a religion that cuts itself off from the changing moods and dynamics of its historical period. Most human institutions, such as law, science, medicine and education recognise the need to
undergo revision in order to stay in touch with the historical process, but religion often sees itself as exempt. It sees its function as the imitation of the past, and tradition is sometimes understood as the endless repetition of past patterns. In this way, religion unwittingly makes itself ‘irrelevant’ to the time, because it deliberately chooses to ignore the rhythms and cycles that it views as dangerous and unsettling.

The living core of the spirit could revitalize religion and keep its forms supple and full of life, as the heart delivers oxygen and blood to the limbs and organs of the body. Religion resists this heart, and defends itself against it by developing defensive structures so that a thick wall is built around the creative spiritual core to prevent it from disrupting religious life. This wall consists mainly of a series of refusals: a refusal to listen to the spirit of the time, a refusal to engage the insights of poets, artists, visionaries and prophets, a refusal to change its moral attitudes and spiritual assumptions.

In isolating itself from the living core of spirit, religion eventually becomes lifeless and petrified, and no longer appears ‘relevant’ to contemporary culture. Jung wrote that ‘Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times’. He also said, ‘All the true things must change and only that which changes remains true’. Religion acts unwisely if it moves against nature and considers itself above the laws of change. Eventually, it inhabits a kind of time-warp, and it clings to this state with some self-righteousness, believing it is upholding and representing the will of God.

In this posture, religion commits a sin of hubris and, like anything inflated, can be punctured or humbled by the realities of time and history. Creative theologians can identify the problem and even call for change, as does Paul Tillich: ‘We must pray for the prophetic spirit which has been dead for so long in the churches’. But the creative minds are marginalised, along with the prophetic spirit for which they hope and pray.

THE EXPLODING CORE OF SPIRIT

Formal religion can repress certain realities for a time, but eventually the walled-in city of the spirit begins to hit back, and a kind of civil war breaks out in the human psyche and in the social experience of meaning. Religion and the spirit of the time, which in creative cultures are complementary, turn against each other and warfare begins. The thing that ‘eternal’ religion rejects, namely time and history, begins to attack it, and in this predicament, as W.B. Yeats wrote:
When religion has repeatedly refused to respond to changing times, the spiritual centre of civilisation becomes active and volatile. The centre ‘cannot hold’ and begins to explode its former boundaries. Disruptive spiritual energy seeks outlet and expression at various points of weakness or vulnerability in the religious culture. Such energy searches the formerly settled and stable surface of society with great interest, hoping to expose its errors and limitations to bring about its demise. Today, secular newspapers and journalists are constantly looking for the points of vulnerability and weakness in the religious formal edifice, always seeking a chance of destabilisation.

These volcanic eruptions are naturally viewed as hostile by religion, which represents them as undermining the churches and destructive to society. But to progressives and revolutionaries, these disruptions are seen as blows for freedom and as advances of the human spirit. When the centre cannot hold, it typically accuses religion of being ‘man-made’ rather than instituted by God. Religious dogmas, ideas, assumptions and attitudes are seen as artificial and socially constructed, as vehicles of social ideology rather than of divine revelation. The new wine accuses the old wineskins of being inadequate, repressive and restricting.

Here are some of the strongest and most fundamental criticisms that the present age has of the dogmatic structures of religion.

- Religion is patriarchal and masculinist; it appears to be made by men to further their own power. It oppresses women and undermines their authority; represses the feminine element in men, and excludes the feminine dimension of the divine.
- Religion is based on a pre-modern cosmology and an archaic vision of reality that can no longer be believed. Its God is externalist and interventionist, inhabiting a distant metaphysical space and performing actions that are no more credible to us today than the thunderbolt temper-tantrums of Zeus or Jupiter upon Mt Olympus.
- Religion is based on a conception of spirit that is supernatural. Spirit is conceived as an outside agency that works miracles and wonders with a ‘kingdom’ in another reality. It seems wholly implausible and unattractive to modern understanding.
- Religion is otherworldly and transcendentalist. It does not have enough to say about the experience of the sacred in creation. It does not teach us how to live harmoniously with nature but to have power
and ‘dominion’ over the earth. In our time of ecological crisis, what can a human-centred religion contribute to the survival of the planet?

- Religion seeks perfection as its goal, but the contemporary era has found perfection to be unrealistic, dangerously one-sided and even anti-life. Instead, our time seeks ‘wholeness’ as its goal, an altogether more complex and paradoxical conception, but one which seems to be in accord with our most basic and spiritual impulses.

- Religion is dualistic and instructs the spirit to triumph over the body and its vital desires, but new spirituality seeks to bring spirit and body, sacredness and sexuality, together in a redemptive experience of the totality and mystery of life.

- Religion is hierarchical and elitist. It rules from above, and excludes the voice of the people and democratic understanding. Religion belongs to a former era in which spiritual authority was invested in authority figures, priests, bishops, clergy, and people freely gave authority to such figures. Now we want to own such authority for ourselves, and for two reasons: the inner authority of conscience and spirit is compelling, and people no longer trust old authority figures.

- Religion is dogmatic and external to our lives. It imposes laws and rules upon us, without enquiring into the nature of the self that it is transforming. It does not offer a psychology or pathway by which the individual can be transformed, but simply demands that the person conform to devotional practices.

- Religion imposes the ‘big story’ of theology upon our experience, without exploring the ‘little stories’ of our individual biographies, which might give theology a foothold in our lives. Religion is rejected not because a person does not believe, but because he or she is not believed. If religion expanded its horizons to include the spirituality of individuals, it might be renewed by such expansion, and individuals would not feel excluded, pushed out or irrelevant.

- Religion is fused with the social establishment and too identified with business, government and commercial enterprise to be able to offer a critique of this world. It does not allow for the true radicality of the spirit, which is always ‘at odds’ with worldliness. Religion does not provide enough challenge to society, but simply reinforces and supports its basic values and, as such, it cannot represent the life of the spirit.

These criticisms wound and puncture the body of religion, and arise from the volcanic core that religion has sought to repress. The criticisms have more vitality and energy-potential than religion has
reserves or defences to withstand these attacks. The attacks are therefore fatal to religion, which loses credibility and integrity as each criticism makes its ‘reasonable’ protest and interrogation.

In this revolutionary crisis, religion and spirituality change places, and ‘spirituality’, as defined by the mood of the time, becomes the new higher authority and the arbiter of social identity and human interaction. But the new spirituality is not organised by any institution, and therefore its actions and developments often have a chaotic, random or haphazard character. Indeed, it appears to the former, highly organised religious culture that ‘mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’. But the spirit of the time, although instinctual and unplanned, is not irrational, but follows an inner logic of its own.

A NEW PARADIGM: ALL-INCLUSIVE SPIRITUALITY

In the new cultural paradigm, which has been taking shape for some time, ‘spirituality’ bursts free from its former confinement, and becomes a much larger field of human activity. ‘Spirituality’ is the new, broad, umbrella term, and the understanding of the term ‘religion’ shrinks and is more narrowly defined. The term today is equated with formal religious practice or church attendance. It has lost its more general meaning, referring to the larger context of our relations with the divine and the community.

‘Spirituality’ now refers to our relationship with the sacredness of life, nature, and the universe, and this relationship is no longer felt to be confined to formal devotional practice or to institutional places of worship. As time moves on, we find we are able to define spirituality less and less, because it includes more and more, becoming a veritable baggy monster containing a multitude of activities and expectations.

Spirituality has become diverse, plural, manifold, and seems to have countless forms of expression, many of which are highly individualistic and personal. Spirituality is now for everyone, and almost everyone seems to be involved, but in radically different ways. It is an inclusive term, covering all pathways that lead to meaning and purpose. It is concerned with connectedness and relatedness to other realities and existences, including other people, society, the world, the stars, the universe and the holy. It is typically intensely inward, and most often involves an exploration of the so-called inner or true self, in which divinity is felt to reside.

Significantly, the new spirituality is democratic and non-hierarchical, which is alien to the traditional forms of religious life. If
a parent/child model governed the old religion, together with an authoritarianism underpinning this top-down style, the new paradigm is ruled by a sibling model of brotherhood or sisterhood, in which every person is felt to be equal in the eyes of the holy. Our spiritual lives are no longer ruled by bishops and clergy, but by our own inward conscience, by insights gleaned from self-reflection, reading, meditation, and talks with friends and spiritual counsellors. This is the new style of spiritual culture, and is exemplified clearly in the experiences of youth, as discussed later.

Spirituality in this new context is a form of personal religion that has gone through various social revolutions—democratic, governmental, political, racial, sexual and intellectual. Many people had hoped that communal religion would pass through these social revolutions, and they waited anxiously for a faith tradition to catch up with the times so that they could link their own faith with the tradition. But because religion has not gone through these revolutions, people have acted independently and created a new revolutionary religious concept, a kind of people’s religion called spirituality. Although willed into existence by a collective aspiration, new spirituality is not collective, but is a personal experience. This is both its triumph and, of course, its severe limitation.

**EMPTY CHURCHES, CROWDED PATHWAYS**

While only a tiny minority of people continue to practise formal religion in the developed nations of the world, huge numbers are keenly pursuing spirituality and individual pathways to sacred meaning. Creative theologians and religious thinkers such as Sandra Schneiders are obviously alert to the spiritual revolution that has taken place, and seek to describe its changing contents and contours:

The term ‘spirituality’ no longer refers exclusively or even primarily to prayer and spiritual exercises, much less to an elite state or superior practice of Christianity. Rather, from its original reference to the ‘interior life’ of the person, usually a cleric or religious, who was ‘striving for perfection’, for a life of prayer and virtue that exceeded in scope and intensity that of the ‘ordinary’ believer, the term has broadened to connote the whole of the life of faith and even the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social and political dimensions.42
Theologian John Heagle has similarly attempted to define the new cultural paradigm, and to summarise the major differences between old and new concepts of spirituality. The old spirituality, at the core of formal religion, ‘was theoretical, elitist, otherworldly, ahistorical, anti-secular, individualistic, concentrated on the interior life and perfection’. By contrast, Heagle argues:

the emerging spirituality of our age is intensely personal without being private. It is visionary without being theoretical. It is prophetic without being partisan, and it is incarnational without becoming worldly. It emphasises personal response and interior commitment but it radically changes the context within which this response takes place.⁴³

Many theological commentators point to the major characteristics of the new spirituality: the new is creation-centred without being pagan, sexually alert without being pornographic, holistic without being sentimental, and personal without being private.

We are concerned with a radically new and surprising experience of spirit, and yet it is a version that is close to the original conception of spirituality. It is only ‘new’ because religious tradition lost touch with the unitary experience of spirit-and-life at some point in its historical development. The curse, ‘May you live in interesting times’ is relevant to our time, in which the churches are emptying and yet the pathways of spiritual discovery are crowded and full of activity. The time is rife with spiritual opportunities and challenges, and anyone with understanding or insight is in great public demand. Speakers who address spirituality with integrity and depth find themselves flooded with invitations in today’s needy climate.

Whether the new spirituality is a result of people power or commercial power is a question worth posing, especially in light of the proliferation of New Age industries and marketing networks. Such commercial industries thrive on the appearance of individualistic, do-it-yourself, free-floating spirituality, and see the demise of collective faith as a business opportunity. Many people feel that they have liberated themselves from the control of the churches, but some have placed themselves in the hands of the commercial interests that patrol the new spiritual waters like sharks in the sea. Our free-floating and formless spiritual hunger can be ruthlessly exploited and manipulated by those who see the crisis as an opportunity to make money and win prestige. There are more false prophets than true prophets in today’s world, and most people who claim to be prophets are almost by
definition not. The title of prophet is best awarded by others, rather than claimed by oneself.

**GAINS AND LOSSES**

We have experienced a revolution of the spirit, in which spiritual authority has been placed in the hands of the individual person and his or her conscience. Many celebrate the new dispensation, but we have brought upon our heads many serious problems, some of which are ignored or repressed in a bid to emphasise the positives.

To some extent we have merely exchanged the authority of the churches for the dubious authority of New Age industries. But there are more subtle levels of entrapment and despair. The spirituality revolution assumes that the individual knows best, and that to gain personal control of our spiritual lives is the desired outcome. This attitude is a product of individualism, an ideology that keeps us wedded to the idea of the individual who is independent of culture and apart from tradition. This ideology promises ‘freedom’ from tradition, but when this freedom is attained, we do not feel liberated, only alienated.

Individualism leads to isolation and loneliness because it encourages us to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and self-enclosed, whereas we are deeply communal creatures who need the support and communality of others. Freud, Jung, and especially Adler felt that a person could only achieve full potential and individuation in creative relationship with others.

Moreover, the idea that ‘spirit’ is some kind of personal possession or inward endeavour is a curious myth of our time. Poetry and philosophy indicate that spirit is universal and collective: it is a shared experience, and cannot be confined to the narrow limits of the personal self. To go deeply into spirit is to be led into universality, away from subjectivity towards the world and the objective life of the spirit.

We are wrongly assuming that because spirit is experienced ‘within’ ourselves, spirit is somehow intrinsically introspective and even subjective. The inward journey, if followed with commitment and courage, leads us through and beyond our subjective lives, because the spirit ‘within’ us is the same spirit that is found in everything else. To encounter the spirit within the psyche is to encounter a reality that longs for involvement with others, and this spirit is not truly satisfied unless it has found communion with the world and exchange with other people. Therefore, the idea of a ‘private’ spirituality is somehow fraudulent and deceptive. It is a powerful modern myth, linked to ideas
of egoic liberation, but the personal domain is experienced by the spirit as a solitary confinement.

This is where form proves to be more central to the experience of spirit than we had realised, and more important than contemporary fashion would suggest. Without form, spirit does not know how to reach out to others, nor how to express itself in communal or social activities. In walking away from religious tradition, the modern seeker turns his or her back on the symbolic forms that provide or contain shared meaning, memory and the experience of belonging to a sacramental community. These are great assets of the spirit and a high price to pay if we renounce form and go in search of a new spirit. Some people manage to create or invent new spiritual communities, and to provide a different or alternative sense of memory by attaching themselves to unconventional, non-Western, esoteric or psychological and therapeutic traditions. But the new attempts at belonging, however courageous or well intended, are mostly fragile, transient and easily destroyed by egotism, power play and personal differences, because they are not grounded in the earth of one’s own society. New attempts at community, based on spiritual precepts, start off with high hopes but frequently end in tragedy when the all-too-human side appears.

The contemporary experience of the spirit is built upon shifting sands and constant change, because it is unsupported by forms that afford containment and security. Such experience can be savage and wild, and yet I continue to meet people, especially young people, who deny that this is so, and who emphasise the freedom and fun of the new situation. Perhaps it is exciting as long as the good times roll on, but when tragedy strikes or the adventuring spirit is depleted, the rawness and lack of containment will be sorely felt. Eventually, the modern seeker is forced to discover peace within the self, because everything outside is whirling and chaotic. The self, and its deep recesses of quiet wisdom, is often the only refuge we have against the howling storms of spiritual movement and social alienation. This is why meditation, retreat and autobiographical reflection have become important features of the postmodern landscape. We have to protect peace of mind and sanity in the face of our own spiritual anarchy.

RELIGIONS AS SUBSETS OF THE SPIRITUAL

In the new cultural paradigm, religion is no longer singular but plural. ‘Religions’, Western and Eastern, modern and ancient, have been downgraded to subsets of the broader category of spirituality. They are no longer a priori givens, but are options or choices that one makes as
one advances along the spiritual journey. At the core of the new paradigm are clusters of religions, and these are ‘used’ for personal insight or for deepening the spiritual pursuit. Society does not regard any one religion as better or greater than another, and Christianity, which for centuries had believed itself to be the greatest of all, has been dealt an almost fatal blow to its pride. Christianity has had to embark on a massive attempt to reposition itself in the new, plural world of many faiths and competing truths. Its fundamentalism and absolutism will always be in question from now on and subject to rigorous scrutiny and opposition from within, by its best and most creative theologians, and from without, by its most vigorous critics.

People no longer feel obliged to remain loyal to one religious tradition or denomination, but tend to roam widely across the spectrum. Schneiders writes:

> Whatever else can be said, it is no longer the case in the first world that most people are initiated from childhood into a family religious affiliation and remain within it for a lifetime, never seriously questioning its validity and, in turn, passing it on to their own offspring.

Instead of the uniform stability of the past, we find a sense of continuous movement across traditions, as people replace loyalty to their natal faith with a new kind of loyalty to their inner striving or personal spiritual quest.

One is no longer born into a particular faith, remaining true to that tradition. Rather, if one enters a religious path at all, it is because one chooses to be inducted. St Paul originally ‘put on’ Christ, but we no longer ‘put on’ religion, we ‘try it on’ for size and taste. If we are not satisfied we become detached and critical or move out and onwards. If the inner striving seems to require contact with a new religious community, we move on according to these promptings. Or people choose a ritual or liturgy from one tradition, and a sacred text or scriptural source from another, supplementing, as it were, their fund of spiritual intuition with a selection of insights and images.

**THE CULTURE OF PICK AND MIX**

Plurality, diversity and choice continues to be denounced by religious traditions as fickleness, faithlessness and promiscuity. If you pick and mix, the traditions say, you will end up with a confusing array of conflicting ideas and views. This is found not only in the hostility to
ecumenicalism in many traditions but also in their intolerance toward young people's experimentation with spiritual paths and views. The old religions still view 'loyalty' in its external or institutional sense, meaning loyalty to a single tradition. The fact that people might be 'loyal' to an inner spiritual process or quest is not recognised or, if seen, not sufficiently respected.

The era of diversity is upon us, no matter how distasteful it may appear to tradition. While I understand this jaundiced response, it is also true that syncretism, plurality and choice are not going to diminish now that people have broken free from old religious constraints. It is no use lamenting the postmodern condition now that it has become the norm. People see themselves as inhabiting a complex, fragmented world, in which they have to gradually 'piece together' the puzzle of their lives and sacred reality. The very breadth and scope of the newly defined sense of spirit gives people the support and moral backing to move across a wide spectrum of religious and historical possibilities. Since spirit is 'in everything', it can be 'found everywhere'. The sacred is no longer experienced in one's own little corner of the world.

To call for 'purity' in a racial context, or in a social and ethnic matter, is greeted with suspicion and scorn. There is usually another agenda behind the call, a desire to impose order or old-world values upon the new. A closer look can reveal a disenfranchised political hierarchy longing for power in a society that has slipped out of its control. The religious opposition to spiritual diversity can be seen in this light, as a final attempt by disenfranchised authorities to bring the people back into the fold. This is tactfully disguised as moral instruction about what is 'good' for our spiritual health, and what we ought to do to live more fulfilling lives. But unless our own experiences teach us otherwise, it is better for the time being to regard such calls for purity and loyalty with some suspicion, as the remnant cries of an imperial religion trying to bolster itself with moral defences.

The traditional sense of belonging to one specific interpretation of the world not only runs counter to the new experience of diversity and social plurality, but is also contrary to the modern experience of education, based as it is on the scientific method. Educated people have been taught by science to observe the world, to develop a hypothesis, to test the hypothesis against reality, and to draw conclusions. It is hardly surprising if many of us begin to live our spiritual lives according to this same pattern, by looking at our own needs and the various world religions in terms of what makes sense to us and what can be concluded by our experimentation. We 'test' the claims of religion against reality as we see it, and against our emotional and
intuitive responses, and we draw conclusions based on these observations. We also recognise that this process and our conclusions may change in time as our needs and inner demands change.

What is berated by religious conservatives as ‘pick and mix’ could be the logical and necessary application of the scientific method to our spiritual experiences. Rather than seeing this behaviour as disloyalty or faithlessness, it could be reconfigured through the lens of science in a radically different way; as a sign that people are taking their spiritual lives seriously, and applying the best criteria they know to the lived experience of the spiritual life. The point of being outside the magic circle of religion, and in a new world governed by different values, is that one has to use one’s own conscience as guide.

**RELATIVITY AND RELATIVISM**

The great danger of plurality is not the claim that we are sure to lose the ‘purity’ of a single tradition, but that we might end up sliding into a radical relativism in which no religious forms or differences are upheld, and where nothing matters because every revelation is ‘as good as’ any other. Here we need to make a distinction between relativity and relativism. Relativity shows us that the sacred is greater and more mysterious than any one religious revelation or cultural manifestation. Relativity indicates that all religious systems are to some extent ‘productions’ of time, place and history, and that when we enter into any religious system we are necessarily participating in the historical and social influences of that system. Relativity, however, does not deny that the sacred is present in the religious system, nor that if we dig deeply into any authentic tradition we are sure to reach the reality of the holy.

Relativism, on the other hand, tends to deny the presence of the sacred in all religious systems, and sees them all as mere products of society, culture, politics, power and ‘functionality’. In this style of reductionism, the sacred is nowhere to be found, because religions are human constructs designed to make sense of a basically meaningless world. Relativism is the dangerous product of a lazy mind and a lack of imagination. It is the revenge of ‘common sense’ against the reality and presence of the sacred. Relativism is notoriously attractive to those who find themselves confused by the plethora of religious manifestations and their competing claims—in one sweep of a partially educated mind, all is declared to be human construction. Relativism does not look for, and therefore does not see, the ways in which the sacred has broken into all authentic meaning systems, giving them
elements of truth and affording them glimpses of divine reality. It is not a spiritual response to plurality, but an imposition of an old-world reductive materialism upon the reality of a plural world.