

# Challenging Secularization Theory: The Growth of “New Age” Spiritualities of Life

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Of the various meanings which have come to be associated with the term “spirituality,” one is readily identifiable. Spirituality is taken to be *life itself*—the “life force” or “energy” that sustains life in this world, and what lies at the heart of *subjective life*—the core of what it is to be truly alive. It is part and parcel with authentic ways of being—as when one hears that “spirituality is love, love is spirituality.”

“New Age” spiritualities of life—or contemporary spiritualities of life—can be distinguished from theistic spiritualities. Whereas New Age spiritualities are experienced as emanating from the depths of life within the here-and-now, the spirituality of the Holy Spirit, the spirituality of obeying the will of God, or the spirituality of experiencing the God-head itself are understood as emanating from the transcendental realm to serve life in this world. Take away the theistic God of religious tradition, and there is little left of Christianity (or theistic traditions); take away the God of theism, and New Age spiritualities of life remain virtually intact.

The key words of New Age spiritualities are “experience” and “practice.” Rather than attaching importance to the beliefs, doctrines, and ethical injunctions of theistic traditions, importance is attached to experiencing the heart of life. Practices are taken to facilitate the inner quest. Drawn from many sources, most especially the spiritual “traditions” of the East, activities range from yoga (the most popular) to spiritual massage (also popular), from *reiki* to spiritual forms of the Alexander Technique. Enabling spiritual seekers to make contact with their inner depths, seekers experience spirituality

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flowing through other aspects of their personal lives—their bodies, their emotions, their relationships. To draw on a term that has acquired wide currency, namely “mind-body-spirit,” this is therefore mind-body-spirit spirituality.

### *The Growth of New Age Spiritualities in the West*

Concluding his discussion of religion and “alternative” spirituality in Britain, Steve Bruce writes that “in so far as we can measure *any* aspect of religious interest, belief or action and can compare 1995 with 1895, the only description for the change between the two points is ‘decline.’”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, secularization theory can be applied to explain decline “across the board.” But there is at least one major problem with the across-the-board application of secularization theory. Whether it be the beliefs and interests of individuals, specialized associational activities, institutional cultures or widely available cultural provisions such as books, New Age spiritualities of life have grown.

Evidence is provided by the growth of the “holistic milieu,” namely associational activities, of a group or one-to-one variety, run by mind-body-spirit practitioners, which take place within their own self-contained contexts rather than within and with reference to broader institutional contexts like schools or businesses. From October 2000 to June 2002 I was part of a research team studying spirituality and religion in the market town and regional center of Kendal, a gateway to the Lake District of England. A primary aim of the Kendal Project was to establish whether the holistic milieu of the town and immediate environs (population 37,150) had grown, and if so, to what extent. By way of several methods, including use of British Telecom Archives of the *Cumbria and North Lancashire Yellow Pages* running back to 1969, we established that there were virtually no holistic, mind-body-spirit activities in 1970. At the time of our research, however, there were 126 separate activities provided by 95 spiritual practitioners—41 practitioners served 63 different groups and 63 practitioners worked with individual clients (9 practitioners served both groups and individual clients). Including the practitioners, 600 people were involved with mind-body-spirit activities during a typical week, amounting to 1.6 percent of the total population of Kendal and the immediate environs.<sup>2</sup>

Even in the Glastonbury of 1970, there were very few holistic milieu activities of the kind found today. However, there are very good reasons to suppose that over 900,000 inhabitants of Great Britain are now active on a weekly basis in the holistic milieu of

<sup>1</sup> Steve Bruce, “Religion in Britain at the Close of the 20th Century: A Challenge to the Silver Lining Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11.3 (1996): 273.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Kendal Project, and on some of the data that follow in this essay, see Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). See also <[www.kendalproject.org.uk](http://www.kendalproject.org.uk)>.

the nation—a not inconsiderable figure. Yoga, with around 400,000 participants, is of greater numerical significance than the regular participants of Methodist congregations (372,600) or Pentecostal churches (216,400); the number of holistic milieu practitioners (146,000) is considerably in excess of National Health Service general practitioners (37,352). In the U.S., the holistic milieu of the nation has grown from being tiny in 1970 (an obvious exception being the San Francisco Bay area) to between 2.5 and 8 percent of the total population. A poll carried out by the Harris Interactive Service Bureau in 2003 found that 7 percent of U.S. adults, or 15 million people, practice yoga—an increase of 28.5 percent from the previous year. Not all practice yoga in associational milieu settings, but many do. Additional evidence is provided by the growth of complementary and alternative forms of “medicine” (CAM), which are often provided by mind-body-spirit practitioners. According to David Eisenberg, et al., for example, survey research suggests a “47.3% increase in total visits to alternative medicine practitioners, from 427 million in 1990 to 629 million in 1997, thereby exceeding total visits to all US primary care physicians.”<sup>3</sup>

Turning to evidence of growth within mainstream institutions, all the schools of England and Wales are legally required to attend to the spiritual development of their pupils. As defined by Ofsted (the government’s inspection agency), “spiritual development” relates “to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth...a non-material dimension to life,” it being explicitly stated that “‘spiritual’ is not synonymous with religious.”<sup>4</sup> Given that Ofsted visits schools to judge the quality of provisions for spiritual education, it is not surprising to find evidence that inner life spirituality is becoming more significant within the mainstream educational system. Many primary schools now provide yoga and *tai chi* for their pupils (and parents); some have special areas where pupils can go for creative, calming, and holistic therapies.

Within another sphere of public services, the National Health Service, government charters and plans state that nurses must attend to “the spiritual needs” of their patients. Although this includes attending to the “spiritual needs” of theistic believers, it is clear that patients and their nurses are increasingly concerned with holistic, mind-body-spirit spirituality. And so are doctors. By 2001, almost half of the general practices in England were providing access to CAM activities, with almost one-third of activities being provided “in-house” by doctors themselves or their staff. Regarding the U.S., much the same picture is to be found, one indicator being that some 10 percent of hospitals now provide alternative forms of healing, often with a spiritual orientation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David M. Eisenberg, et al., “Trends in Alternative Medicine Use in the United States, 1990–1997,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 280.18 (11 November 1998): 1,569.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Heelas and Woodhead 71–2.

<sup>5</sup> Evidence is provided by Paul Heelas, “Nursing Spirituality,” *Spirituality and Health International* (forthcoming): 1–16.

Holistic spirituality is also a growing presence within the heartlands of capitalism. According to Douglas Hicks in his study of current interest in religion and spirituality in U.S. companies, “along with a new public Christian evangelicalism, New Age language fundamentally shapes discussions of contemporary workplace spirituality.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, surveying the evidence provided by the numerous companies which have incorporated “the sacred,” it can be argued that inner life spirituality has become more significant than Christianity, with many employees (especially in larger companies) participating in trainings, courses, and seminars that aim to release and optimize the resources that lie within—including what spiritual “energy,” “wisdom,” and “creativity” have to offer.

In terms of the numerical significance of inner life beliefs among the general population, the best evidence to date is provided by Eileen Barker. Drawing on the 1998 Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) survey of eleven European countries, she reports that 29 percent agree with the statement, “I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there,” with an additional 15 percent agreeing with the statement, “I believe in an impersonal spirit or life force.”<sup>7</sup> In the U.S., the importance of inner life spirituality is indicated by George Gallup and Timothy Jones’s finding that “almost a third of our survey defined spirituality with no reference to...a higher authority,” a typical response being that spirituality is “the essence of my personal being.”<sup>8</sup> Although comparison is not made easier by virtue of the fact that survey questions have tended to change over the years, it is safe to say that the picture of Europe and Britain over time adds up to one of growth.

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In sum, with no (significant) indices of decline, we can reverse Bruce’s assessment to conclude that “the only description for...change...is ‘growth.’”

### *The “Symptom of Secularization” Defense*

Faced with evidence of growth, across-the-board secularization theorists have adopted the strategy of arguing that expansion is more apparent than real. The argument is that a great deal of holistic mind-body-spirit spirituality is part of the very process of secularization itself. As David Voas and Steve Bruce make the point, “Unconventional spiri-

<sup>6</sup> Douglas A. Hicks, *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, Leadership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 31.

<sup>7</sup> Eileen Barker, “The Church without and the God within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?” *Religion and Patterns of Social Transformation*, ed. D. M. Jerolimov, S. Zrinscak and I. Borowik (Zagreb: Institute for Social Research, 2004) 38.

<sup>8</sup> George Gallup, Jr., and Timothy Jones, *The Next American Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 2000) 49.

tuality is a symptom of secularisation, not a durable counterforce to it.”<sup>9</sup> Compared to the “real thing”—religious tradition—New Age spiritualities of life are impoverished, vague, attenuated, and quasi-spiritual, if not secular.

To discuss this defense in connection with the Kendal Project, Voas and Bruce draw attention to the finding that nearly half of the respondents to the questionnaire sent to all the participants of the holistic milieu did not consider their activities to be of spiritual significance. Although all the practitioners might have been providing activities that *they* understood to be spiritual, a considerable number of group members or one-to-one clients understood homeopathy or osteopathy, for example, as devoid of spirituality. However, Voas and Bruce do not take into account the finding that 82 percent of all respondents agreed with the statement that “some sort of spirit or life force pervades all that lives,” with 73 percent agreeing that there is “subtle energy (or energy channels) in the body.” Furthermore, 71 percent rated “spirituality” between 6 and 10 on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (very important), with 38 percent selecting 10. The milieu is thus by no means secular as the understanding of activities by some participants might lead one to suppose; Voas and Bruce themselves write that questionnaire responses are “extraordinarily high on unconventional beliefs.”<sup>10</sup> As for elsewhere in Britain, Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe’s study of the Iyengar Yoga Jubilee Convention held at Crystal Palace, London, during 2002 finds much the same picture: 83 percent of questionnaire respondents “describe themselves as having a spiritual life” whilst 47 percent have a “spiritual’ interest in their practice.”<sup>11</sup>

The extent to which the holistic milieu differs from the secular is seen in the criticisms directed at CAM by scientific researchers. To mention just one critic, Raymond Tallis, a fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences, writes that

acupuncturists require one to believe ideas about illness for which there is no evidence, other than the sacred texts of Chinese medicine: that there are patterns of energy flow (Qi) throughout the body that are essential for health; that disease is due to disruptions of this flow; and that acupuncture corrects the disruptions

and suggests that such practitioners use “untested medicines invested with the magic of antiquity and the subversive charm of irrationality.”<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of critics

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<sup>9</sup> David Voas and Steve Bruce, “The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred,” *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Voas and Bruce.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe, “Spirituality and ‘Mystical Religion’ in Contemporary Society: A Case Study of British Practitioners of the Iyengar Method of Yoga,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20.3 (2005): 312.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Tallis, *Hippocratic Oaths: Medicine and Its Discontents* (London: Atlantic, 2004) 129, 133.

like Tallis, a chasm exists between the explanations and procedures of orthodox medicine and CAM—a chasm that reveals the extent to which beliefs like “subtle energy (or energy channels) in the body” deviate from the secular world of science.

It is true that some of those participating in the holistic milieu of Britain (as elsewhere) are simply doing yoga for stress relief (for example). It is also true that a smallish minority (probably in the order of 20 percent) do not acknowledge belief in inner spirituality or spiritual energy. The fact remains, though, that the great majority of participants accept spirituality, and those who do not sometimes accept the existence of scientifically untenable states of affairs, such as the operation of non-material, invisible *chakras*.<sup>13</sup>

Generally speaking, the holistic milieu activities of Western countries are not the “last gasp” of the sacred sought out by those who are happy to make do with the impoverished. Without going into detail here, the growth of the milieu attests to its vitality—a vitality which owes a considerable amount to the fact that the milieu (in any particular locality and beyond) works by way of shared, mutually confirmed, “cultural” values, expectations, key terms (like “spiritual energy” or “life force”), and key experiences (like “harmony,” “inner healing,” or “holistic wellbeing”).<sup>14</sup>

### *Explaining Growth*

With secularization theory very much dwelling on the decline of religious tradition in “Western” settings, the challenge is to develop alternative explanations—explanations that specifically attend to the growth of New Age spiritualities of life.

The development of the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the autonomous self during modernity is pivotal. The argument is basically simple. Whatever the reasons for this development—which are multiple—the autonomous self has to have what Lionel Trilling refers to as “internal space.”<sup>15</sup> To *be* autonomous the self must act on the basis of what belongs to itself. Appropriate subjectivities, taking place within internal “space” and which can only be experienced by the self, are required for the self to be able to consider itself able to exercise control, make judgments, act on the world, express itself, and grow whilst being true to itself. Much of the content of the autonomous self of Western societies is (relatively) secular: the “mind” itself; “will” and the ability to exercise “will power”; being “imaginative” and “creative”; regulating one’s “emotions” to

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Heelas, “The Holistic Milieu and Spirituality: Reflections on Voas and Bruce,” *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Heelas, “The Infirmary Debate: On the Viability of New Age Spiritualities of Life,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 24. For a brilliant analysis of the muting of “inner space” in a culture where individual autonomy is equally muted, see Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961).

exercise authority; calling one's "intuition," "experience," or one's sense of what "feels right" into play to make decisions; being "authentic," honest about oneself, emotionally "intelligent" in dealing with malfunctioning relationships. However, given the value ascribed to *being* autonomous, an effective way of informing, articulating, or emphasizing autonomy is by locating the "sacred"—with its powers—*within* the subjectivities of the self. And indeed a considerable body of evidence shows that autonomous selves are much more likely than conformist selves to hold inner life, spiritual beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

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As the sociocultural order becomes increasingly restrictive, people increasingly come to value their freedom. The "ideology" of autonomy, which is certainly deeply rooted in "Western cultures," comes to the fore precisely when it is most threatened. The fact that people are "determined" to be free—maybe in one sense of the word (in line with Foucault), but certainly in the sense of their own *self*-determination—counters the Foucault-inspired objection that "autonomy" is subverted by implicit regulatory or constructivist processes.

Another question arises in relation to the argument I have outlined: surely it is perfectly possible to be autonomous without buttressing the exercise of freedom by way of inner spirituality? Given that this question has to be answered in the affirmative, we then have to ask: why do some people, but not others, believe in the sacred within? Unfortunately, critical, detailed evidence has yet to be provided. Other than those participating in holistic milieu activities, we know very little about the gender, occupational, age, educational, etc. profiles, or the values and worldviews of those in the population at large who believe in the sacred within, and not "simply" in being autonomous. Neither do we have a clear idea of the number of people who do not go to church (or other places of worship) on a regular basis, who value autonomy, but who continue to believe that the sacred is primarily located in the transcendental realm.

I strongly suspect, however, that an ingredient which has to be added to the autonomy argument lies with the role played by the mysteries of life. In 1841 Feuerbach wrote that "Man first of all sees his nature as if *out* of himself, before he finds it in himself."<sup>17</sup> What he called "religion," Feuerbach argued, is increasingly found within our consciousness—our consciousness of our infinite, mysterious nature. Scientific advance since the time of Feuerbach has done nothing to dispel the inexplicable nature of consciousness and life. Indeed, as Einstein was fond of observing, scientific progress highlights the unknown. Whether it be life or the universe, there *must* be something more that is way

<sup>16</sup> See Heelas and Woodhead 113–23; see, in particular, the pioneering research carried out by S. Houtman and D. P. Mascini, "Why Do Churches Become Empty, While New Age Grows?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41.3 (2002): 455–73.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957) 13–4.

beyond our ken as mere partially evolved mortals. And the more you think about it, the more mysterious it becomes. The irreducibility of the great mysteries...

Especially with the decline of belief in the transcendental world since the time of Feuerbach, if the sacred is to be located in this world (and where else can it go?) it will be in the realm of the mysterious: the realm that exists beyond the mere materialities of the secular world—a realm that can be experienced but not grasped by the mind.

In Durkheimian fashion, the “sacred” is quite naturally associated with the most important, ultimate of cultural values. Hence, it is the interior home for many of the “free spirits” who value the autonomous way of being. The “sacred” also quite naturally dwells with the mysterious. Hence the probability that it has its interior home with those who are most aware of the unfathomable, inexplicable depths of life (or, as with Einstein and other preeminent scientists, the universe). I predict that research will show that those whose self-reflexivity about life has been stimulated by college or university education (especially in the humanities and social sciences), then exercised by careers in person-centered jobs (most obviously hospices) where “meaning and purpose” issues come to the fore, will be most aware of the mysteries of life. Such people, who almost certainly value autonomy, are therefore the most likely to hold beliefs of the kind reported by Eileen Barker; or to participate in holistic milieu activities to explore the significance of their lives by plumbing the depths of “life” affirming life.

Just as the powers, capacities, and *value* of the inner life mean a great deal to the autonomous self, so the question of what it means to *be* alive means a great deal to those who adhere to the ethic of humanity. Assessing the significance of the “religion of humanity,” as he called it, Durkheim claimed that the ethic

has become a fact, it has penetrated our institutions and our mores, it has blended with our whole life, and if, truly, we had to give it up, we would have to recast our whole moral organization at the same stroke.<sup>18</sup>

Durkheim’s claim is even more justified today, at least in “the West.” Fuelling the value of freedom by way of the importance attached to the value of “respecting the other,” and the associated institutionalization of human rights, the core value of the ethic in fact lies with life itself. The basic assumption of the ethic is that life itself—what we all share by virtue of the life of humanity—lies beyond “difference” (ethnic, gendered, national, etc.). Other values—for example equality and respecting the other—flow from this. Acknowledging that no one human being is the same as another, freedom is valued as providing the opportunity for people to “live out” their humanity in their own way—so long as life itself (and the freedoms of others) is not (unnecessarily) at stake. In short,

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<sup>18</sup> Emile Durkheim, “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” *Emile Durkheim: On Morality and Society*, ed. Robert Bellah (London: The University of Chicago Press 1973) 46–7.

the *ultimate* value assigned to life itself by the dominant ethic of “the West,” and in many other parts of the world, means that it is not surprising that Durkheim called it the “religion” of humanity. Neither is it surprising that so many today explicitly locate the sacred within the depths of this shared life. (Recall the key Kendal Project finding that 82 percent of questionnaire respondents agreed with the statement that “some sort of spirit or life force pervades all that lives.”)

Whatever the precise role played by the “secular” ethic of humanity in explaining the growth of inner life spirituality, there is undoubtedly an extremely close match between the two. That they share the theme of there being a universal core to life, expressing or “manifesting” itself through the unique life experiences of particular individuals by way of the (relative) freedom which they are accorded, undoubtedly shows that the “secular” ethic has played an important role in providing assumptions for, and in lending plausibility to, the explicitly sacralized rendering of the ethic in contemporary spirituality of life circles today.

Whereas the ethic of humanity is grounded in “life in general,” the development of the autonomous self is more about “life in particular”: the unique life of the experiences of each person. With the development of the autonomous self, *subjective life*—so vital an aspect of the self-understanding of the autonomous agent—becomes an increasing focus of attention and concern. Catering to subjective life, fuelling it, perhaps constituting particular elements, *subjective wellbeing culture* has thus become a vehicle for a range of careers, adding up to one of the largest (if not the largest) employment sectors of contemporary modernity. And the culture of subjective wellbeing has played a major role in the growth of inner life spirituality.

All cultures are bound up with the wellbeing (or not) of their denizens. Subjective wellbeing culture is marked out by the *explicit* (often highly elaborated) attention that is paid to subjective life. One sees this, for example, in the difference between the car ad that provides the objective facts (fuel consumption, number of cylinders, etc.) and the one that declares “Experience the Difference” or “The Drive of Your Life,” with only a photograph. Clearly, you might be pleased about the fuel consumption figure—but the fact remains that the life of experience is not explicitly addressed in objective, impersonal provisions of this variety.

Those working within subjective wellbeing culture seek to align their provisions and activities with the elementary “logic” of enhancing the quality of subjective life. Given that the subjective life of any particular individual is unique, provisions or activities are personalized or individualized as much as possible (or are left intentionally vague so as to be inclusive and open to personal interpretation). The key is to enable people to “be themselves” (where the unique comes in) “only better” (which is where the enhancement of quality comes in)—a two-fold aim which is frequently advanced by encouraging people to go “deeper” into their experiences to develop their qualities and circumvent their limitations (and for those who regard life as unfathomable, there is plenty of scope for

going “deeper”). From child-centered or “independent” education, to manager-centered “soft capitalism,” to patient-centered nursing, to guest-centered spas and hotels, to the more individuated health and fitness clubs, to customer-centered shop floor assistants, to “person”-centered call center operatives, to viewer-centered “reality TV” shows, to reader-“engaging” or “life-provoking” autobiographies and women’s magazines, to advertising, to client-centered therapists, to life-skill coaches: provisions and services offer a wide range of ways of being yourself only better. The child-centered primary school teacher works in the spirit of Rousseau to cultivate the particular abilities or “gifts” of individual children and to help particular children to develop their own “well-rounded” personalities; the therapist at the spa endeavors to work with her guest to facilitate the best possible experiences; those producing “reality TV” shows aim to provide as many opportunities as possible for the individual viewer to learn from the “personalities,” both how to avoid ill-being and how to be happy and successful as a person.

*Provisions and services offer a wide range of ways of being yourself only better.*

What has all this got to do with the growth of New Age spiritualities of life? Within the ranks of those supplying the provisions of purchasing culture, any good market researcher will be aware of the inner life beliefs of the kind reported by Eileen Barker. Market researchers will know that the sales of newspapers (like the *Daily Mail*) or (women’s) magazines like *O The Oprah Magazine* benefit from the inclusion of articles catering to the hopes of those with beliefs of this variety; market researchers will know that “spiritual” products sold in health and beauty shops are likely to appeal to those who think that holistic spirituality might well improve their quality of life. And in turn, the widespread presence of spiritually “significant” provisions—not least the many books housed under the “self-improvement,” “health and fitness,” and (of course) the “mind-body-spirit” categories in the wellbeing zones of major bookstores—could well be serving to contribute to the increase in the number of people who believe in inner spirituality, perhaps even influencing the “I definitely believe in something” camp.

“Capitalizing” on widespread beliefs in what lies within and what this realm has to offer, many of the provisions and activities of subjective wellbeing culture have introduced holistic, mind-body-spirit themes. Sometimes these are well-developed; sometimes they provide a “taste”; sometimes they take the form of allusions to inner life spirituality and hints of what it promises. Relative to context, inner life spirituality is thriving. It adds to the “better” or “more” of more secular forms of subjective wellbeing culture by offering an additional means to the end of the “more.” Working from within the heart of the person, to flow through her or his personal life, it does not distract from the unique—the “I am what I am” anchorage of so much of modern culture.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Whether or not people are “taken in” by the advertising (etc.) of much of subjective wellbeing is not my concern here. What matters is that they have the opportunity to be “taken in to” their subjectivities.

The assumptions and values of subjective wellbeing culture—the importance of subjective life; the positive, “can do” way it is envisaged; the theme of exercising autonomy to develop, express, and celebrate who you really are—are writ large in the holistic milieu. Accordingly, expectations aroused by subjective wellbeing culture can serve to direct people to the specialized zone of the milieu itself. Here, they can engage in associational, face-to-face activities to go “deeper” into what is to be found in other areas of the culture. One reads about yoga and wellbeing in a popular magazine; one decides to “work out” whilst watching a yoga DVD; one gets interested, buys a book or two, and reads about *chakras*, energy flows, and what yoga has to do with the purpose of life; one gets older and starts thinking about one’s health and what one’s life is all about; one exercises one’s autonomy to find out what works best; one finally settles with a *tai chi* group; one “realizes” things about oneself that one had not known before. Or again: a primary school teacher feels that she should really do something to prepare for the upcoming Ofsted inspection; she introduces “stilling” sessions; she experiences the effects for herself and observes the results in the classroom; she decides to join a meditation group.

Many of the participants of the holistic milieu work, or have worked, in person-centered, wellbeing professions—nursing, education, counseling, therapy, HRD, and so on. Many become active in the holistic milieu because they have been unable to fulfill their holistic, person-centered, subjective wellbeing concerns within the workplace. Take the National Health Service hospital nurses as an example: on the one hand, governmental policies direct them to respond to the “spiritual needs” of their patients; on the other, they are terribly busy working to comply with scientific and bureaucratic procedures. A number of nurses whom I interviewed were seriously interested in “growth” by way of working closely with others and with what holistic spirituality has to offer, but got so frustrated with the “iron cage” of the ward that they simply left or went part-time, to liberate themselves by becoming practitioners in the holistic milieu.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the role played by subjective wellbeing culture, including wellbeing-oriented professions such as nursing, see Heelas and Woodhead. If space permitted, consideration could also be paid to other growth factors, including the roles played by increasing prosperity; the increase of enrollment in college and higher education; the self-reported efficacy of holistic activities in enhancing the quality of life; the ways in which “humanistic” spirituality provides a useful way of appealing to “the same” in the increasingly multicultural environment of many schools and hospitals (for example); the ways in which inner life spirituality lends itself to serving the interests of the managerial sector (in particular) of mainstream businesses; the decline of belief in “human” existence in heaven, meaning that increasing value is attached to living a fulfilling, experience-laden life in the here-and-now; the widespread loss, at least in Britain, of knowledge of Christian beliefs, opening up the “space” for spiritualities that, until recently, were widely regarded as deviant; the ways in which the “empiricism” of holistic spiritualities of life—the test of “what works *in my experience*”—suits the ethos of consumer culture pragmatism; the celebratory, celebrity factor; and, somewhat conversely, the ways in which the egalitarianism of inner life spirituality suits the democratic, anti-deferential ethos that is widely in evidence today.

## Conclusion

The across-the-board claim—that both religion *and* “alternative spirituality” are in decline—is clearly wrong. A great deal of evidence might show that regular church attendance is falling in many countries (including the U.S.), but virtually all indices show that New Age spiritualities of life are growing, most especially the activities of the holistic milieu, activities and beliefs within mainstream institutions, and personal beliefs.

Designed to explain decline, pluralization, and structural differentiation theories, for example, might well help explain why theistic beliefs among the general population are becoming less popular (the first theory) and why public institutions have generally lost most of the theistic significance that they might have had in the past (the second). But does secularization theory have anything to offer with regard to explaining the growth of holistic spiritualities of life? Since explanations of decline can hardly explain growth, the short answer to this ill-explored question is “no.”<sup>21</sup>

However, the longer answer is that certain sociocultural developments are associated with *both* decline and growth. Consider the process of pluralization. On the one hand, the increasing awareness of different religions probably contributes to loss of faith in tradition. (Why should one be right when they all claim to be true?) On the other, the same increase almost certainly contributes to the growth of humanistic, inner life spirituality (for example, to handle the problem of difference in multicultural public institutions, one finds the sacred within the common ground of humanity).

Or consider the development of the autonomous self. In *The Spiritual Revolution*, Linda Woodhead and I argue that the *subjectivization thesis* serves to offer a particular explanation of growth, another for decline.<sup>22</sup> Basically, the argument is that the “turn” to the autonomous self and its subjectivities—which Charles Taylor calls “the massive subjective turn of modern culture”—favors those forms of spirituality which resource one’s subjectivities and treats them as a fundamental source of significance, and undermines those forms of religion which do not.<sup>23</sup> Experienced as the heart of life and flowing through the unique experiences that comprise personal life, holistic spirituality can appeal to the increasing number of free spirits in the culture—people who exercise their autonomy by trusting their own experience to find ways of “deepening,” thereby “elevating,” the quality of their subjective lives, their intimate relationships, their sense of fulfillment and authenticity—without sacrificing their uniqueness and sense

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to deny that secularization theorists have done a great deal to illuminate the nature of modernity, thereby contributing to other explanations.

<sup>22</sup> See Heelas and Woodhead for further discussion.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 26.

of authority. At the same time, however, the subjectivization thesis offers a particular explanation of decline. As the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the autonomous self oriented toward the subjective life become more widespread in Western cultures, there are progressively fewer traditionalists, conformists, or conservatives who are willing to remain with places of religious worship, let alone to start attending. And autonomous selves are unlikely to participate in forms of worship that require living by an order of things not of their own making, rather than by something from within their *own* (not dependent) life.

Bearing on both growth and decline, the development of the autonomous self and the associated subjective turn of modernity provide a *general* explanation of change. The fact remains, though, that the *particular* ways in which growth and decline are explained are by no means the same. The adverse impact of the autonomous, unique, subjectively oriented mode of selfhood on theistic tradition is one thing; the positive impact on New Age spiritualities of life another. Secularization theory is not so much challenged as put in its place—a place where it serves to complement explanations of growth.