

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES, OCCULTURE AND THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF THE WEST

CHRISTOPHER PARTRIDGE



CHRISTOPHER PARTRIDGE is Professor of Contemporary Religion in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at University College, Chester. In recent years his research has been in the areas of religious studies and the sociology of religion, focusing on new religions, alternative spiritualities and Western culture.

We are particularly grateful to Professor Christopher Partridge and Professor John Drane for engaging in a lively and stimulating debate regarding the escalating interest in spirituality and its effect upon Western culture and the Church.

In this first article Christopher Partridge draws our attention to the re-enchancement of the popular culture with "alternative" spiritualities and, interestingly, argues that this is spawned by an occluded spirituality within the culture itself, despite its secular nature. This rising spirituality, which Partridge terms "occulture" is informed by a wide range of ideas, practices and methodologies that traditionally have not resided within mainstream religions. The Church, therefore, does not have reason to be optimistic by this development if it is seeking a revival of a conventional Christian spirituality in this new religio-cultural milieu. LS

"The disenchantment of the world" (Max Weber) is the result of a network of social and intellectual forces. More specifically, it is arguable that the emergence of rationality and individualism have led, on the one hand, to the erosion of religion as a communal phenomenon and, on the other hand, to the implausibility of many of its beliefs. Whilst this secularising process is deceptively complex, the essential idea is simple: modernisation leads to religious decline, both in society and in the human mind. In other words, not only do people stop attending places of worship and organising society according to broadly religious convictions, but they no longer think from a religious perspective anymore. It is not so much that religion is explicitly rejected, but more the case that it just is not thought about. For Weber, disenchantment is the process whereby magic and spiritual mystery is driven from the world, nature is managed rather than enchanted, the spiritual loses social significance, and institutions and laws do not depend on religion for their legitimisation.

Whilst not denying some aspects of Western secularisation, I want to question whether it is the whole story. Is the West witnessing a thoroughgoing erosion of belief in the supernatural? Are magic and spiritual mystery being driven from the world? Is the loss of faith in otherworldly forces a one-way, inevitable decline, or are there reasons to believe in the re-emergence of "spirituality" in the West?

Whilst the current state of religion in the West is complicated and difficult to accurately map, and while simplistic analyses should be avoided, as I have argued

at length elsewhere,¹ overall I am persuaded that whilst disenchantment is ubiquitously apparent, the forces of secularisation have never quite been able to stifle the shoots of spirituality. Although institutional Christianity has been seriously damaged and does not seem to be able to arrest the process of erosion, new and very different forms of significant spiritual life are emerging on the Western landscape. As with all life, new conditions require adaptation. Religion in the thin atmosphere of the modern West will necessarily evolve away from what we have become used to calling "religion" into, it would seem, the personally tailored forms of "self-religion" that are now being referred to as "spirituality". Moreover, as future generations of alternative spiritualities become established, rooted and increasingly mainstream, they may prove to be more hardy and resistant to the disenchanting forces their antecedents were ill-equipped to deal with.

In a recent revision of his influential secularisation thesis, Peter Berger, after predicting that the world of the twenty-first century will be no less religious than it is today, asserts that "the religious impulse, the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world, has been a perennial feature of humanity ... It would require something close to a mutation of the species to extinguish this impulse for good."² Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that if mainstream religion loses authority, new forms of religion will evolve to compensate. Indeed, I would argue that any apparent disappearance of spirituality is illusory. Secularisation is only a stage in a larger process, a stage which is accompanied by the increasing significance and mainstreaming of new forms of religiosity. While it may look as though the West is experiencing creeping secularisation because the most conspicuous streams of traditional spirituality, which have dominated the religious landscape for centuries, are drying up, this, in fact, is not the whole story.

Spiritualities are emerging that are not only quite different from the dying forms of religion, but are often defined over against them, and are articulated in ways that do not carry the baggage of traditional religion. Unlike those forms of religion that are in serious decline, the new spiritual awakening utilises thought forms, ideas and practices which are not at all alien to the majority of Westerners. They emerge from an essentially non-Christian religio-cultural milieu that both resources and is resourced by popular culture, and is a constantly replenished reservoir of ideas, practices

“... previously unusual spiritual beliefs and practices are being appreciated by and gradually absorbed into mainstream Western society.”

NOTES

1. C Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol 1 (2 vols.; London: T&T Clark, 2004).
2. P Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview”, in P Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 3.
3. Jane Brum, “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, *Marie-Claire* (November, 2000), p. 146.
4. In 1930 occult books constituted 7 per cent of religious books published. This gradually rose to 17 per cent in 1990, dipped to 11 per cent in 1995 and arose again to 15 per cent in 2000. See P Brierley, “Religion”, in AH Halsey and J Webb (eds.), *Twentieth-century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 666–67.
5. “The Road Well Trodden: How to Succeed in Publishing”, *The Economist* (19 May 2001), p. 35.
6. P Heelas, “Prosperity and the New Age Movement: The Efficacy of Spiritual Economics”, in B Wilson and J Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 71.
7. P Heelas, “Expressive Spirituality and Humanistic Expressivism”, in S Sutcliffe and M Bowman (eds), *Beyond New Age* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 240. See also the revealing study of religion in the Lakeland town of Kendal, P Heelas and L Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
8. T Walter, “Reincarnation, Modernity and Identity”, *Sociology* 35 (2001), p. 21.
9. *Ibid.*
10. This is discussed in detail in C Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol 2 (2 vols.; London: T&T Clark, 2005), ch. 1.
11. *Nurse's Handbook of Alternative and Complimentary Therapies* (Springhouse: Springhouse Corporation, 1999).

► and methodologies. I have termed this milieu “occulture”. Expanding the narrow, technical definition of the term “occult” to include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal, occulture is the new spiritual atmosphere in the West; a large pool of ideas and theories feeding new spiritual springs; the environment within which new methodologies and worldviews are passed on to an occulturally curious generation. Moreover, it is worth briefly drawing attention to the fact that popular culture is central to the efficacy of occulture, in that it feeds ideas into the occultural reservoir and also develops, mixes and disseminates those ideas. Put starkly, popular occulture is sacralising the Western mind.

Evidence that the resurgence of religion in the West is taking a new trajectory is not difficult to find. For example, a recent sympathetically written article on Wicca in America makes the following interesting, if a little exaggerated, points: “Witchcraft, or Wicca, is the fastest growing ‘religion’ in the USA today. It is estimated that around a million-and-a-half teenage Americans, often as young as thirteen, are practising Wiccans. Television programmes such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and films like *The Craft* have sparked continent-wide interest in witchcraft and awarded it the official Hollywood stamp of ‘cool’.”³ This interest is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Non-traditional re-enchantment has been a long time coming. In particular, over the past 40 years or so there has been a sharp rise in, not merely those tolerant of, but those taking a keen interest in new forms of spirituality. For example, the fact that the percentage of “occult” books published since 1930 has more than doubled,⁴ and, according to a recent report in *The Economist*, “sales of books about yoga and reiki ... have exploded in the past 18 months”,⁵ is indicative of the steady increase of popular interest in alternative religiosity. Similarly, Paul Heelas points out that, not only have, for example, “New Age holidays ... expanded rapidly during the last ten or so years”, but “there is no reason to suppose that ... spiritual economics will not continue to prosper. Since the 1960s, we have witnessed a clear pattern of growth.”⁶ Hence, Heelas rightly notes that whilst “it would be misleading in the extreme to conclude that everything going on beyond the frame of institutionalised worship is of great ‘religious’ (or

spiritual, paranormal, etc.) significance ... many more people are (somehow) ‘religious’ without going to Church on anything approaching a regular basis than are attendees.”⁷

Bearing the above in mind, it is no surprise to discover that, according to recent polls, whilst the numbers of people claiming belief in God or in heaven and hell are decreasing, once questions are asked about non-Judaeo-Christian beliefs, or are framed in a non-Judaeo-Christian way, a different picture emerges, one which shows that growing numbers of people are becoming interested in “spirituality”. Indeed, it is clear that whilst some people would not regard themselves as being “religious” (almost certainly because of the baggage that term carries), they do understand themselves to be “spiritual”. Hence, whilst the numbers believing in “God as personal” are falling, those believing in “God as spirit”, “universal spirit” or “life force” are rising. Again, the relative popularity of the non-Judeo-Christian belief in reincarnation is interesting. Since the proportion of Hindus, Sikhs or Buddhists in the West is relatively low (around 2 per cent in Britain), it is significant, as Tony Walter points out, that surveys consistently discover that “around 20 per cent of the population of Western countries answer ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Do you believe in reincarnation?’”⁸ Indeed, some surveys indicate that a quarter of Europeans and North Americans do believe in reincarnation. Quite simply, there has been a substantial increase “since the middle of the twentieth century when British surveys found figures of 4 per cent and 5 per cent”.⁹

Taking this line of thought a little further, an example of what I would understand to be “re-enchantment” (i.e. alternative forms of spirituality which evolve, cease to remain purely private concerns and start to “re-enchant” the wider culture) is the way a typically modern, science-based profession such as medicine is now witnessing a rise of interest in what used to be called “New Age healing”.¹⁰ Manuals such as the *Nurse's Handbook of Alternative and Complimentary Therapies*¹¹ (produced by medical professionals) are being published and alternative medicine, holistic approaches to illness and “the spiritual” are increasingly being explored and utilised. This is not surprising bearing in mind the general public's rising levels interest. For example, in his now famous study, David Eisenberg of the Harvard Medical School found that ordinary Americans were annually spending more than \$13 billion on alternative therapies and that “an estimated one in three persons in

“Traditional Christianity is too marginal in the lives of most Westerners ... and its thought forms and ideas too alien to those of the majority of the population.”

the U.S. adult population used unconventional therapy in 1990”.¹² As the *Nurse's Handbook* notes, “Andrew Weil and Deepak Chopra have become household names, and their books espousing the benefits of natural and Ayurvedic remedies sell by the millions.”¹³ Whilst it would obviously be misleading to claim that all such consumers hold alternative spiritual worldviews, it is significant that, even in the areas of medicine and health, there seems to be a trend away from trusting only the conventional to experimentation with or trust in therapies and medicines which are not only unconventional, but are often supported by spiritual terminology and non-rational explanations. Many of the therapies, for example, have their roots in Eastern religious systems. As the *Nurse's Handbook* points out, in a way that suggests some verification of their value, which is in itself significant, “Many alternative therapies practiced today have been used since ancient times and come from the traditional healing practices of many cultures, primarily those of China and India ... The Indian principles of Ayurvedic medicine stem from the Vedas, the essential religious texts of Hinduism”.¹⁴ As one might expect in such a book, there are references, not simply to exercises and herbal remedies, but also to spiritual concepts and belief systems such as qi (or chi), qigong, prana, meridians, chakras, shamanism, prayer, healing touch, and yin and yang.

The point of the above is simply that, previously unusual spiritual beliefs and practices are being appreciated by and gradually absorbed into mainstream Western society. As Walter states regarding the belief in reincarnation, it is “not an exotic, fringe belief, but an idea that is being explored by a significant minority of otherwise conventional people”.¹⁵ This mainstreaming of previously obscure and exotic beliefs is fundamental to and symptomatic of the process of re-enchantment. Whilst many of the particular new religions and alternative spiritualities may still be considered fringe concerns, increasingly their ideas and beliefs are becoming accepted as normal and incorporated into Western plausibility structures.

To conclude, it would seem that, while it cannot be denied that secularisation/disenchantment has reshaped Western societies, it is myopic not to recognise the significance of the gradual and uneven emergence of personally and socially consequential alternative spiritualities. It seems clear that spirituality is able to sustain itself outside traditional institutions and indeed to thrive within a late-modern, Western consumer climate. Even though “religion” is reshaped and

relocated (and, consequently, needs to be redefined), and just because many of its ideas are passed on through “popular occulture”, it is not thereby trivialised. I meet many such people for whom their “spirituality” is a deeply meaningful and satisfying part of their life.

Finally, the model of re-enchantment I am suggesting is, needless to say, not one of Christian revivalist optimism. Although, for good sociological and psychological reasons, certain streams of experience-based, charismatic Christianity (and, possibly, some streams of “liberal” Christianity) may continue to hold their own (in, I suspect, transformed ways), we will not see the large-scale revivals that were witnessed, for example, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hence, although one might want to qualify some aspects of secularisation theory, its fundamental thesis concerning the decline of institutional Christianity, certainly in Europe, cannot seriously be questioned. There is simply not the required sociological, psychological and spiritual soil needed for such Christian seeds to take root. Whereas pre-industrial Europe was fundamentally religious, and principally Christian, this is not the case today. That it now flourishes in, for example, Latin America and Africa is testimony to the very different histories and the distinctive social and cultural conditions of those areas of the world. Although, of course, there may be sporadic eruptions, such as the Toronto Blessing, which began at the Airport Vineyard Church in Canada in the early 1990s and petered out by the end of the decade, and although there are undoubtedly many who, as Grace Davie argues, *believe without belonging* to a church,¹⁶ any large-scale, socially significant “awakenings” are very unlikely in the foreseeable future of the contemporary West. Traditional Christianity is too marginal in the lives of most Westerners, particularly in Europe, and its thought forms and ideas too alien to those of the majority of the population. The popular Christian milieu, which was so important for the Christian revivals of the past, has collapsed. However, that it has collapsed does not mean that the West has become fundamentally secular. Another religio-cultural milieu has taken its place. Christians need to understand these shifts if they are to make their faith relevant to twenty-first century Westerners. ■

NOTES CONTINUED

12. D Eisenberg et al., “Unconventional Medicine in the United States: Prevalence, Costs, and Patterns of Use”, *New England Journal of Medicine* 328 (1993), p. 251.
13. *Nurse's Handbook*, p. ix.
14. *Nurse's Handbook*, 3.
15. Walter, “Reincarnation”, p. 22.
16. G Davie, “Believing Without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?” *Social Compass* 37 (1990), pp. 455–69.