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FORUM



'Of' and 'For': studying spirituality and the problems therein

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ABSTRACT

Only since the latter half of the twentieth century has it become relatively common to self-identify as 'spiritual' in contrast to 'religious'. Emerging from this cultural sea-change came the idea that spirituality is a topic of study categorically distinct from 'religion' and therefore worthy of its own field. The nascent 'spirituality studies' holds both promise and potential, yet there remain important methodological and normative issues surrounding how scholars who study spirituality ought to approach their subject. In this paper, I discuss two such issues: the often implicit (yet unacknowledged) distinction between the study *of* and the study *for* spirituality in much contemporary scholarship, and the political and epistemological disagreements that stem therefrom. I conclude with some tentative remarks regarding how we might mitigate the problems they engender.

KEYWORDS

Spirituality; definition; religion; critical studies; theory and method

'Of' and 'For': a proposed distinction

My aim in this paper is to stimulate a critical discussion about the ways in which disciplinary boundaries and contexts shape both the *purpose* of scholarship as well as the *kind* of scholarship produced. My thinking about this arose out of my experience at the international conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS) in May 2016 where I was witness to a number of academic disputes which, it seemed to me, emerged out of a lack of consensus regarding these very topics.

In order to clarify what I mean it might be helpful to distinguish between how social scientists or those engaged in social inquiry (this will likely include history, cultural studies, and the majority of approaches in the academic study of religion) study spirituality in contrast to those in more 'applied' fields such as health studies, leadership, management or education. Although this is a crude oversimplification, those in the latter category generally do not study spirituality in order to understand better what it is, or what it does, in the existing social world, nor what it signifies in popular and academic discourse(s), but rather to find out what a specific *kind* of spirituality that they usually endorse (or disparage) might do in their workplace. These scholars are motivated by a personal interest in contemporary spirituality and the positive benefits (or negative consequences) they believe it will produce in practical application. This approach, I believe, is better understood as the *study for spirituality*. In contrast, religious studies, cultural studies or critical theory scholars generally take a broader – perhaps less practical – approach to spirituality, framing it

as a socio-cultural and/or discursive construct that is everywhere and always political. These scholars therefore may seek to offer a description of spirituality as it presents itself in a specific social or discursive context, and/or critique it from a normative standpoint. This approach, I believe, falls under the rubric of the *study of spirituality*.

Making this distinction clarifies politicized debates surrounding the question of, for instance, whether spirituality ought to be understood as a form of non-religion or, conversely, a kind of new religion. Those engaged in the study *for* spirituality – often self-identified advocates of spirituality – would like to claim the label ‘non-religion’ for the pragmatic reason that in a secular society all things ‘religious’ are effectively quarantined from the public sphere. Thus, scholars who wish to see spirituality and its discourses/practices included in school curricula or hospital training manuals, for instance, will couch their proposals in ‘secular’ language, and contrast this type of spirituality with ‘religion’. On the other hand, scholars engaged in the study *of* spirituality may remain suspicious of this apparent (political) manoeuvring, and therefore choose to view this as, at best, disingenuous, and, at worst, a means of surreptitiously inserting a new form of religion into the secular public sphere. These scholars may therefore reject the implicit claim within the label ‘spiritual *but not religious*’, viewing it as a mere red herring.

This is not to suggest these two approaches cannot, or do not, overlap. It is possible to hold a normative understanding of ‘spirituality’ while at the same time seeking to understand it better as an abstract concept or as a lived phenomenon, or to criticize inauthentic or corrupt forms of it. Conversely, one may seek to understand better how spirituality operates within certain spheres (e.g. healthcare, education) from a critical perspective while also hoping to promote its application in these spheres. I do not wish to give the impression that these approaches are inherently at odds. However, they are, in important ways, distinct endeavours; and I believe that the confusion surrounding ‘spirituality studies’ originates in their not being explicitly recognized as such.

With this in mind, I suggest that those working within spirituality studies must make their normative commitments clear in order to enable more transparent communication of discourses and knowledge *across* disciplines.¹ I also think it would be helpful if those of us studying spirituality were to ask ourselves into which camp we best fit. Doing so would allow scholars who are looking to study ‘spirituality’ as a socio-cultural phenomenon in order to understand it better to distinguish themselves from those who are looking to promote a specific version of spirituality in the public sphere. I take the view that both are important (I confess, I am one of those individuals who holds a normative view of spirituality – that is, what it *ought* to be – yet I nevertheless ground myself in religious/cultural studies and their starting premises). In my estimation, it is ultimately dialogue across and within disciplines that will aid spirituality studies to flourish. Yet, in order for us to have such dialogue, we must be clear about the discipline we are representing, and the basic assumptions we therefore hold.

¹We should also continue to insist on clear and substantive definitions, along with methodological assumptions, being made explicit *within* disciplines. Indeed, although there may be strong family resemblances constituting ‘spirituality’ within disciplines, it does not necessarily follow that more analytic precision would not clarify things considerably.

Complicating the distinction

Admittedly, the issue is more complex than I have indicated thus far. Increasing transparency may go some way to enabling cross-disciplinary dialogue but it will not address the fundamental (that is, political) disagreements, which – in some cases – separate those engaged in the study *of* spirituality from those engaged in the study *for* it. Indeed, this remains a little-addressed subject within the literature on the academic study of spirituality, but nevertheless lies at the core of many controversies.

From a sociological standpoint, it is no mere coincidence that discourses on ‘spirituality’ began to emerge near-simultaneously across disciplines. Although there may be disagreements between individuals as to what ‘spirituality’ means, this should not lead us to think that ‘spirituality’ is the product of their wholly private reflection undertaken in a social vacuum.² Indeed, there are a number of scholars who have convincingly argued that underlying much of what is termed ‘spirituality’ is a specific worldview (Heelas 1996, 2008; Forman 2004; Lynch 2007; Houtman and Aupers 2007, 2010, 2011). Houtman and Aupers (2010, 6) have even gone so far as to call it a ‘doctrine’ – the ‘doctrine of self-spirituality’. They characterize self-spirituality as ‘Post-Christian spirituality’ and argue that it entails ‘an epistemological third way of ‘gnosis’, rejecting both religious faith and scientific reason as vehicles for truth’ (2007, 307). Thus, the worldview underlying self-spirituality, according to Houtman and Aupers, challenges some of the basic assumptions of the secular academy. This observation paves the way for at least two important insights. The first is that debates over definitions of ‘spirituality’ have distracted attention from the (more consequential) social and ideological shifts – the rise of a ‘Post-Christian spirituality’ – taking place within the wider culture (and the academy).³ The second is that the difference between those engaged in the study *of* spirituality and those engaged in the study *for* it, is not merely one of academic aims, but also one of epistemological subscription. In other words, one of the core issues surrounding my aforementioned distinction – ‘of’ or ‘for’ – arises from debates over *how* it is we come to *know about* ‘spirituality’ and, consequently, what methods are most appropriate to study it. Having now laid out my claim let me attempt to make historical sense of it.

Much work has been done recently to trace the history of what I earlier called self-spirituality in the West (e.g. Heelas 1996; Roof 1999; Fuller 2001; Tacey 2004; Carrette and King 2005; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Gottlieb 2013; Sheldrake 2013). One point of near consensus that has been achieved is that much of what is termed ‘spirituality’ today has been significantly informed, at least in part, by the Romantic movement (Thomas 2006) – most especially its specific revival manifested in the 1960s counter-culture (Heelas 1993, 2000, 2008; Houtman and Aupers 2010; Possamai 2003).⁴ Indeed, many of the ideas (although of course not all, see Ammerman 2013), which are classified

²Thus it should not surprise us when Linda Woodhead (2010, 39) argues that, among scholars, ‘there is significant agreement that spirituality can be defined by its emphasis on the sacred nature of the unique self’s innermost, subjective depths’.

³As ‘spirituality’ has risen to become a cultural buzzword in Western societies, much scholarly attention has been paid to definitional issues, that is, those pertaining to how ‘spirituality’ is, has, or has not, been defined.

⁴These ideas were originally formulated during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Bender 2010; Schmidt 2012; Woodhead 2010). Additionally, the ethic of expressivism informing it likely has its philosophical roots in the work of Rousseau (Taylor 1989); and Houtman and Aupers (2010, 8) argue that the emphasis placed on personal feelings, intuitions and experiences arises out of the tradition of esotericism.

under the umbrella of ‘spirituality’ in the West today, were once (not uncontroversially) classified under the term ‘New Age’ (Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1999).

The New Age viewed itself as a reaction to the ‘disenchantment’ of modernity, which many viewed as emptying the world of meaning and purpose. Importantly, the academic university was considered deeply implicated in the project of modernity and so was viewed, in part, as responsible for this cultural disenchantment. The late Robert Bellah (2006) sheds light on how this purportedly came to pass: during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the social sciences aimed to imitate the natural sciences. At the same time, materialist understandings of the world came to dominate, ultimately reaching a hegemonic status within the academy (Bellah 2006, 398). As a result, matters of the spirit, came to be viewed within the academy agnostically or ‘neutrally’ (Bellah 1983, ix). However, as some have recently argued (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000; Harvey 2013), the problem is that this lent itself to a thoroughly secular modernist worldview (not a neutral one), which consequently led to intensified disenchantment (Taylor 2007). Even Max Weber, one of the pioneers of the sociological tradition, recognized this implication. And, although he worried that the rise of science could only cause further disenchantment, thereby aggravating modern problems of meaning, he believed that the ‘fate of modern man [and woman] ... is to face this stern reality as it is, without illusions – to heroically bear the modern fate of meaninglessness without taking refuge in utopian dreams or promises of religious salvation, because there is simply no way back’ (in Houtman and Aupers 2011, 6). Yet not all have agreed. Houtman and his coauthors (2011, 12) argue that the New Age movement represented an attempt to spark cultural reconstruction and overcome the alienation caused by the project of modernity. It was perceived as a reaction to the modernist veneration of rationality and science as the sole authorities on matters of knowledge and truth. In turn, many ‘spiritual’ discourses, inspired by Romantic thought, which emerged out of the movement, pitted spiritual forms of knowledge – embodied, intuitive, mystical – against those offered by the scientific method and rational inquiry. ‘Spiritual’ modes of inquiry were said to conflict with ‘secular’ ones – ‘secular’, in this case, being concerned with ‘*knowledge derived from the application of reason to publicly demonstrable states of affairs*’ (Heelas 2000, 245, original emphasis) – not to mention those that were seen as ‘religious’, meaning those based on tradition or dogma. It was out of this cultural ferment that the ‘epistemological third way’ emerged.

Although this is no doubt a gross oversimplification of the ‘history of spirituality’ in the West, I believe it goes some way towards helping us to make sense of the dilemma that scholars who study spirituality face today. Given that discourses on spirituality emerged out of a mood of, more or less, anti-modernism – thereby challenging the secular epistemology of the university academy – it is no wonder there exist disagreements over how to answer the following questions:

- What ought to be considered a valid form of knowledge when studying spirituality?
- What resources and/or measures ought we to utilize to assess scholarship that claims authority over questions regarding ‘spirituality’?

It is likely that scholars engaged in the study *of* spirituality will vehemently reject ‘spiritual’ epistemologies, which are not grounded in empirical observation or rational inquiry. Conversely, there will be scholars engaged in the study *for* spirituality (although certainly not all of them) who will argue that this privileges a modernist epistemology, and thereby

reinforces, if not exacerbates, the problems of meaning associated with disenchantment and the hegemony of a materialist worldview – those problems which spurred the interest in spirituality in the first place. The issue then becomes: given that we need agreed-upon epistemological standards in order to enable dialogue both within and across disciplines, how do we mend this quite deep fissure which, generally speaking, separates the ‘scholars *of*’ and the ‘scholars *for*’ spirituality?

A possible solution

I believe there may be valid reasons for the dichotomization of spirituality and science – many view the hegemony of scientific/rational discourse in academia as having left no room for discussions about what is unquantifiable yet nevertheless most important in human life (such as, for instance, ‘spirituality’). Nevertheless, I fear that this dichotomizing of epistemologies (spiritual *v.* secular) will ultimately lead (if it has not done so already) to a radically oppositional relationship between those engaged in the study *of* spirituality with those engaged in the study *for* it. Therefore, given that what enables meaningful discourse is an (often tacitly) agreed-upon standard of assessment and evaluation, I believe we must remain agnostic towards what Peter Holmes (2007, 23) calls ‘the incorporeal essence of spirituality’, and therefore focus on studying spirituality on a ‘corporeal level, but only through its *outcomes* and *symptoms*’ (2007). In other words, we must be wary of those epistemologies which ground authority in the immaterial or the purely personal.

This being said, I am not endorsing a return to a purely positivist or hyper-rational paradigm that posits truth is only Truth if it can be quantifiably verified. I do not believe this is the correct solution, nor do I think it aligns with the aims of those who study spirituality. Instead, what I am cautioning against is the dangerous tendency among some scholars who study spirituality to assume that, because there are significant flaws in the scientific/rational approach to knowledge, all forms of knowledge are therefore equally valid. This view, I believe, is as absurd as the view that we can make sense of *all* things of human significance with the tools provided by science. Perhaps another way of putting it would be to say that we ought to think of non-empirical forms of knowledge as *supplementary* – rather than *alternative* – ways of knowing. This would enable us to retain reasonable and relatively objective standards by which to assess one another’s work.

Some may object to this proposal on the basis that it privileges the scientific and analytic approaches to knowledge – by ignoring the incorporeal, that is, metaphysical aspects of spirituality – and thereby endorses a secular modernist worldview. In some ways this observation would be correct, yet I see no other alternative. For if we are to endorse the *academic* study of spirituality then are we not required to uphold the standards of intellectual rigour, ultimately based in reason and evidence, associated with the university academy? Nevertheless, I recognize that many scholars *of* spirituality are looking to reform such standards, hoping to make room for alternative ways of knowing. Although I sympathize with this aim I have concerns about the consequences of rejecting the modernist paradigm outright.

Conclusion

In sum, what I hope this paper has succeeded in doing, at the very least, is to shed light on how and why some of the fundamental issues surrounding how to study spirituality are

tied to the history and evolution of academic disciplines from the eighteenth century to date – most especially those of the social (that is, ‘human’) sciences – as well as to the cultural shifts brought about by, and in reaction to, the processes of modernity. There are no simple solutions to these problems. It may therefore be useful to remember that BASS purposefully presents itself as an organization that is committed to encouraging ‘dialogue about spirituality with different faiths, professions and interest groups’. The important point, I believe, is that BASS is encouraging *dialogue* and not necessarily *consensus*. I do not believe it is detrimental to the field of spirituality studies for scholars to disagree about how or why spirituality ought to be studied or how the term itself ought to be invoked. In fact, it is precisely these kinds of disagreements, dealt with through reasoned and empathetic conversation that will ultimately advance our field.

Of course, I recognize there still remains a lingering question, which, I confess, I am not entirely sure I know how to answer. That being, whether we ought to conceive of those engaged in the study *for* spirituality as qualitatively similar in kind to those engaged in theology; and, if so, whether – as we do in the case of religious studies – we ought not to include their work under the heading ‘spirituality studies’ on the basis that they are doing something fundamentally different. As I have tried to elucidate, one’s answer to this question will depend on how one conceives of ‘spirituality’ and whether one views the study *for* spirituality as being ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ in nature. Some will undoubtedly suggest that those who, for example, wish to see spirituality integrated into school curricula, say, are no different from theologians who wish to see Christian values and discourses explicitly promoted in educational contexts. Others may object to this and argue in response that spirituality – or at least certain kinds of it – is ‘not religious’, because it is harmonious with a liberal democratic society’s aims and purposes, and consequently ought not to be excluded from the public sphere. One such proponent might argue, for instance, that ‘Spirituality is more about doing than about believing’ (Bregman 2014, 30) and therefore need not entail any specifically ‘religious’ doctrines or dogmas. Admittedly, I believe there is some validity in both these views (hence my internal conflict over how to answer this question). In any case, I believe the difference between them is clarified by distinguishing between the study *of* and the study *for* spirituality.

I would welcome further debate.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Galen Watts is a PhD Candidate in the Cultural Studies Graduate Program at Queen’s University in Canada studying the social and political implications of spirituality.

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