

Summary of the Monograph

Spiritual But Not Religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality

Teodora Karamelska

Sofia: New Bulgarian University Press, 2023, 235 pp., ISBN: 978-619-233-259-4

This monograph focuses on the transformations of religious experience in late modernity through the prism of their (auto)biographical thematization. It uses data from longitudinal, nationally-representative sociological surveys and in-depth biographical interviews with Bulgarian respondents.

The starting thesis of the monograph is that religion was not the “big loser” in the course of modernity. Despite the gradual weakening of its traditionally established institutions, religion took on new social forms in Western European societies in the second half of the twentieth century. This was made possible by several processes: the critical attitude towards any knowledge fixed in theological dogmas and canons, the erosion of priestly authority, and the displacement of religious rituals to the field of extra-daily (festive) experience. The growing emphasis on individuals’ personal decisions regarding their spiritual experience led to a weakening of the structures of mediation between humanity and the divine/transcendent, a decline in transgenerational religious affiliations, freedom to choose among multiple competing worldviews, and a conscious distancing from institutional forms of religiosity. Consequently, the distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” gained traction in late modernity. Monotheistic religions, in turn, ceded ground to individualized notions of the existence of an impersonal universal force or cosmic energy, with some even sacralizing the self. The proliferation and widespread adoption of practices for spiritual self-improvement and for achieving unity of “mind, body, and spirit” have even prompted leading sociologists of religion to speak of a “spiritual revolution”.

The monograph analyses the effects of this sui generis new “enchantment” of the world, drawing parallels with the contemporary situation in postcommunist Bulgaria. A number of diagnostic and conceptual-methodological questions are discussed: Is the number of people who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” actually increasing? Is the erosion of institutional Christianity the leading factor in intensifying this trend, or are we witnessing a more complex process of delegitimizing collectively binding authorities? Has the “end of Christianity” led to the emergence of new sources of sacredness and new socially significant resources for dealing with feelings of disorientation and anxiety? Can we speak of a conscious resistance by women against male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchies, or is

women's marked interest in holistic spirituality more of an aesthetic effect of the late capitalist obsession with "self-care"? Is the introduction of the term "holistic spirituality" into the sociological lexicon as equivalent to religiosity justified, or does semantic diversification only increase ambiguities? How can forms of spiritual experience that are organizationally fluid, do not assume rigid memberships, and do not rely on regular attendance at temples and places of worship, be observed and studied?

Chapter One of the monograph defines the characteristics of spirituality as a specific organization of religious experience that exists alongside the other two main sociological types, church and sect. The categorial distinctions made in the early twentieth century by German scholars Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Ernst Troeltsch in analysing the intersections between religion and modernity are used as a starting point. Of key importance here is the understanding of religion as confined to the sphere of institutionalized ritual, and of spirituality as associated with the subjective, impossible to define in terms of doctrine, intimate experience of the divine/transcendent. The second important point addressed in this chapter is the typology of "church-sect-mysticism", insofar as German sociologists saw in the mystical, unmediated religious experience a precursor of modern individualism. Chapter One also presents the leading scholarly interpretations of contemporary forms of holistic spirituality that elude institutionalization and rely on creative experimentation with different worldviews (Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism, New Age, etc.).

Chapter Two discusses aestheticizations of holistic spirituality in popular culture. It seeks an answer to the question of why the pursuit of unity of "mind, body, and spirit", associated in the 1970s mostly with the counterculture of the Western hippie generation and with the followers of the so-called New Age movement, has since the 1990s become widespread among all social strata in the form of practices for "self-improvement", "spiritual enlightenment", and "achieving wellbeing". Here it is shown how the contestation of the Christian monopoly on notions of the human body, sexuality, nutrition, medicine, and post-mortal existence gradually reinforced the social position of the so-called "new clerics", while reducing the functions of Christian clergy to "performers of religious rites". This chapter analyses the ways in which these processes resonate in Bulgaria, seeks explanations for the increasing interest in holistic spirituality among women from different social groups, and explores the symbolic remapping of the contemporary urban environment through the emergence of new cult places (yoga studios, holistic medicine centres, etc.). The final excursus presents the discursive strategies of negative labeling of yoga by the Bulgarian Orthodox clergy and hints at future lines of tension in the religious field in Bulgaria.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical framework and methodology of biographical research in a sociological context. Emphasis is placed on the possibility of accessing, through in-depth narrative interviewing, the temporal changes in the social frameworks within which individuals frame and make sense of their experiences of the divine/transcendent. Drawing on in-depth biographical interviews with Bulgarians interested in and practising some form of holistic spirituality, this chapter analyses the impact that spiritual “awakening” has had on their subjective patterns of world interpretation, strategies for coping with life crises, and organization of everyday life.