

## In Defense of Religion: The 2013 H. Paul Douglass Lecture

R. Stephen Warner

Received: 13 August 2014 / Accepted: 13 August 2014  
© Religious Research Association, Inc. 2014

**Abstract** Originally presented as a lecture—with copious illustrations accompanying an abbreviated text—this article argues that the concept of “religion” retains its theoretical value despite claims that religion has been eclipsed by “spirituality.” Presupposing that both religion and spirituality are valuable concepts in themselves, the article begins by reviewing critical literature that examines recent claims on behalf of spirituality and the spiritual. The article then presents case studies based on three recent monographs to illustrate the continued viability of the concept of religion.

At the outset, I must explain what I mean by the title of this lecture. I am here not to defend any particular religion, or even religion in general. I am speaking about the rubric of what it is that we study. The simplest way for me to do so is to exaggerate an implication of a lot of loose talk about religion versus spirituality in contemporary society.

In the spirit of such talk, the professional association that sponsors this lecture should be re-named the Spiritual Research Association, and its journal the Review of Spiritual Research. Similarly, the association we have long been meeting in tandem with would become the Society for the Scientific Study of Spirituality. If those changes were made, we could all look forward to the 2014 annual meetings of the SRA and the Double Double S in Indianapolis. What do you say? I think you know my answer from the title of this lecture.

Of course, I'm rejecting a proposal that no one, to my knowledge, has made. But there's certainly a lot of talk to the effect that religion is over the hill, confined to dying churches and deadening rituals, and necessarily backward-looking, whereas spirituality is said to be ever renewed, authentically personal and more inclusive.

---

R. S. Warner (✉)  
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA  
e-mail: rswarner@uic.edu

Some say that “spirituality” is “more than religion,” and in that sense a broader rubric. And then there’s the talk of being “spiritual but not religious.”

Chronically busy keeping track of American religion, I have largely kept my head down in the face of these claims. But I looked up last spring (April 2013) when Joy Charlton called to ask me if I would be willing to present the Douglass Lecture at the 2013 RRA meetings. She reminded me that the Douglass lecture is intended to address matters of concern to religious institutions. I replied that her timing was excellent. I told Joy that reading two books, Wendy Cadge’s *Paging God* (2012) and Nancy Ammerman’s *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (2014)—both assigned to me for Author-Meets-Critics sessions at the same meetings—inspired me to speak up in defense of religion.

Beginning with Cadge’s and Ammerman’s writings, my reading on the topic prompted me to affirm that the concepts of both religion and spirituality identify enduring, valuable, and potentially dangerous aspects of human experience. By religion, I mean collections of beliefs and practices regarding the sacred that pertain to a community. Spirituality may be thought of as beliefs and practices that connect individuals to sources of ultimate meaning. What are at issue are the catchphrases, spirituality and spiritual.

### **Talk of Spirituality in Opposition to Religion**

In the opening chapter of Cadge’s wonderful book, a study of religion and spirituality in secular teaching hospitals, I encountered a striking formulation of her findings focused on two units of these hospitals. One setting was chaplaincy departments, or, as many are now labeled, “departments of spiritual care”; the other was intensive care units (ICUs), general and neo-natal. Cadge writes (2012: 15):

Paradoxically, religion and spirituality seem to be most present in these hospitals when they are visibly absent and most absent when they are visibly present. It is chaplains, in other words, who are the visible, present, professional carriers of religion and spirituality in hospitals. Rather than filling their chapels, prayer, and meditation rooms with the widest possible range of religious and spiritual symbols and visibly naming religion in its multiple forms, chaplains seem to be doing the opposite. Seemingly neutral, symbol-free chapels, interfaith prayer services that one chaplain in training described as ‘so watered down you could find it in the phone book,’ and descriptions of their work that emphasize hope and wholeness make the visible ways that religion and spirituality are present in hospitals seem almost devoid of content and conspicuously absent.... It is when religion and spirituality seem to be visibly absent, in contrast, that they seem most present, particularly in the ICUs.... ICU staff members understand religion primarily in terms of its institutional manifestations and make space, for example, for Catholic Eucharistic ministers, religious rituals, and in [some] cases... their own private prayers that are quite different from chaplains’ broadly framed spiritual approaches.

Cadge thus suggests that not only religion but also spirituality are muted under the purview of self-designated spiritual professionals whose attempts to guarantee neutrality proceed through a process of symbolic subtraction. Religion and spirituality are more likely to appear in actions of medical professionals in ICUs, where death is no respecter of regular schedules. For example, a Jewish nurse in a neonatal ICU learned the unwritten rule that “if a baby is dying,.. you have to baptize the baby.” Another staffer in the same NICU explained that “we do it by sprinkling water on the child’s head and saying a short prayer. If they [the family] didn’t want it, we don’t have to mention it” (Cadge 2012: 140).

The secular teaching hospital where Cadge heard these stories is situated in a predominantly Catholic city, but those in charge of chaplaincy departments aspire to greater universalism, in which project they understand “spiritual” to be more inclusive than “religious.” But they have difficulty defining or communicating what they mean by spiritual. Cadge (2012: 89) interprets the vagueness of spirituality as “strategic,” an aspect of a “jurisdictional expansion strategy” for chaplaincy as a profession (2012: 102), a language by means of which chaplains can stay on top of the movement toward a more inclusive understanding of their purview while the hospitals that employ them serve a religiously ever-widening clientele. One conclusion I reached from reading Cadge’s book is that spirituality as a catchphrase can serve professional interests.

I then turned my attention to Nancy Ammerman’s spiritual narratives project, but before I received my copy of her book (2014), I read her article, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion,” which had just come out in *JSSR*, from which I quote another arresting conclusion (Ammerman 2013: 275):

Spiritual-but-not-religious... is more a moral and political category than an empirical one.... The ‘religion’ being rejected turns out to be quite unlike the religion being practiced and described by those affiliated with religious institutions. Likewise, the ‘spirituality’ being endorsed as an alternative is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by the people drawing a moral boundary against them.

Ammerman asserts that the “spiritual-but-not-religious” catchphrase serves not descriptive but political functions, a moral claim made by and for the “spiritual” speaker in invidious comparison to their own religious past or to an imagined religious other. Neither Cadge nor Ammerman scorns either religion or spirituality in themselves. Their critical remarks are directed at language that serves material or ideal interests.

Cadge’s and Ammerman’s attention to the way that talk of spirituality is deployed led me to the work of Courtney Bender, on which they both draw (Cadge 2012: 10, 196; Ammerman 2013: 271–272).<sup>1</sup> In *The New Metaphysicals* (2010) Bender records and reflects on her encounters with an informal network of spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Spiritually adept by any definition, these men and women narrate stories of out-of-body experiences and reincarnation; they

<sup>1</sup> I am also indebted to Erika Summers-Effer’s (2012) brilliant review of Bender (2010).

chant mantras and practice chakra meditation; and they learn from their teachers that relaxation requires a lot of work. Despite the recognizable roots of these beliefs and practices in nineteenth-century American spiritualism and the turn-of-the-century teaching of Swami Vivekananda, among other sources, Bender's informants speak of their experiences as timeless, universally available and authentic precisely to the extent that they come to the individual practitioner unmediated by historical or social context. In so doing, the Cambridge metaphysicians both avail themselves of teaching (e.g., that of William James) to the effect that spirituality is the experience of solitary individuals and obscure to themselves and those to whom they tell their stories that their practices are nourished by long-standing traditions. Claims that spirituality differs from religion in being fresher, more personal and innocent of institutional entanglement are thus part of a discourse of spirituality, not of spirituality itself. Once again the discourse of spirituality is known by its functions, in this case the function of authenticating individuals' experience. But make no mistake: the extent to which Bender recognizes both religion and spirituality in the lives of the Cambridge metaphysicians is signaled by her book's subtitle, *Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*.

Bender's insights regarding what I might call the psychological functions of spirituality as a catchphrase recalled an observation made by Cadge in her description of the stripped-down symbolism of so many hospital chapels. Crosses, statuary, and Bibles have been replaced by abstract stained glass windows and bubbling fountains, which are purportedly neutral but which Cadge see as nonetheless comfortable for the mostly mainline Protestants who oversee them. It occurred to me that "spirituality" might also mark out cultural boundaries, which is the thesis advanced by social workers Yuk-Lin Renita Wong and Jana Vinsky.

In a recent article, Wong and Vinsky (2009: 1345) ask, "from whose socio-political and historical vantage point is the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' discourse produced? What gets legitimized and who gets excluded from this particular construction of spirituality?" Careful to specify their "subject positions, respectively, as a 'Chinese woman growing up in the former British colony of Hong Kong and currently living in Canada practicing Buddhist teachings' and a 'white Jewish lesbian of Eastern European decent [sic] who has grown up and currently lives in Canada,'" Wong and Vinsky each testify that the distinction between spirituality and religion was beneficial in their younger years. The distinction helped Wong negotiate between her Catholic missionary education and her Buddhist neighbors in colonial Hong Kong. It helped Vinsky deal with the marginalization she experienced in her religious school. "The benefit of separating spirituality from religion, however, reached its limit after RW [Wong] became a racialized minority in Canada and JV [Vinsky] launched further into the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' discursive zone" (2009: 1348). From their Chinese-and-Buddhist and Jewish-and-lesbian perspectives, they discovered that for "marginalized groups, their experience of spirituality and religion is firmly grounded in the history of their community in the face of oppression" (2009: 1356, emphasis added). The contrary assumption that spirituality, in contrast to religion, is neutral and free from baggage reflects particular, often dominant, interests. Reviewing a large literature in their field, Wong and Vinsky argue that marginalized, racialized "others" are typically

presented as tradition-bound and religious whereas Europeans are seen as “spiritual, free and independent” (2009: 1353). Thus, “‘spiritual-but-not-religious’ discourse may speak well to the need of many people of Euro-Christian background to distance themselves from their Christian religion,” but it is a mistake to extrapolate that particular experience as a general rule (2009: 1356).

In the midst of their review, Wong and Vinsky (2009: 1353–1354) argue that the separation of spiritual practices such as yoga and mindfulness meditation from their origin in Asian religion facilitates their appropriation by Western spiritual consumers. This brought to mind the ongoing research of sociologist Carolyn Chen (2013) on the appropriation of such practices by American corporations like Google, Apple and Genentech, where they are offered to employees for the express purpose of stimulating innovation and increasing productivity. To avoid any taint of sectarianism in the secular world of business, they are shorn of their religious roots and repackaged as scientifically grounded practices of health and wellness.

In this brief run through work of Wendy Cadge, Nancy Ammerman, Courtney Bender, Renita Wong and Jana Vinsky, and Carolyn Chen, we see that the discourse subordinating the religious to the spiritual can serve many functions: to enhance claims of professional jurisdiction, to authenticate personal experience, to draw moral boundaries, to elevate white culture, and to enhance profitability. Spirituality as a catchword has all the earmarks of what Steven Epstein (2013) calls a buzzword. A buzzword is an inescapable term that defies attempts at denotative definition. It has multiple meanings that serve the interests of different constituencies, who then have an interest in promulgating it but not restricting its meaning.

By contrast, religion is in bad odor as a word, in some quarters almost a pariah word. About a quarter to a fifth of all Americans now say they have no religion. Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2002) showed that many of those people were liberals repelled by religion because of the religious right. But other people near the opposite end of the religio-political spectrum also eschew the word religion: these are evangelicals who say, “I don’t have a religion, I have a relationship with the Lord.” On the other hand, religion does have a trump card in its favor, and that is the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment. As we shall see, it matters that “religion” has legal protection.

### **First Case Study: Ammerman’s *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes***

Let me now turn to what Ammerman has found about the realms of the spiritual and the religious in *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (Ammerman 2014). She and her associates recruited 95 participants, English-speaking, mostly middle-class Americans in two cities. Most of them were chosen from rosters of active and marginal members of congregations representing important US religious traditions: Protestants (mainline, conservative, and African American), Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and neo-pagans. The religiously unaffiliated were recruited through on-line chat rooms and coffee house bulletin boards. Because Jews, Mormons and neo-pagans constitute small percentages of the population, they had to be over-sampled, leaving the other groups somewhat under-represented.

From their participants, Ammerman and her co-workers (and from now on, I'll just speak of Ammerman) elicited narratives of religious, spiritual and sacred experiences in their everyday lives—home, neighborhood, work, community, even church, if they so wished—through intake interviews, photo elicitation interviews, and oral journaling. It is important that Ammerman did not define “religion,” “spiritual,” or “sacred” for the participants, and therefore that the findings are inductively derived (Table 1).

The more than one thousand narratives were analyzed and coded, and from them Ammerman identified three different languages of spirituality that the participants use: theistic, extra-theistic, and ethical. Theistic is about God. I think extra-theistic would include how I feel when I sing my bass part in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Ethical is represented by the “Golden-Rule Christianity” that Ammerman has told us about.

It should come as no surprise that theistic language is most prevalent among conservative Protestants, African-American Protestants, Mormons, those with less than college education and those over 65 years of age (Ammerman 2014: 32). But Ammerman reports that 4 of the 5 pagans also use theistic language. So theistic language is not necessarily Christian. (Although Ammerman did not include Muslims in her sample, it should be clear that religiously active Muslims would rank high on theistic spirituality.) Theistic language is low among Jews, those who claim no religion, and those who never attend religious institutions.

Extra-theistic language is high for neo-pagans, nones, low attenders, Jews, and baby boomers. It is low for conservative Protestants, those over 65, Mormons, those with less than college education, and African-Americans (Ammerman 2014: 41). Measured by a spirituality of “morality” (living a life of care and service), ethical spirituality is expressed by most, i.e., 73 %, of Ammerman's participants.

Ammerman adds up each respondent's spiritual narratives to arrive at an estimate of the salience of spirituality for them. Of the 95 in the sample, 27 express “high spiritual interest,” 16 manifest “minimal spiritual interest,” and, in the middle, 52 are characterized as having “typical spiritual interest.” The “high spiritual interest” people tended to employ both theistic and extra-theistic languages (Ammerman 2014: 87), thereby bridging the divide between them.

Respondents' patterns of attendance at religious services were similarly arrayed on a trichotomous scale: 30 attend once a week or more, 31 once or twice a month, and 34 rarely or never (Ammerman 2014: 92, 306). For our purposes we can treat this scale as a measure of more or less religion on the part of the individual.

Correlating these two scales (Ammerman 2014: 92) clearly shows that spirituality and religion are strongly correlated: 14 respondents, whom Ammerman calls “spiritually disengaged,” are for the most part both uninterested in spirituality and uninvolved in religion; 17, whom she calls “spiritually engaged,” express high spiritual interest and attend church weekly; 20 cluster in the middling cell of average attendance and typical spirituality. There is exactly one person who, whether or not he would apply the label to himself, fits the “spiritual but not religious” conceptual profile, rarely or never attending church but “really passionate about spirituality” (Ammerman 2014: 89). And the religious but not spiritual cell is empty.

**Table 1** Ammerman's three landscapes of spirituality

---

|   |
|---|
| Theistic Spirituality is about God or, more generally, a territory in which there are divine actors                                     |
| Extra-theistic spirituality is about connections to others, awe in the face of nature, the search for meaning, and a core of self-worth |
| Ethical Spirituality is about living a virtuous life, helping others, transcending self-interest (e.g., "Golden Rule Christians")       |

---

Ammerman concludes (2014: 127):

Far from discrete 'religious' and 'spiritual' institutional domains, the robust religious organizations of the United States are prime sources of the production of the spiritual experiences most prevalent in the culture. And those who are estranged from those organizations find themselves also largely disconnected from alternative spiritual communities and mostly uninvolved in individual spiritual pursuits).

This is where the spiritual tribes of her title come in. Although I have misgivings about this term,<sup>2</sup> the concept is right on the money. It points to sites—kitchens and dining rooms, lunch tables, workplaces, health clubs, support groups and community organizations, as well as churches and synagogues—where people of like mind gather and produce both religion and spirituality. But because of the strong correlation in Ammerman's data between spiritual interest and religious participation, the gatherings that she characterizes as spiritual tribes are disproportionately populated by religiously active respondents. For example, "two-thirds of work-based friendships are religiously homogeneous" (Ammerman 2014: 210). Moreover, lest that fact suggest that religion promotes workplace sectarianism, Ammerman (2014: 210) immediately adds that "religiously dissimilar friendships were actually more likely among the more spiritually engaged." As we have seen, it is the highly spiritually engaged who speak on both sides of the theistic versus extra-theistic divide. Spirituality is carried by spiritually-minded individuals into the other realms of their lives, but it is especially in their religious congregations that people learn the spiritual languages that they use to create spiritual tribes in the non-religious world.

For the huge swath of American society that Ammerman's method tapped—educated, mostly middle class, white and African American Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, organized neo-pagans and nones—her findings show that religion and spirituality build on one another. Nonetheless, in intensive, qualitative research of the sort Ammerman and her associates so brilliantly achieve, it is impossible to represent all minorities. For example, she does not have access to Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or even Spanish-speaking tribes.

But many of us in the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion have studied what Ammerman would call spiritual

---

<sup>2</sup> Primarily because of the ascriptive connotation of the word "tribe," as if a "spiritual tribe" is something one must be born into. Drawing on work of Gary Alan Fine (2012), I would nominate "small spiritual publics" as a synonym for Ammerman's intention. Nonetheless, I follow her usage in this lecture.

tribes that are not conventional congregations. For *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (Warner 1988), my first book in sociology of religion, I spent time with a charismatic house church called Antioch Ranch (fl. 1969–1978), with members of a hippie commune that became a Jesus-movement commune (1969–1977), and among veterans of the 3-day spiritual retreat called Cursillo (1976–1982) (see now Nabhan-Warren 2013). I believe that Ammerman would say that these are all spiritual tribes. In my book I put it that they were sources of the “new wine” (read spiritual energy) that got poured into the “old wineskin” (read religious institution) of Mendocino Presbyterian Church. In *Gatherings in Diaspora* (Warner and Wittner 1998), the report of the New Ethnic and Immigrant Congregations Project, several of the chapters dealt with formally organized churches and other religious institutions, but four of them focus on informal associations and home-based groups, including Prema Kurien’s Organization of Hindu Malayalees (Kurien 1998), Shoshanah Feher’s IJF/SIAMAK, the Organization of Iranian Jews in Southern California (Feher 1998), Nancy Wellmeier’s Fraternidad Ewulense Maya Q’anjob’al, Mayan Catholic devotees of St. Eulalia (Wellmeier 1998), and Elizabeth McAlister’s Haitian vodou gathering at the home of Manbo Miracea (McAlister 1998: 130, 141–144). These are clearly spiritual tribes in Ammerman’s sense. More recently, Rhys Williams and I (Warner and Williams 2010) have published an analysis of religious production in the homes of Chicago-area Protestants, Muslims, and Hindus.

Some of you may have read “Bodies in Sync,” the article Anne Heider and I (2010) wrote about “Sacred Harp” singing. Sacred Harp is a spiritual tribe if there ever was one, many but by no means all of whose participants are deeply religious. But speaking of Anne also brings to mind the most famous of all spiritual sites in late twentieth century America, the Esalen Institute, where Anne lived and worked from 1967 to 1971. Esalen hosted many spiritual tribes.

### Second Case Study: Goldman’s *American Soul Rush*

In her review of Jeffrey Kripal’s book, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Kripal 2007), Marion Goldman (2007: 427) describes Esalen as “a retreat center, spa, arcane think tank, and small intentional community on the central California coast, overlooking rugged cliffs at Big Sur.” That’s a pretty good précis, which she builds on in her own book, *The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege* (Goldman 2012). Esalen was founded in 1962 by two spiritual virtuosos, Dick Price (1930–1985) and Michael Murphy (b. 1930). Both were just over 30, sons of wealthy families, knowledgeable in religion, good-looking, athletic and vigorous. Both educated at Stanford, they were separately inspired by a comparative religion course taught by Frederic Spiegelberg. Through that course, Murphy, who was raised Episcopalian, was turned on to the Hindu yogi, Sri Aurobindo. Price, who had a more difficult childhood in a mixed Jewish-Protestant family, found his way to Zen Buddhism and later Taoism.

Price and Murphy’s shared vision soon attracted many other visionaries, teachers, and influential thinkers, among them Richard Alpert, Gregory Bateson, Joseph



Campbell, Harvey Cox, Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls and Paul Tillich. These were men who enjoyed what Goldman calls spiritual privilege. "Spiritual privilege is an individual's ability to devote time and resources to select, combine, and revise his or her personal religious beliefs and practices over the course of a lifetime" (Goldman 2012: 77).

Goldman characterizes the overall mission of Esalen as the democratization of spiritual privilege. In an almost offhand observation in her own book, Ammerman (2014: 40) implies that the mission was successful: "By the last third of the twentieth century, it had become a commonplace in American culture to claim spiritual privilege for the individual. Seekers were expected to shed institutional strictures, but also to borrow freely from them to fit individual needs."

But Goldman also recognizes, and this is the outstanding strength of her book, that spiritual privilege is not equally distributed. Her "expanded definition" continues (Goldman 2012: 77): spiritual privilege is "shaped by a mixture of four attributes—affinity for supernatural meanings, experiences, and explanations; cultural resources that include broad education and more explicit religious knowledge; participation in social networks of like-minded spiritual seekers; and economic wherewithal." With advantages in several of these attributes, Esalen's men enjoyed the most spiritual privilege.

In a chapter on "Gender at Esalen," Goldman (2012: 120–138) recounts three iconic narratives from the 1960s that had the function of defining Esalen to itself. One story recounts the founding of the institute as a heroic venture accomplished by Murphy and Price with the aid of cosmic influences. The second memorializes the night when Murphy and Price evicted trespassers—reportedly including gay men—from the steam baths, symbolically taking command of the grounds as a preserve for heterosexual spiritual seekers, not rag-tag hedonists. The third celebrates Esalen guru Fritz Perls spanking actress Natalie Wood in the context of an impromptu gestalt encounter at a Hollywood party. Goldman writes that the Perls-Wood story was frequently recounted in subsequent years and that "no core members of the founding generation publicly criticized Fritz's contemptuous behavior" (Goldman 2012: 129). Moreover, she suggests that Esalen insiders assumed that the very outrageousness of Perls's behavior might tempt other moneyed and well-connected seekers to check the place out.

Indeed, from Esalen's point of view, there was an idealistic angle to the Perls-Woods encounter. Centering, clarity, self-knowledge—these were spiritual goals at Esalen to which ends meditation, sensory awareness and encounter techniques were put in service. In the belief that everyone had "a true self that could be touched and restored" (Goldman 2012: 130), Perls's Gestalt workshops scrutinized participants' behavior to lead them to greater awareness of their motivations and actions. His treatment of Wood was understood in that light. Given the pervasiveness of masculine privilege in the 1960s, the possibility of underlying misogyny was overlooked. But in the wake of a rash of suicides in the late '60s and early '70s, "leaders toned down the intensity of their groups, and Esalen catalogs spoke forcefully about an ethic of self-awareness and self-responsibility at the Institute" (Goldman 2012: 63).

Here it is necessary to say that Esalen was not defined solely by the founders' ideas. The site itself, owned by Murphy's family, was part of the mix. Situated on one of the most spectacular stretches of coastline in the world, with geothermal springs near the edge of the cliff and steep trails into the mountains, Esalen drew in all sorts of people—from wealthy and beautiful Hollywood celebrities to collegiate Bohemians and hippie dropouts; from visionary seekers to people at the end of their rope—who engaged in the pursuits they found the place amenable to. By 1970, Esalen was one of the must-see places for the American avant-garde.

One of the delights of getting acquainted with Anne Heider, after we met in 1976, was sharing our experiences as nearly exact contemporaries, her folk music for my jazz, her White Mountains for my Sierra Nevada, and her Esalen counterculture for my Berkeley politics. But I was nonplussed by the discovery that a tiny settlement 3 hours south of San Francisco along a treacherous stretch of 2-lane highway could lay a claim equal to Bancroft & Telegraph as the center of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Esalen quickly became an institution, not unlike a church. (Kripal [2007] calls it the center of “the religion of no religion.”) Immanuel Lutheran, the church that Anne and I now belong to in Evanston, Illinois, prides itself on the quality of its preaching and the integrity of its liturgy, but the supportive acoustics of the sanctuary, the craftsman-style stained glass windows, the spacious fellowship hall, the commercial-grade kitchen, an ADA-compliant elevator, and the boilers reliably pumping central heat into the whole complex during the winter make the church a center of activities that are not easily defined by theology or liturgy<sup>4</sup>: quilt-making, concerts, Weight-Watchers meetings and Go tournaments, free breakfasts for the community, and an indoor farmers market the Saturday before Thanksgiving that draws hundreds of people who would not otherwise darken the door of a church.

Similarly, Esalen, dramatically situated on the cliffs above the mis-named Pacific Ocean, with its hiking trails, hot baths, massage tables, locally grown cuisine, and handmade bread, in addition to T'ai Chi classes, Encounter groups, and meditation sessions, not to mention sex and drugs, was a magnet for many different constituents.

Goldman observes that there was a hierarchy across these constituents at Esalen, mapped in the left-hand column of Table 2 (which I constructed using her ideas). At the top were the founders, some influential theorists, and very wealthy patrons. In the middle were teachers, group leaders, mentors, and other donors. At the bottom were the workers. The middle column shows the different values of the resources—wealth, education, age, and especially gender—contributing to the spiritual privilege that was commanded by those on each level. The third column characterizes the different kinds of spiritualities developed and typically expressed by the people at each level.

At the top was the theoretical, largely cerebral realm populated by men concerned with the reconciliation of science and the “religion of no religion.” In the

<sup>3</sup> Esalen's influence was felt along with Berkeley's in the spiritual currents that swept through Mendocino Presbyterian Church in the 1970s (Warner 1988: 138, 171 and 137, 240–241).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of structural diffuseness as a characteristic of the American congregation, see Warner 1994: 63–73.

**Table 2** Hierarchy of Spiritual Privilege or of Spiritualities? Warner's reconstruction of Goldman's account

| Stratum  | Factors in Spiritual Privilege               | Spiritualities  |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Upper</i>   |  |   |
| Inner circle of founders and theorists                                 | Male gender                                  | Theoretical and largely cerebral  |
|  | Elite college education                      | Oneness of universe   |
|  | Wealth, Age                                  | Reconciliation of science and the Religion of No Religion<br>Contemplation, meditation                        |
| <i>Middle</i>  |  |   |
| Second circle of influential teachers, mentors, and donors             | Mostly male gender                           | Partake of both theoretical and practical, cerebral and embodied  |
|  | Upper-middle class<br>Professional education | Encounter, Gestalt Therapy, Gestalt practice<br>Sensory Awareness, Yoga, T'ai chi, Roling, Feldenkrais, Reiki |
| <i>Lower</i>   |  |   |
| Third circle: groundskeepers, housekeepers, dining staff, body workers | Female and male gender, youth                | Embodied and practical<br>Miracles of birth and healing   |
|  | Often economically marginal                  | Massage: one-on-one; massage of pets  |
|  | Varied education                             | Sensitivity to animals: whales, cougars, butterflies  |
|  |  | Experience with plants: herbs, mushrooms, etc<br>Orientation to phases of the moon                            |

middle, there was the more embodied practice of sensory awareness techniques. At the bottom, there was the realm of spiritually-infused practical wisdom pertaining to nature, including plants, animals, humans and their babies, a realm more likely to be populated by women. What Goldman does not say but what I read her to suggest is that Esalen was characterized not only by a hierarchy of spiritual privilege but also by a hierarchy of spiritualities. Some spiritualities, in other words, were more equal than others. Although a hierarchy of spiritualities and spiritual privilege does not negate the agency of those on the bottom rung, and although Goldman (2012: 121) is at pains to state that in the twenty-first century women's spiritual privilege has been greatly enhanced, men had the lion's share in Esalen's twentieth century heyday.

### Third Case Study: Dubler's *Down in the Chapel*

This brings me to my final case, Joshua Dubler's *Down in the Chapel* (2013), an assiduously researched and beautifully written ethnography of religious life in an American prison, a revision of the author's PhD dissertation for the Princeton department of religion. The setting, Graterford Prison outside of Philadelphia, is radically different from Esalen: closed off, gloomy, almost entirely male, and far

more hierarchical. But if anything, it is more religiously diverse. "Spirituality" is never at issue in Dubler's account and the term does not appear even in the very thorough index. Yet it must be said that spirituality and spiritual tribes are abundant at Graterford. The research site, Graterford's chapel, is home to a "stunning range of religious practices."

On any given week, the chapel plays host to thirteen recognized religious groups whose members convene more than forty weekly assemblies, including worship services, textual studies, devotional groups, and musical rehearsals, activities that draw between a quarter and a third of the prison's residents.... [I]n the fecund coexistence of its many ways of religious life, Graterford's chapel is, among other things, a wonder of American religious pluralism, or (as I hyperbolically italicized it in a preliminary report to my Princeton advisors): *arguably the most religiously eclectic sliver of real estate in the history of the world* (Dubler 2013: 9).

The majority of the recognized groups, scheduled assemblies, and religious participants at Graterford are Protestant or Muslim, but the prison authorities also recognize Catholic, Jewish, Seventh-day Adventist, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Black nationalist and Native American religious groups, all of which have their meetings in the complex of rooms that make up the chapel, the site of Dubler's research. The weekly Catholic mass and Protestant Sunday worship take place in the chapel proper, a large church-like hall with pews and a raised dais. The Muslims' jum'ah prayer is the largest of several non-Christian services that are held in a plain room off the chapel, called the Annex, devoid of fixed furniture. The Jews convene in a conference room, and the Native American group holds their prayer circle out of doors, in an alcove between the chapel and the nearest cell block. Other meetings take place in classrooms within the chapel building.

Dubler stresses that there is not a level playing field among these religious groups. He learned of a 1995 crackdown, universally called "the raid," that was motivated in part by suspicions of the prison's Muslims and led to the curtailment of privileges especially important to the Muslims. He quotes a seditious rant from a Jew that would get a Muslim thrown into solitary confinement, even though he comes across absolutely no evidence of jihadist tendencies among the Muslims. He reports a conversation with a Wiccan who after a great deal of work succeeded in getting his pentagram authorized by the state's Religious Accommodation Committee but wants no part of the chapel. "Praying in the chapel would be like eating kosher in a pork factory," he told Dubler (2013: 27). Rev. Baumgartner, the "Facilities Chaplaincy Program Director" who supervises the whole operation is, unsurprisingly, a white liberal Protestant. Nonetheless, Dubler marvels at what the inmates do with the religious freedoms they have, many of them won in court cases initially brought by the National of Islam. "First Amendment protection was the round hole through which the Nation successfully drove a square peg" (Dubler 2013: 164).

Dubler's account is partly based on his observations of the assemblies. The book is framed as a chronicle of 1 week in the chapel, seven 10- to 11-hour days during the winter of 2006. He records interactions that took places in the week's Protestant

bible studies, Muslim discussion groups, Catholic devotionals, and choir and band rehearsals as well as formal religious services.

But most of the book's action takes place in the offices at the back of the chapel, where Dubler carried on conversations with "the men of Graterford's chapel," among whom he numbers himself (Dubler 2013: xix). The men of the chapel include five professional chaplains and a couple of correctional officers, all of whom are paid employees of the prison and who, along with the ethnographer, go home at night. The other fifteen "men of the chapel" are Protestant, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish (and one ex-Catholic atheist) chapel workers. They are also paid, but all but one of them are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole (LWOP) and know they'll never leave alive. They work down in the chapel as clerks, janitors, and technical assistants, in preference to earning more in one of the prison industries. The chapel is the least oppressive place in the prison, and offers them a good deal of free time in the midst of their chores. They are chosen by Rev. Baumgartner in roughly proportional representation to the religious population in the prison.

Most of Dubler's data is based on his conversations with these men. From them he gets essential background information, including stories of the raid. He also learns of the imperfect overlap across the thirteen recognized religious groups, the forty-plus weekly assemblies, and the religious identities of the men of the chapel. Few if any would call themselves "Protestant," let alone "religious." Instead they are "born-again" or "Bible-believers," but they participate in, and especially provide the music for, the Mainline-inspired Protestant Sunday worship. Struck early in his field research by the sparse attendance at the Muslims' Friday prayer, Dubler learns that the Sunni Muslims are divided between followers of Warith Deen Mohammed and a newer group of Salafis, each of whom had its own masjid before the raid. Now, they are supposed to pray together in one Jum'ah, where the khutbah is given by a Nigerian imam loyal to neither faction. Dubler admires the liberal teaching of Rev. Baumgartner and Imam Namir, but he recognizes that the religious convictions, or what we might call spiritual tribes, of the men who attend their respective sermons are not defined by the recognized religious group through which they gain their privileges. They have their own thoughts and feelings.

Well into Dubler's research, a man he hadn't previously known approached him to explain that the divide among the Muslims was exacerbated by the fact that the Warith Deen men grew up in South Philly, whereas the Salafis were more likely to come from West Philly. Those geographic origins, overlain with gang affiliations, accounted for as much interpersonal solidarity as did religion. By no means all of Graterford's tribes were spiritual.

One of the joys of the book is character development. Through repeated encounters, we come to know people like Al, Baraka, and Brian. Al is a huge man, pushing 300 lbs, with an outside history of causing great harm to people decades before but whom Dubler experiences in the chapel as a man full of love—a born-again Christian, band leader and preacher. Al's decades-long best friend, and half his size, is Baraka, a Muslim who is also from South Philly. (So if the Muslims are divided by Philadelphia geography, others are brought together by the same factor despite their religious differences.) Baraka is a wise old head, sardonic, witty, and

Dubler's favorite intellectual sparring partner. There is Brian, an observant white Jew, cynical about everyone but himself, litigious, the prison's best legal mind, and Dubler's most relentless interrogator about religion. Peter, a Catholic although not a chapel worker, is "more serious about his religion" than anyone else. At the tail end of a Legion of Mary devotional meeting, he asks Dubler for comments on a paper he's written. We get to know these and other men through their life stories (including what Ammerman would call spiritual narratives), but without false sentiment. Dubler frequently reminds himself and us that most of them are convicted murderers.

Peter's paper was in fact an earnest proposal for a restorative-justice program based on Franciscan principles that, with the help of the Catholic chaplain, he would like to bring to Graterford. The driving motivation for this effort is "to do anything in his power that might give his victim's family a chance to heal" (Dubler 2013: 287). Already, Peter, along with Brian, is a volunteer in the new hospice program at Graterford, addressed to the end-of-life needs of an increasingly aged population. But Peter's spirituality is very different from that of Brian. Both are deeply disciplined followers of their god's path, but Peter strives toward self-transformation as demanded by Christ whereas Brian adheres to the 613 *mizvot* of Orthodox Judaism.

Baraka is a very different sort. A convert in the 1970s to the Nation of Islam, he followed Elijah Muhammad's son, Warith Deen Mohammed, into Sunni Islam after Elijah's death. Relieved to be free of the burden of Elijah's fanciful religious metaphysics, he nonetheless believes and practices Elijah's ethic of self-discipline and program of individual and collective uplift. (One of the epigrams with which Dubler begins the book is a quotation from Baraka: "The Creator made the world and said: *Have at it, fellas.*") But Baraka also believes in and practices the power of the mind. He is Dubler's key informant (a word Dubler wishes he could avoid). "In practice, he might well be my dissertation advisor" (Dubler 2013: 8).

Dubler's conversations with Baraka, as well as Brian, mostly concern religion as a topic, often enough the religion of others in the prison. But when he talks with Peter, and especially with Al, the talk is itself religious, and deeply theistic. Toward the end of the book he relates an exchange with Al. (Quotations in this and the following two paragraphs are from Dubler 2013: 299–301) He's getting ready to conclude his period of research, therefore about to leave the prison and the men of the chapel. He knows that Al, concerned about his salvation, had put a bounty on his soul a year before. Now, as he is about to leave, Al begins to make his play for real. He asks Dubler what exactly is his plan for what will happen to him when he dies, when he's forced to stand before God's judgment. Dubler, who identifies himself as a secular Jew, doesn't have much of a strategy. So far as he thinks about it, he says to Al, before we're born, we're like water in the ocean, and after we die, we return to the ocean. While we're here, "we're like water in the toilet bowl, discretely contained, and as such seemingly disconnected from all the other water that is. Then, at the end of our days: flush" and it's back to the ocean. Al counters that all that changed when God breathed life into Adam. In like fashion, he, Al, had been an animal as a young man, but God came to him and saved him. Jesus took his place on the cross. Dubler responds that his most pressing order of business is not what

happens when he dies but how he lives while he's here. "What concerns me," he says, "is how I might live up to my obligations to my fellow woman and man."

But this plays into Al's own sense of duty to his fellow man, which drives him to do everything in his power to save Josh's soul. The discussion continues, through "30 more minutes of conduits and cul-de-sacs," Josh reiterating his worldly ethical system, and Al professing his faith in God. Eventually Al says he trusts in Jesus, but if Jesus isn't who he says he is, "then let God do whatever he wants with me." Dubler does a double take and excitedly tells Al that that's exactly how he feels. Maybe he's wrong to discount personal salvation, but he's doing the best he can. "And if one day I'm forced to stand before God and defend the choices I've made, I'm willing to make my case."

What began as a tense exchange ended in an extraordinary sense of fellowship, "forged through hard-won mutual recognition—a sense that perhaps our two world views aren't so irreconcilable after all." When Dubler sees Al the next day, Al tells him that if they just had the time to talk it all out, maybe they'd find they don't really disagree at all.

Most of Dubler's book consists of his reports of religious exchanges and exchanges about religion. But he also engages in frequent soliloquies, trying to figure out what it all means, some of them expressed in ten numbered "theses," spread throughout the book. In these theoretical musings, he resists attempts to reduce prisoners' religion to any simple formula. He especially scorns the constructs he calls "The Bad Man of Religion," and "The Poor Man of Religion." The Bad Man is the bias that sees religious prisoners solely as con artists who fake their piety in order to garner privileges. The Poor Man is an equally reductionist construct that construes religious prisoners as wretches who cling to faith because faith is all they have left. Dubler does not discount the partial truth in these or other interpretations—which in various permutations are voiced by men of the chapel as well as by scholars he has mastered and journalists he reads—but none of them is the whole truth.

Midway through the book, he quotes one of many "discarded introductions" to earlier drafts of the book (Dubler 2013: 263):

[W]hatever religion at Graterford might be said to be depends largely on the eyes one brings to it. In the chapel's fellowship, a Christian might well see the power of the Lord at work; a Muslim, the transformative effect of righteous submission. A humanist might see how the men at Graterford employ religious practices to live meaningful lives in spite of the soul-crushing weight of their surroundings.<sup>5</sup> A suspicious secularist, by contrast, might see how religious discourses at Graterford use these men, enlisting them to accept their gratuitous suffering as requisite. A bit more mutedly, a

---

<sup>5</sup> I must not overlook the observation that Dubler dedicates his book "To the lifers." He frequently voices critiques of and protests against LWOP. He addresses the 30 pages of fine-print endnotes and the 16-page index in part to prisoners, including those who take courses offered by Villanova University at Graterford, three of which Dubler has taught. The endnotes are filled with scholarly references as well as suggestions for further reading. Dubler (2013: 327) invites any reader who is "incarcerated and interested in receiving selections from one or more of the quoted sources to which you otherwise have no access," to write him at the University of Rochester, and he promises to "do my best to honor your request."

liberal might see in the chapel's vibrancy the lamentable absence of other opportunities for intellectual and spiritual development. An anthropologist might notice the ways that religion fosters tribal identities, an essential function in this atomizing and dangerous environment, while a psychologist might see how through religion, men who have struggled with controlling their impulses gain a little on them. An ethicist might see the role played by spiritual practices in the formation of character, while a reader sensitive to gender might note how religion allows formerly aggressive men to transvalue the brutal masculinity of the streets into one that celebrates self-sacrifice. An idealist might see how religion allows these men to live in a world within yet somehow outside state power, while the unsentimental might see in the chapel activity merely a flimsy bulwark against boredom. None of these encapsulations is without its truth.

Esalen Institute and Graterford Chapel are both complex sites of religious and spiritual production. Both are institutions, both are hierarchical, both host what Ammerman would call multiple spiritual tribes, and both, I hope I have convinced you, are clearly worthy of our attention as members of the *Religious Research Association* and the *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

## Conclusion

Beginning with the presupposition that the concepts of both religion and spirituality identify perennial, valuable, and potentially dangerous aspects of human experience, I have drawn on recent literature to argue that

- Spirituality is not new.
- Spirituality draws on religion—intellectually, historically, biographically, and sociologically.
- Religion builds on spirituality.
- Religion especially, but also spirituality, provides a kernel for institutionalization.
- Like religion, spirituality can be institutionalized in hierarchical forms.
- Individuals' spiritualities may not fully coincide with the teaching of religious institutions in which they participate.
- Like organized religion, the discourse of spirituality can be mobilized in service of non-spiritual and/or non-religious agendas.
- The experience of spirituality may be more authentic than religion for some people, but the opposite is true for other people.
- In particular, the catchphrase of spirituality resonates best with middle class people of European origin.

Religion is a robust institutional sphere, legally protected in US society, and the most viable rubric for the object of our studies.



**Acknowledgments** I am grateful to Joy Charlton and the Religious Research Association for the invitation to deliver this lecture, to Lou Altman, Nancy Ammerman, Steven Andes, Courtney Bender, Carolyn Chen, Marion Goldman, Anne Heider, John Smithers, and Erika Summers-Effler for ideas around the topic, and (again) to Anne Heider for even more than her usual heroic level of support. None of these persons nor the authors of the works cited in this lecture is in any way responsible for the uses to which I have put their ideas.

## References

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 2013. Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52: 258–278.
- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 2014. *Sacred stories, spiritual tribes: Finding religion in everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, Courtney. 2010. *The new metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American religious imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cadge, Wendy. 2012. *Paging god: Religion in the halls of medicine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chen, Carolyn. 2013. Personal e-mail correspondence, October 18.
- Dubler, Joshua. 2013. *Down in the chapel: Religious life in an American prison*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Epstein, Steven, & Laura, Mamo. 2013. *Sexual health* as buzzword: Competing stakes, proliferating meanings, and the politics of niche standardization. Paper Presented to the Health and Society Working Group and the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, October 23.
- Feher, Shoshanah. 1998. From the rivers of Babylon to the valleys of Los Angeles: The exodus and adaptation of Iranian Jews. In *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, pp 71–94. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 2012. *Tiny publics: A theory of group action and culture*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Goldman, Marion. 2007. Review of Esalen: America and the religion of no religion, by Jeffrey Kripal. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46: 427–428.
- Goldman, Marion. 2012. *The American soul rush: Esalen and the rise of spiritual privilege*. New York: New York University Press.
- Heider, Anne, and R. Stephen Warner. 2010. Bodies in sync: Interaction ritual theory applied to sacred harp singing. *Sociology of Religion* 71: 76–97.
- Hout, Michael, and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. Why more Americans have no religious preference: Politics and generations. *American Sociological Review* 67: 165–190.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2007. *Esalen: America and the religion of no religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kurien, Prema. 1998. Becoming American by becoming Hindu: Indian Americans take their place at the multicultural table. In *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, pp 37–70. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McAlister, Elizabeth. 1998. The Madonna of 115th street revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the age of transnationalism. In *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, pp 123–160. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Nabhan-Warren, Kristy. 2013. *The Cursillo movement in America: Catholics, Protestants, and fourth-day spirituality*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Summers-Effler, Erika. 2012. Review of the new metaphysicals by Courtney Bender. *Contemporary Sociology* 41: 176–179.
- Warner, R. Stephen. 1988. *New wine in old wineskins: Evangelicals and liberals in a small-town church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warner, R. Stephen. 1994. The place of the congregation in the American religious configuration. In *New perspectives in the study of congregations*, volume II of *American Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, pp 54–99. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Warner, R. Stephen, and Judith G. Wittner (eds.). 1998. *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Warner, R. Stephen, and Rhys H. Williams. 2010. The role of families and religious institutions in transmitting religion among Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in the USA. In *Religion and Youth*, ed. Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, pp 159–165. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate.
- Wellmeier, Nancy J. 1998. Santa Eulalia's people in exile: Maya religion, culture and identity in Los Angeles. In *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*, ed. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, pp 97–122. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Wong, Yuk-Lin Renita, and Jana Vinsky. 2009. Speaking from the margins: A critical reflection on the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' discourse in social work. *British Journal of Social Work* 39: 1343–1359.