

Christian Responses to Spiritual Incursions into the 21st Century Church and Society

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Edited by

Nikolaos Asproulis and Stuart Devenish

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EDITORS' PREFACE

In September 2018, a group of scholars from around the world gathered in South Africa to look for “triggers” that might lead to the renewal of hope in our troubled times. They brought with them a deep awareness of the geopolitical issues confronting the present moment in the form of political turmoil, economic stagnation, social fragmentation, global warming, rising military tensions, and the growing blight of depression and drug addiction, as well as deep anxiety about the future.

As Christians, their question was not “what will lead to the renewal of Christianity as a world religion?” They asked another question altogether: “what will renew humanity itself?” Their answer was to paraphrase Dostoyevsky’s famous phrase that “beauty will save the world”, by offering the parallel conviction that “spirituality will save the world” ... a phrase repeated by Deepak Chopra among others. By arriving at this agreed conviction, they were delving into the left-handed, counter-intuitive and wisdom-centered form of knowledge that is older and wiser than science, human rationality, atheism and political correctness.

The scholars came from different countries and cultures: Greece, Germany, Canada, Latvia, Australia, the Czech Republic, and South Africa. They came from different confessions within the broader Christian “family” in the form of the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox traditions. They came from different disciplinary backgrounds: philosophy, theology, history, education, healthcare, mathematics, the social sciences, the media, leadership and more. They discussed a broad range of topics, twelve of which have found their way into this present volume.

Together, they have come to a shared agreement on the irrepressible nature of the “spiritual” that continues to resist our attempts to exclude it by seeping through the cracks, leaking through the gaps and dripping from the pipes of our traditional forms of knowing and human self-confidence. The three significant points-of-overlap that we became aware of were: 1) spirituality is a transformative factor in human life—religious or otherwise; 2) spirituality is a key contributor to human well-being—social, physical and emotional; and 3) spirituality is a foremost meaning-making force—one helping individuals, communities and cultures to make sense of their life-experiences and human existence.

What you will find in this volume is a series of fascinating and provocative case studies, each of which describes the inner-functioning and out-working of spirituality as a transformative point-of-connection between God, world, society and the self. Each chapter contains thoughtful informed inquiry that draws on best-practice scholarship. The authors and their discussions of the spiritual in their fields of endeavour, are all-too-conscious of the needs and opportunities that confront we citizens of the 21st-century on this blue-green planet that lies at the edge of our galaxy. The end-result is a book that offers hope and transformation for human life, and for the planet. We as editors and contributing authors use the words of Augustine's muse to invite you to "take up and read."

Nikolaos Asproulis
Stuart Devenish
Easter, 2020

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTO LOMBAARD

Two Conferences, One Book: A Brief History and Placement

Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of human needs (Maslow 1943, 370-396, expanded in Maslow, 1954), though often misrepresented (as Bridgman, Cummings & Ballard 2019, 81-98 recently indicated), remains an important key to understanding who we are as human beings; or perhaps better said: of how we are as human beings. The famous pyramid of human needs (influentially constructed as such in McGregor, 2006 [1960], as summarised in MacLellan, 2019) has recently been reinterpreted for our unfolding age by Diamandis & Kotler as consisting of:

Three levels, with the bottom belonging to food, water, shelter, and other basic survival concerns; the middle is devoted to catalysts for further growth like abundant energy, ample educational opportunities, and access to ubiquitous communications and information; while the highest tier is reserved for freedom and health, two core prerequisites enabling an individual to contribute to society (Diamandis & Kotler 2014, 14).

None of these levels function independently of aspects of religiosity. As one instance that substantiates this assertion, each of these aspects finds expression in the biblical texts, and biblical scholars have been reflecting on this topic of late in exegetical and theological studies. (As just some instances, these studies will suffice as examples: Ben Zvi & Levin, 2014; Conradie 2006; Lombaard, Benson & Otto, 2019; De la Porte, Joubert & Oberholzer 2017.) Although management sciences—from which much of the trajectory of Maslow's interpretation was traced in the publications listed above—have tried throughout the 20th century to eschew religious and spiritual matters, that is no longer the case (see for example publications on management such as Barentsen, van den Heuvel & Kessler, 2017 [see also Kessler's discussion of the religious concepts and terminology routinely employed within management language itself, in Kessler 2017, 1-

9)). The same holds true, increasingly, for many other academic disciplines as well as for broader society itself: religion and spirituality are increasingly finding a normalised place within public life, without being either unnecessary privileged (on the one hand) or marginalised (on the other hand)—as has been the case in previous ages. Faith is as normal a human dimension as is economic activity, sexuality, counting, literature, clothing ourselves, etc. Why should spirituality therefore be the single matter reflexively marginalised in modern democratic societies, in various ways? (This directly parallels the question: why would spirituality be the single matter reflexively privileged in non-modern or non-democratic societies, in various ways?) This “normalisation” of spirituality—in particular—is the characteristic that has given name to the currently slowly unfolding broad religio-cultural climate, post-secularism.

In this volume, twelve chapters are offered that deal with the sacred as a recurring and irrepressible element of 21st century life. These contributions reflect aspects of this emerging post-secular era in which we find ourselves (and on which volumes such as Ingman, Utriainen, Hovi & Broo, 2016 and Nynäs, Lassander and Utriainen, 2012 provide different perspectives). In our view, there is a need for ongoing and deep-level engagement with the religious aspect of human culture, which—as the title of this volume suggests—represents a core theme, despite the rhetoric of atheist and secular humanist contributors to the cultural debate.

The chapters themselves are the result of two conferences held in South Africa in September 2018, hosted by the University of South Africa in Pretoria and the University of Stellenbosch. The origins of those two conferences, and hence of this volume, can be traced to several sources. One of those is a Research Professorship I held at the university where I serve, the University of South Africa. This extraordinary appointment meant that one’s duties for a period of three years were strictly limited to research activities in the form of one’s own publications, supervising research students and facilitating the research of others. The latter included activities such as mentoring formally and informally up-and-coming researchers, and arranging conferences, seminars, and guest lectures (including in my case an Australian lecture tour, which resulted in the Lombaard, Benson & Otto, 2019 publication), among other events. These two conferences were foreseen as part of the closing activities to that special three-year tenure I was privileged to enjoy.

There was however also a more natural stimulus to these two conferences. Part of my role as a researcher with a wide range of intellectual pursuits (part of which finds reflection in Lombaard 2016, 1-5; for context, also reflected upon in O’Sullivan 2012, 52-53 and Bosman 2015, 647) and

professional contacts, is to bring all sorts of people together—something I particularly enjoy. These two conferences came about in ways that could hardly have been planned; one may ascribe it to the chaos of life (a notably positive concept I derive as much from French existentialist philosophers of the previous century as from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes) or, in greater piety, to grace.

Most directly involved in this line of influence were three significant personalities: Stuart Devenish (at the time Director of Postgraduate Studies at Tabor College, Adelaide, Australia, and now an independent scholar based in Melbourne), Nikolaos Asproulis (Deputy Director of the Research Centre of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Greece) and Laima Geikina (Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Latvia, Riga, and of late also the holder of a specially funded research position on the “Interrelationship of Theology and Praxis in the Context of Sustainable Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue”). I had met them independently: Devenish, by chance at a research conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, followed up by research visits in Australia and South Africa; Asproulis and Geikina at a NELCEE (Network for Ecumenical Learning in Central and Eastern Europe) conference in Vilnius, Lithuania. Together with Geikina, a series of Theological Education and Post-secularity conferences followed in Riga, Latvia. The mix was potent: an Australian Baptist phenomenologist of religious experience, a Greek Orthodox ecumenicist, a Latvian Lutheran theological education specialist and (myself) a South African Dutch Reformed scholar of biblical spirituality (to mention just one role and one particular specialisation belonging to each of us).

With this diverse background in mind, the two South African conferences that occurred in September 2018, can be better understood. The calls for papers for those two conferences read:¹

A conference on *"Spirituality, Theology, Education"* 20–22 September 2018. Pretoria, South Africa. University of South Africa (Lukasrand campus).

The discipline of Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Department of Systematic and Practical Theology, University of Latvia, invite proposals for a third international conference in the series: *"Spirituality, Theology, Education"*. The intention of the conference is to facilitate a wider inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural forum

¹ Included here is just the text guiding academic matters, I have left out that which gave the practical arrangements.

where researchers, scholars and others engaged in the study and practice of spirituality in diverse disciplines can:

- share and debate their research;
- draw comparative perspectives and insights from different cultures;
- incorporate different forms of writing and expressions of spirituality;
- explore new methodological approaches; and
- identify new agendas for research into spirituality.

These may include ways in which spirituality can be taught, or asking why it is we sometimes allow our critical faculties to be diluted when working with spirituality.

To this end, the conference welcomes contributions that will critically examine spirituality in the following disciplines:

- Christian Spirituality
- Music and Spirituality
- Law and Spirituality
- Religion and Spirituality
- Biblical Spirituality
- Anthropology and Spirituality
- Sociology and Spirituality
- Psychology and Spirituality
- Primary Spiritualities
- Contextuality and Spirituality

Other topics related to the broad themes of the conference may also be proposed.

The second conference was scheduled for just a few days later, but 1,400 km to the south, in the university town of Stellenbosch. For this, the text guiding academic matters was more substantial:

A conference on: "Bible, churches and spirituality in a (non?-)secular world," 26-27 September 2018. Stellenbosch (near Cape Town), South Africa.

The discipline of Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Volos Academy for Theological Studies, Volos, Greece invite proposals for the first of three international conferences on: "Bible, churches and spirituality in a (non?-)secular world".

The global rise of religion has seen the centre of gravity of Christianity move into the global south, as numerous sociologists and religion theorists attest. Christian theology internationally has an important mission to fulfil, despite its devaluation and assumed unimportance in the policies of many states and institutions. With the demographic trends currently and over the coming decades indicating a rising tide of confessionality over and against non-religiosity, such assumptions of unimportance are becoming ever more untenable.

One of the main tasks of Theology, particularly after the fall of Communism in Central and East Europe, is to reassert the dignity and worth of human persons, as it was ravished by Soviet communism. In South Africa, the same search for renewed human dignity characterises the post-Apartheid period. In both contexts, such dignity is now ever more under threat by the commodification accompanying consumer capitalism and neoliberal education policies that are oriented solely toward the market-place, without much sense of the human and spiritual experience—which lies at the foundation of every single human being.

These conditions provide Theology with the opportunity to witness to its core contributions. In doing so, different theologies will have to reconsider their doctrinal, ethical, homiletic and pastoral narratives, and hence the often-neglected role of the Bible and spirituality; the latter, not only in the light of the particular histories, but, also, in the light of the present and emerging contexts.

With this rise in the global interest in religion, the Bible in particular and spirituality in general have considerable roles to play—not only in theology, but also in phenomenology and sociology. On the one hand, the Bible is clearly recognised as the common ground and heritage of the main Christian traditions and of Christian-heritage societies, upon which deeply irenic and fruitful encounters take place. On the other hand, spirituality, as the essential means by which religious life is concretely expressed, is the common existential experience of all people, irrespective of particular religious or national origins. Spirituality brings us together.

This means that Bible-and-spirituality could be considered as a widely-applicable language by which the major Christian traditions, like Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestant Churches, in their own immediate contexts and more broadly within Christian-heritage societies, could facilitate understanding for shared visions for the wider world.

To this end, paper proposals are invited on aspects of the theme: ‘Bible, churches and spirituality in a (non?-)secular world’.

Of particular interest would be proposals from or on aspects of the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions. However, papers would be welcomed from other perspectives too.

It would serve little purpose to list here all those papers presented at the two conferences. All presenters were however invited to submit their contributions to this volume, for the usual double-blind peer review academic process, leaving everyone also the freedom to publish their contributions elsewhere. My colleagues Asproulis and Devenish were kind enough to take on the roles of editors of this, the resultant volume, for which all involved owe them many thanks.

Appreciation is also due to the colleagues who in different ways assisted with organising the two conferences, some in an advisory capacity, some more practically. My two colleagues for the discipline of Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa, Dirk van der Merwe (Lombaard 2017, 5-24) and after his retirement, Fundiswa Kobo (who also completed her doctorate during this time; Kobo 2018), I happily and gratefully list first; at the University of Stellenbosch, my colleague Peter Nagel rendered equally appreciated services. During their respective assistantships with the discipline of Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa, Tom Segami and Annalie Steenkamp-Nel assisted too; Steenkamp-Nel in many practical ways, throughout. Brimadevi van Niekerk, first as post-doctoral researcher at the University of South Africa and currently on the lecturing staff of St Augustine College, and Iakovos van der Riet of the Greek Orthodox Church, both in Johannesburg, South Africa, were much appreciated guiding hands and voices. My colleagues Geikina, Asproulis and Devenish were the flames of wisdom along this path, the latter two also with this publication. My sincere thanks certainly to all the contributors to this volume too.

In CHAPTER 1, Stuart Devenish has opened a window onto the faith-experiences of modern-day mystics, demonstrating that 21st century culture itself is mystical to its core, and that individuals who draw meaning and breath from that same culture, similarly demonstrate mystical leanings in their interior lives. This realisation resonates well with Christianity's mystical 'centre' and opens up potential points of connection between 21st century seekers, and the classical Christian faith and its mystical spiritual tradition ... for those with eyes to see. We are all—to use the title of his previous book—*Ordinary Saints* (Devenish 2017).

In CHAPTER 2, Kevin Lenahan has offered astute insight into Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view of Christian discipleship, a view that has special relevance and meaning for the present moment in history. At a time when the Christian Churches are re-negotiating their own inner-life and their

relations with “others”, Lenehan’s clear-eyed exploration of the implications of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship in pluralistic societies is a must-read. The resulting discussion—beyond its technicalities—reveals Bonhoeffer’s incisive and profoundly pastoral implications for the 21st century environment.

In CHAPTER 3, Nikolaos Asproulis has drawn from his Greek Orthodox background, to explore the concept of *theosis*, which is an aspect of spiritual experience well-known in the East, but is only now coming to popular consciousness in the West. As a leading figure in Greek Orthodox theological, ecumenical and spirituality discussions, Asproulis speaks with authority. To understand Orthodox theology, one has to look at its trinitarian heart. In this important contribution, Asproulis identifies *theosis* not as a specialist topic for the theological elite, but a possibility—as the result of the Divine invitation—for the whole of humanity to participate in and to “rise” to its spiritual potential.

In CHAPTER 4, Laima Geikina has fused her broad experience of teaching Christian theology with her deep understanding of spirituality as both a Christian and a human entity. In doing so she offers a clearly wise and carefully thought-out account of how best to transmit the spiritual life to others in the context of formal theological studies. Spirituality is often thought to be more “caught than taught”. The development of both a theory and a praxis for teaching faith in classrooms is urgently required. By contributing from her extensive previous research on spirituality, learning and communality (as in e.g., Geikina & Balode 2019, 146-161), Geikina has done us all a great service.

In CHAPTER 5, Solomon Kgatle investigated the biblical text of Acts 8 (the account of the Ethiopian eunuch) to locate a solution to the problem of Pentecostal pastors in South Africa preferring the Spirit’s immediate inspiration and empowerment over the equally important decision to submit to the learning process that is theological education. As a missiologist at the University of South Africa, with a keen academic interest in the teaching of theology in the South African context (as attested to by for instance Kgatle, 2019, 1-7), Solomon understands we require both the Spirit’s transformation and the formation of the mind. Since Pentecostalist-charismatic movements are one of the major driving forces on the African continent, assisting Pentecostal pastors grow to their maximum potential in Christ, is strongly encouraged.

In CHAPTER 6, Freeborn Kibombwe has carefully examined the concept of media education to improve Christians’ understanding of, participation in, and capacity to critique the media (in all its forms). Kibombwe is a member of the Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate, who

serves as a member of the Formation Team at St Joseph's Scholasticate and as a member of the faculty of St Joseph's Theological Institute in Cedara, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Emanating from his doctoral work (Kibombwe, 2013), his positive appreciation of the media and its important contribution to Christian education, provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of this important topic.

In CHAPTER 7, Fabrice Blée has undertaken an inspirational journey into cinema, filmmaking and spiritual experience. In his ground-breaking chapter, Blée has explored two central themes. First, the benefits to the theological enterprise of expressing itself in visual form; and second, the transformative inward journey of the viewer/receptor in what is—without doubt—a visual age. Blée teaches spirituality at the Université Saint-Paul in Ottawa, Canada, where I had the privilege to spend two research months in 2008. His art as filmmaker on topics related to spirituality finds expression in his academically reflective contribution here, as a further extension of his work in for instance his 2010 volume, *La mystique démystifiée*.

In CHAPTER 8, Annalie Steenkamp-Nel has placed the South African healthcare system under the microscope, using the categories of spirituality, transformation and improved outcomes as her metrics. Following her theological studies at the North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Steenkamp-Nel is currently completing her doctorate in Christian Spirituality at the University of South Africa. Drawing on her dissertation, on aspects of health and spirituality and on other publications (i.e., Steenkamp-Nel 2018, 1-10), this incisive and valuable chapter brings together theological, philosophical and spiritual insights to produce significantly improved outcomes in the South African healthcare system.

In CHAPTER 9, Rigard Steenkamp has explored the concept of spiritual leadership and its contribution to leadership theory at a time when leadership is increasingly under scrutiny. Bringing together conceptual, historical, biblical and philosophical approaches, Steenkamp's wide-ranging interests and careful exploration draw out themes that assist in clarifying the category of spiritual leadership, and which contribute to our understanding of how spiritual leaders act, and shape the world around them. Steenkamp is Professor in the Department of Operations Management within the College of Economic and Management Sciences of the University of South Africa. Among his other publications are Steenkamp, 2017, 147-156.

In CHAPTER 10, Brimavedi van Niekerk has undertaken a critical assessment of the contribution of the Hindu Swami Vivekananda's contribution to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The chapter acts as an important historical contribution to our understanding of what is an

increasingly pluralistic cultural and religious environment in 21st century globalised society. Understanding issues of trust and distrust between the world's religions positively impacts their ability to work together to contribute to our shared humanity. Van Niekerk teaches at St Augustine College in Johannesburg, and has drawn here on her strong humanities background (as seen also in for instance Van Niekerk, 2018, 1-11).

In CHAPTER 11, Stuart Devenish has contributed a second valuable chapter to the volume, this time addressing how to measure spiritual vitality in situations where the enlargement of souls is the priority. In research undertaken in 2017, resulting in the “State of Discipleship in South Australia Report”, Devenish overheard pastors’ frustrations at the lack of any metric to measure “what really matters” in spiritual formation. As a result, he has here developed a ‘spiritual vitality index’ that is applicable to the context of the local church.

Finally, in CHAPTER 12, Kees Thönissen has delved deeply into the superstructure of Franciscan spiritual life, to isolate those aspects that have the capacity to transform human persons, institutions and societies. Going back to the “roots” of his own tradition in the Capuchin Franciscan Order (having joined in 1978), Thönissen’s in-depth analysis lays bare core aspects of classical Christian spirituality, to enrich and deepen them for application in individual faith, the Church and the world at large. Thönissen has been part of the South African Catholic Bishops Conference Department for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, and received his Doctor of Theology from the University South Africa in 2014.

It is my sincere hope, which I also share with the two editors of this volume, that the essays collected here will exert the stimulus to thought and action that each inherently deserves. Spirituality does not lie outside of the Maslowian hierarchy of human needs; not even in the newest adaptation of that model for our unfurling future. The experience of faith is inherent to everything, from what may be called the most basic drives of humanity, to those peaks of experience, each “highest tier” (Diamandis and Kotler, 2014, 14), in which we sense that we transcend our (earlier) selves. Towards such ends, I lift your attention, much like an impresario would do to the tent door of the circus ring, and invite you to read, to see, to discover, to enjoy.

Christo Lombaard
Pretoria, South Africa
Easter, 2020

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PART A:

IN-BREAKINGS OF THE SPIRIT: EXPERIENCES THAT DEFINE

CHAPTER 1

REFERENCING MODERN-DAY MYSTICS: A DISCUSSION OF ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Mysticism is one of the most defining features of the Christian religion, forming a consistent although differentiated stream of expression throughout the long history of the faith. Steven Fanning wrote:

A survey of mystical Christianity illustrates the presence of the mystics throughout the 2000 years of Christian history when, for long periods, mysticism was exalted as the highest form of Christian life. While Christianity is commonly regarded as a religion based on the acceptance of an established theology or creed and the performance of certain external acts, at the same time it is also a living religion based on a personal experience of God (Fanning 2001, 220).

In the years following the close of Vatican II (1962-65), the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner undertook a “thought experiment” that was concerned with the life-situations of Christians in the future (Rahner 1967, 78). Vatican II represented an *aggiornamento*, an updating of the Catholic faith to reflect the new cultural situation in which the Church found itself. Rahner’s thought experiment sought to look into the future to see what it held for believers of tomorrow. If Vatican II represented an “updating” for the Church, it is reasonable that Rahner would want to look carefully at the new situation confronting Christian believers in the new future that would confront them. Rahner is well-known for his statement that “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he [sic] will cease to be anything at all” (Rahner 1971, 15). His intent was to prophetically pre-sage what he suspected would be a

difficult and uncertain future for believers, wondering whether his experiment would prove to be a nightmare, a blissful utopia, or utter nonsense.

Three themes emerge from Rahner's exercise concerning the "devout Christian of the future." First, Christian mystics of the future would need to see themselves as the "advance party of those who, on the roads of history, were travelling towards God's salvation in the future" (Rahner 1967, 84). Given the changed historical circumstances, and the irruption of the secular as the predominant value in Western society, the Christian's identity and self-consciousness would need to "lean into" God's eschatological future. Second, Rahner's imagined future world-context presents a resistant and repressive situation for people of faith. Their desire to live holy and sanctified lives would conflict with the godless values of Rahner's foreseen future. And third, the Christian "little flock" would not receive the kind of pastoral support from Mother Church they would likely need in situations of contestation and marginalization. The Church of the future as Rahner's thought experiment conceived it, would be caught in a struggle for its very existence, and would likely not be able to offer extensive pastoral support to modern-day mystics. Rahner wrote:

... [The] bishop ... will have to carry out his office as a service because at his back there will no longer be any, or hardly any, earthly social power of [ecclesial] tradition ... The official Church in its magisterium and pastoral care will simply no longer be in a position to do anything but leave very many things, or even those things which involve particular concrete decisions, to the conscience of the individual (Rahner 1967, 98).

The faithful individual, therefore, will need to be strong enough to flourish under challenging circumstances without the support of the Church, and will need to find alternative ways to create supportive faith-communities either at the margins of the Church or outside its pastoral care networks. All this sounds familiar in our own day, when institutional religion has been disestablished, and the faith of local congregations, small groups and individuals is being asked to carry the full weight of a meaningful Christian "presence," as it did in the first three centuries before any *Magisterium* was established.

Rahner stated,

The young Christians of today must quietly develop a new way of Christian living and demand the right to practice it in the Church. If it leads to charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-discipline and other manifestations of the presence of the Spirit one can only say with Paul (Gal

5:23), “against such there is no law.” Not even the law of the Church (Rahner 1967, 23-24).

Now, more than 50 years after Rahner’s exploratory thought experiment, we pause to take stock of his predictions concerning the Christian mystics of the future. Has the future Rahner imagined proven to be a nightmare, a blissful utopia, utter nonsense or the *real situation* experienced by people of faith in the twenty-first century?

Two things are very clear. First, it is easy to dismiss Rahner’s prophetic pronouncements as the rantings of a madman. Yet in hindsight, his prognostications have proven to be astonishingly accurate. The realisation dawns upon the reader that *we* are the Christian-mystics of Rahner’s projected future. Now that we find ourselves thrust uncomfortably into the times he foresaw, we had best attempt to comprehend them. With Sandra Schneiders (2005, 18-19), we understand spirituality to be a “self-implicating” activity. That is, those who are the subject of faith-experiences, must reflect on those experiences in an attempt to determine how they shape their lives as citizens of the twenty-first century in the shadow of a secularised, post-Christian age, and how those mysterious convictional experiences constitute their existence in the new age. In situations where their modes of interpretation are contested by the dominant culture, the People of God are forced to verify and validate the criteria on which they base their existence. Are they merely creatures of this world who exist without purpose and without meaning, or are they God’s “offspring” “in whom they live and move and have their being”? (Acts 17:28).

And second, it was Louis Dupré who predicted that the very future of Christianity would depend upon the quality of the spiritual life of its adherents. The comfortable, self-assured, tradition-bound Christendom of the past is long gone. Today, we find ourselves being forced to navigate the challenges of the new situation. Christianity will once again need to make its way in the world in apostolic mode, as it did in first century Palestine—as *if* for the first time. Dupré’s warning to the Church is that “Christianity has always started with a personal conversion of the heart.” He stated, “I am convinced that if Christianity isn’t somehow everything, it will die altogether” (Dupré 1998, 382-4). In that instance, mystical experience (defined as a convincing, first-hand, inner experience that explains one’s existence in a way that logical positivism is incapable of doing) must not remain a marginal experience of the fanatical few, but must become the predominating life-force for the Christian faith and its believing confessors as its default setting. Thus, in Rahner’s future, and now also in Dupré’s future ... Christianity stands or falls on the quality of

the faith of those believer-mystics who confess the Creeds with full conviction, “We believe...”

The Mystical Stream in Post-Secular Society

Alongside the West’s inadequate belief that facts arrived at through empirical observation determine the criteria for what is *real* ... there exists an alternative consciousness that moves in the exact opposite direction. Mystery, the intuitive and the not-fully knowable offer a discernible counter-point to the taken-for-granted empirical logic-based consciousness indwelt by most citizens of Western society. As with the opposites of oil and water, sweet and savoury, light and dark—which interpenetrate and counterbalance each other—so a left-handed spiritual consciousness now permeates the minds of many citizens in post-secular society (Tacey 2009).

The end of the Christian era has been accompanied by the advent of the post-secular age, where a range of spiritual experiences, convictions and expectations make their presence felt in the life-experiences of the “sacred self” (Csordas 1994). As John Caputo has observed,

Disenchantment, the risk of disenchantment, is the very resource of the religious ... So the *Aufklärers* should be very careful in speaking of our times as an era of secularization or disenchantment, for that will only precipitate more faith! (Caputo 1997, 158).

It was Robert Webber who observed, “We live in a secular culture but a spiritual society” (Webber 2003, 55); indicating that the religious and spiritual have been excluded from the public domain, but have come to predominate the private domain in a dramatic rise of psychic yearning. Aware of the deficits inherent in post-modernism,¹ post-modern *seekers* reach for something real beyond the empty materialism of their lives.

Movies

In the world of cinema and visual entertainment, there is evidence far and wide of people wanting to reach beyond the material realm to grasp some kind of higher life-form or deeper life-force. If it is not George Lucas’ sinister character Snoke in *Star Wars*, who asked, “There has been an awakening, have you felt it?” ... or Kylo Ren’s imprecatory half-prayer,

¹ As described by Jean Baudrillard in the form of the five qualities of “depth, coherence, meaning, authenticity and originality,” (Sheridan 2018, 269).

“Forgive me. I feel it again. The call to the light” ... It is the outflow of mystery, alchemy, magic and wizardry of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, which has captured our imaginations and brought us and our children endless hours of entertainment. Far from being what Charles Taylor called a “secular age” ... if anything our age is a *re-enchanted* age, where “Once again fairies live at the bottom of the garden” (Devenish 2017, 84). In the words of Ian Fleming’s *James Bond* series, “The world is not enough,” and it is clear that there is a very large audience and appetite for entertainment that provides citizens of the twenty-first century with the opportunity to escape the shallow banality of their lives, their mortgages, their workplaces and their existence, in order to enable them to discover something *more*.

Song Lyrics and Poetry

The evocative lyrics of Leonard Cohen’s song “Hallelujah” have left a deep impact on the secular soul. Reference to the “mystic chord” opens the secular mind to the availability of secret and transcendental knowledge that lies behind and supersedes all forms of this-worldly knowledge. Cohen’s biographer Liel Leibovitz wrote “Cohen has been a poet whose words, like the chants of Gregorian monks, seem designed to attract the attention of some higher power” (Leibovitz 2015, 14). Ironically, the mystical incantations of Cohen’s “Hallelujah” have become a secular hymn and something of a freedom anthem, and one of the most re-recorded songs in history.

Poetry speaks the language of the spiritual, the mystical and the imaginative more powerfully than any other mode of discourse. Although far from an orthodox Christian, the Czech poet laureate Rainer Maria Rilke (1878-1926) spoke profoundly of the mystery that expresses itself to human consciousness, making it ache for more. In her exploration of Rilke’s poetry, Stephanie Dowrick sub-titled her book, “Why a 20th-century visionary poet speaks so eloquently to 21st-century readers yearning for inwardness, beauty and spiritual connection” (Dowrick 2009). Despite his rejection of institutional religion, the theme of “God speaking” reverberates everywhere throughout Rilke’s poetry. “The One that you are looking for is also looking for you”—says Dowrick in summing up Rilke’s poetry (Dowrick 2009, 19). God, then, is not the unknown God who is far off and who dispassionately avoids the messiness of life. Instead, He is the One who comes near as neighbour, as lover and as friend. Dowrick commenced her book with a sagacious quotation from Heidegger, who wrote: “To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the

trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy" (Dowrick 2009, frontmatter).

A Hungry Culture

One notable instance of the incursion of the sacred into the public consciousness on a global scale is the sermon preached by the black American Episcopal Bishop Michael Currie at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle. Currie's sermon on love was a public exposition of love between God and humanity, a man and a woman, and love between neighbour and neighbour across racial, religious, cultural and geographic divides. His sermon was broadcast to an estimated one billion people worldwide. Although the faces of some in attendance at the wedding showed disapproval, the sermon and its message has, nevertheless, received widespread acceptance among social commentators. One might say it is the most listened to and discussed sermon in history. Since romantic love is a "type" of divine and spiritual love, Currie's passionate rhetorical address provoked a resonant response from large sectors of his audience.

The New Cultural Mystique

Philip Wexler has explored the idea of society itself as a *mystical* entity (Wexler 2000). He pursued Durkheim's early social theorization that religion is the "germ from which all other social phenomena are derived," and that the source of the mystical consciousness is an excess of "transactional energies" that flows from humanity's consciousness towards its greater self. He also traced Ralph Beals' observation that Western society contains within itself a discernible move towards human self-actualisation. The spiritual, the mystical and the experiential, represent important parts of the inner-language of the experiencing self. Thus, as Beals observed, "It is possible ... that if present trends continue, mysticism in its many forms may yet emerge as the characteristic 'religion' of our era" (Wexler 2000, 26). Wexler cites the overthrow of the secularisation hypothesis from the 1960s, and the subsequent "return of the sacred" of what can only be described as an onrush of neo-pagan religions that are frequently gnostic in character, that represent a revitalisation of *chthonic* influences. He observed there is a "wild" ecstatic hunger at work in Western culture, which offers a counterpoint movement to reason, the marketplace, and the politics of greed. All this confirms our primary thesis that mysticism is both present in the lives of twenty-first