

## CRITIQUES OF NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

Around 4 in 10 Americans have become more spiritual over time, fewer have become more religious. Perhaps one of the striking current phenomena in the UK is the overwhelming numbers of the population who have categorised themselves as having “No Religion”. In this sense, some of them claim that they do not belong to any particular religion. Some others have shifted themselves from the traditional practices to personalised and non-religious spiritual practice. It is also a popular belief that humans can establish connection to the divine without attaching to any traditional faith’s dogmas. These are among some views found among the western contemporary peoples about the notions of non-religious spirituality. This conceptual study employs a qualitative research method, primarily applying analysis of selected works and documents of western spirituality and its critics from both Christians and Islamic frameworks. To have a better comprehension of this notion, this study will highlight several dominant definitions and concepts on the religion and spiritual understanding in the west. This study will also share the root cause and historical context of the emergence of this notion as well as its features. Lastly, this study will evaluate critics on the notion and actions of non-religious spirituality from both Christian and Islamic perspectives.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of Religion; Contemporary Western Society; Spirituality without Religion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity was the most common religion in western society before to the 1990s, when conventional religious views were firmly established. This religion was a cornerstone of society, influencing people's daily lives, norms, and values in addition to being a matter of personal faith. Religious leaders held a great deal of authority and influence, including priests, bishops, and other church officials. Their interpretations of religious texts frequently served as the basis for legislation, public policies, and moral and ethical norms. Churches, monasteries, and religious schools—all of which were associated with Christianity—had prominent positions in the community. They served as centres for social interaction, education, and charitable endeavours in addition to being houses of worship. As a result, the population had a high degree of religious participation and affiliation. But as the 20th century progressed, this environment started to drastically change. In western societies, organised religion saw tremendous transformation in the 20th century. The process of "secularisation" marked the beginning of the decline in the power of religious organisations. The growing emphasis on individualism and the rationalist concepts of the Enlightenment and the quick advances in science, which questioned established religious teachings and authority, were the main

drivers of this change. The combined effect of these factors was to lessen the power of traditional religious organisations. As a result, a new spiritual terrain started to take shape, setting the stage for the advent of New Age spirituality in the 1960s and 1970s

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This conceptual study employs a qualitative research methodology, primarily utilising analysis of existing research from books and articles in both religion and spirituality among western society. In order to provide some comparative study of the followers of religious traditions and non-religious spirituality, some selected and relevant references have been critically analysed. This approach allows for a critical examination of the root cause, beliefs, and rituals of non-religious spirituality that are rising among western society.

## 3. WHAT DO RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY MEAN?

There is no one single definition agreed by all scholars with regard to the term religion and spirituality for the past century also. Before the twentieth century, the terms religious and spiritual were used more or less interchangeably. But apparently the term 'religion' preferred to be used more regularly than spirituality, and in a wider sense than used today. With regards to the term Religion, it derived from the Latin term "religio," encapsulates a structured system of beliefs, practices, and rituals dedicated to the veneration of a divine or supernatural entity (Oman, 2013). It is often characterised by the presence of organized doctrines and institutionalized traditions that prescribe adherents' lifestyle and conduct. According to Russell, although no one is certain of the word's origins for the term religion, 'religion' derives from Latin word that meant to tie something tightly (*religare*), and that languages influenced by Latin have equivalents to the English word 'religion. The term religion in today is commonly used to refer to those beliefs, behaviours, and social institutions which have something to do with speculations on any, and all, of the following: the origin, end, and significance of the universe; what happens after death; the existence and wishes of powerful, non-human beings such as spirits, ancestors, angels, demons, and gods; and the manner in which all of this shapes human behaviour. (Christopher Partridge, 2018). Religion also is defined in the context of distinctions between religion and spirituality as the institutional or communal aspect of spirituality, as a shared set of beliefs, experiences, and practices related to the transcendent and the sacred. (Moreira, 2021)

Like religion, there is no overarching definition of spirituality that is agreed upon by all scholars. In the Western tradition, the term 'spirituality' goes back to the "spiritual" in Greek religion (*pneumatikos*), denoting both the spirit that resides in humans and what belongs to the divine spirit. (Steenland. B, 2021). The term "spiritual" also considered originates from the Latin word "spiritus," which refers to the life-sustaining breath or wind. This term signifies an animating essence that imparts vitality to living organisms (Suzuki, 2022). Conceptually, spirituality may be expressed within or as part of a religious tradition; it is often associated with more personal experience of the transcendent or with the acceptance of a higher power. (Baetz, Bowen, Jones & Koru-Sengeul, 2006). Spirituality as shared by Robert Wuthnow (2001, P.307) is defined as a state of being related to a divine, supernatural or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense of awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinary experienced'. Spirituality in a broader sense as defined by Bucher in Ibrahim Ruschoff's article "broad understanding of spirituality whose center is attachment, on the one hand, horizontally with the social environment, nature, and the cosmos and,

on the other hand, vertically with the all-encompassing ultimate, holy one, for many still god, who is beyond human grasp (Ibrahim Ruschoff, 2018)

#### **4. THE FEATURES OF NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY.**

Until the twentieth century, religion and spirituality were thought to be the same. Spirituality is always seen as the component of religiosity and not as a separate dimension. The idea of spirituality, independent of religious principles, appears to be a recent phenomenon in human history. In recent decades, spirituality in the western society has increasingly become regarded as distinct from religiosity. Spirituality is known as an individual's journey to transcendence, whereas religiosity is defined by institutionalised beliefs and practices. This appears to be particularly common among health professionals and psychologists who define themselves as spiritual but not religious. (Rizvi, S. 2021 ). In addition to that, the term *spiritual* gradually came to be linked with the private and personal spectrum of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public spectrum of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines. According to Fuller "Religiousness, they found, was associated with higher levels of church attendance and commitment to orthodox beliefs. Spirituality, in contrast, was associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches". (Fuller, 2001, p.6) 'I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual' is among a common expressions by some western people to indicate that they are able to seek a connection to the divine, free from traditional faith's dogma or independent of traditional religious framework. It can also be assumed here that for these people the institutions associated with religious such as its hierarchies, regulations, rituals and others are merely secondary and inessential; the important thing is the inner faith, the inner 'essence' of religion. The movement of 'non-religious spirituality' has for quite some time appeared in the media and in the printed or online books. For the former the followers of this movement wanted to be known as new form of spiritual seeker who are neither 'atheists' and 'agnostics' on one side or 'religious traditional organizations' on the other. And for the later they have introduced themselves with several names which are among others are 'non-affiliated believers', 'believing without belonging', 'religious non-affiliated theists', 'spiritual seekers', 'unchurched believers', 'religious privatism', 'highly active seekers' and, of course, 'spiritual but not religious'. It can also be traced that some of the advocates of non-religious spirituality would also belong to alternative spiritual movements, including holistic groups, alternative medicine practices, Yoga classes, Reiki, and spiritualist organizations. (Bruno Paz Mosqueiro, 2021). In fact one of the most intriguing aspects of non-religious spirituality is the diversity of alternative practices, including meditation, mindfulness, nature-based spirituality and energy healing. Sheldrake (2004) suggests that those who identify as spiritual but not religious often engage in practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness, which are strongly associated with eastern spirituality. These practices offer opportunities for introspection, inner peace, and self-discovery.

#### **4. ROOT CAUSES OF THE RISE OF NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY.**

There are many theories described by scholars with regards to the emergence of non-religious spirituality in the west. In this writing, focus will be given to some of these causes. The advent of New Age spirituality in the 1960s and 1970s brought about a profound change in spiritual viewpoints. This movement stressed independence and self-realization, departing from established religious

institutions. It was a unique fusion of spiritual beliefs and practices, a melting pot of diverse religious traditions, Eastern philosophies, and esoteric rituals. The advent of New Age spirituality marked a noteworthy turning point in the development of spiritual practices and ideas. It established the foundation for the modern movement of spirituality devoid of religion, encouraging acceptance of individual spiritual experiences. Additionally, it promoted a more inclusive and varied spiritual environment by encouraging the investigation of a broad variety of spiritual practices outside the walls of conventional religious institutions.

The advance of science and technology, which is greatly founded on the modern western paradigm, has tremendously shape the westerners' scientists and intellectuals. Some of them no longer believe in the supernatural or religious institutions which claim absolute truth. By embracing the value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experimental approach to religion, some of them choose to disconnect from the divine power and traditional beliefs. Having said that, for some of these scientists, their dissociation of religion has been replaced with the notion of spirituality but no religion. In this respect they claim that the organised religion is the main threat to true spirituality. They hold that true spirituality involves making an effort on a personal level to get closer to the sacred. (Fuller, 2001)

The influence of the popular culture in the present era, such as the music, films, entertainment, sports, and trendy life styles has significantly shifted the mind of mainly western teenagers from their attachment to religious institutions to a exploring alternative spiritual beliefs and practices. According to studies by Moberg (2009) and Lynch (2006), it has become more prevalent in western society to embrace and portray alternative spiritual practices and ideas that exist outside of established religious frameworks. These portrayals of spirituality without religion have been successful in normalising and popularising it, increasing its accessibility and attractiveness to a wider range of people.

## **5. CRITIQUES OF NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY**

The idea that spirituality without religion lacks a clear and established moral code is one of the main accusations levelled at it. It is maintained that in the absence of religious ideas and teachings, spirituality is unable to give people precise direction for moral guidance and ethical decision-making, which can have profound effects on both the individual and the larger community. For a very long time, traditional religions provided their adherents with a set of moral precepts that shaped their ethical behaviour through the use of sacred books, teachings, and religious authority. These moral precepts give believers a thorough framework for differentiating between good and wrong as well as detailed guidance on how to live a morally pure life. For example, the Ten Commandments are a clear and succinct moral code that outline the essential beliefs that guide the behaviour of Christians. In a similar vein, the Qur'an in Islam has passages that give Muslims moral precepts and guidelines. For followers, such religious concepts provide a sense of moral clarity and guidance.

Nonreligious spirituality frequently promotes approaches for self-improvement and personal development, such as affirmation exercises, visualisation techniques, and mindfulness meditation. Although these activities have been shown to improve emotional health and self-awareness, our research indicates that they frequently put individual goals ahead of group involvement and social responsibility. Studies by social psychologists have shown that those who identify as spiritual but

not religious have a tendency to be less socially attached than people who identify as religious. This implies that the development of strong social support networks and community relationships may be hampered by an overemphasis on personal development.

Unlike the notion of spirituality propagated by the adherents of non-religious spirituality in the west, Islam has its own holistic concept on how a human can embrace spirituality in his life. Based on the Quranic verses, the essence of spirituality in Islam revolves around the fear of God, awareness of His Divine presence, hope in His absolute pardon, trust in His reward, and positive expression of emotions and behaviour. The aim of spirituality in Islam is to develop inner peace, maintain healthy wellness, purify of the self, and sustain driving motivation for good. In other words, in Islam, the actualisation of spirituality in life can only be attained by attachment to religious principles and submission to God the Almighty.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The idea of spirituality without religion insinuates the possibility of individuals pursuing a spiritual path and cultivating a profound divine connection, independently of any specific religious beliefs or practices. Nonetheless, this notion is deemed problematic from an Islamic viewpoint as it overlooks the crucial role of divine revelation and guidance embedded in religious teachings. Because it lacks a supreme authority or a source of divine revelation, the idea of spirituality apart from religion is frequently criticised within the framework of Islamic thinking.

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