Summer 2009

Fuzzy But Not Warm: On the (Continuing) Descriptive and Analytical Inutility of 'Spirituality'

Chad M. Bauman

Butler University, cbauman@butler.edu

Gene Gallagher

Davina Lopez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Other Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bauman, Chad M.; Gallagher, Gene; and Lopez, Davina, "Fuzzy But Not Warm: On the (Continuing) Descriptive and Analytical Inutility of 'Spirituality'" *Religion and Education* / (Summer 2009): 141-149. Available at https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/82

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Fuzzy But Not Warm: On the (Continuing) Descriptive and Analytical Inutility of "Spirituality"

Chad M. Bauman, Eugene V. Gallagher, Davina C. Lopez¹

In her response, Nadine Pence helpfully turns the conversation towards actual practices in teaching and the array of practical decisions that have to be made in the classroom and on campuses when it comes to addressing "Big Questions" and students' aspirations and interior lives. Several dimensions of her argument are worth amplification. Pence appropriately notes that at least some of the "meaning-making activities of human groups have been done without reference to a god or to a supra-natural force" (p. 133). Since repeated practice in the accurate and precise use of descriptive and analytical language is an important part of the collegiate classroom experience in the humanities, it is at least "awkward" (p. 133) if not damaging to students and their objects of study to categorize wholly secular perspectives on human life as in some ways constituting "spiritualities." Such an interpretive move goes well beyond devising a capacious category for purposes of comparison to outright misreading of the primary evidence. To make that kind of category mistake is to fail the minimal requirements for descriptive adequacy. As the philosopher of religion Wayne Proudfoot puts it, "where it is the subject's experience which is the object of study, that experience must be identified under a description that can plausibly be attributed to him."² In simple terms, it is a fundamental distortion of the evidence either to claim or to imply that every person has a "spirituality," especially, as Pence notes, "when the understanding itself is explicit that there is no such thing as a 'spirit'" (p. 133).

We are happy to hear in Alexander and Helen Astin's response that their subsequent studies and reports have recognized the problems inherent in measuring the prevalence of "spirituality" by asking questions that employ versions of the word, and for this reason have shifted to the language of "spiritual identification." And the fact, as the Astins suggest, that the index displayed a high internal consistency ($\text{Alpha} = .89$) between the 13 elements of the scale is of course not at all surprising given, as they say, that "12 of the 13 items making up this scale included some version of the word 'spiritual'" (p. 127). Be that as it may, the questions we are asking are not

concerned with whether the measure is consistent within itself, but whether this consistency tells us anything meaningful about the nature of "spirituality," or even about what people understand it to mean in any given historical moment and ideological climate in the United States. We remain unconvinced that all of those who identify with the word "spirituality" understand it to mean the same thing. And we are therefore, in the language of sociologists who specialize in survey methodology, questioning the *inter-rater*, or *inter-observer*, *reliability* of the study's variables, and especially the most central of its variables, i.e., "spirituality."

Although the Astins detail in their response the careful methods and multiple refinements of their approach to survey research, it cannot be said that the same level of care is evidenced when enthusiasts for "Spirituality in Higher Education" declare without hesitation that literally everyone has a spirituality.³ In effect, such pronouncements impoverish students' encounters with the diversity of ways of making sense of the world through unwarranted homogenization. They also suggest that teachers and students need not take seriously people's own descriptions of and questions about their experience and points of view, even as an analytical starting point. That stance yields the unsettling prospect of having either a teacher or student declare that while person X claims to be an atheist, person X "really" is "spiritual." Such an approach to the reading of primary data begs, but does nothing to answer, the question of when individuals' descriptions of their own experiences and perspectives on the world are to be taken seriously and when they are not—and on what bases. Perhaps considering the reversed statement can drive the point home. Enthusiasts for "Spirituality in Higher Education" seem unwilling to entertain the possibility that person X claims to be "spiritual" but is "really" suffering from psychological maladaptation. It is difficult indeed to discern how assertions that depend on dismissing out of hand first-person testimonies could produce the kind of "real information" about actual practices and beliefs that Pence rightly claims is the subject matter for the religious studies classroom. The extension of "spirituality" to categorize explicitly secular viewpoints obfuscates rather than clarifies. At the very least, such an extension indirectly implies that secular understandings of the way the world works are somehow underdeveloped, inferior, diminished, and not worthy of serious, sustained consideration. But in the undergraduate humanities classroom those value judgments should be the topics for discussion and debate, with their supporting arguments open to explicit challenge and defense—rather than being treated, by implication, as self-evident truths.

Pence additionally expresses wariness about calls for the classroom to be a site for explicit efforts to promote student "formation and maturation" (p. 135). She wonders whether that focus would "weight the classroom too much toward the personal life of the student and places the subject matter of the course into competition with student needs" (p. 135). On this topic the findings of the GTU studies may only be of limited value to those teaching in large state universities, community colleges, or religiously unaffiliated colleges. In those venues the originally Christian language of "formation" can stand in some tension with institutional missions that cannot be seen as endorsing a particular religious point of view as well as diverse student populations where the notion of religious formation may be different for those in non-Christian traditions, and alien to those who maintain a secular view of the world.

Another productive question raised by Pence concerns the type of work that is appropriate to the classroom and the type of work that is best undertaken in other settings, and sometimes by other people, in the contemporary college or university. What should teachers strive to accomplish in their 45 or so classroom contact hours in a given semester? Most institutions feature robust Student Life staffs and substantial counseling services. The people who work in those sectors of higher education have extensive training in their chosen fields and may well have skills that individual teachers do not, raising the question of which dimensions of students' "formation and maturation" are best addressed outside of the classroom and best left in the hands of other professionals. It does not appear to be an accident, then, that Student Life staff and other administrators are so prominent in the "Spirituality in Higher Education" movement. But while they may have the appropriate tools to create contexts and guide discussions of some of the "big questions," if the literature produced by the movement is any indication they also bring with them taken-for-granted conceptions, like the central concept of "spirituality," that have rarely been subjected to the careful scrutiny and contestation that is the hallmark of the contemporary academy. Our essays in this volume have attempted to do just that.

None of us would deny that the intellectual growth and maturation of students is a primary goal of their collegiate experience and that their college years are an appropriate time for grappling with big questions. What we vigorously dispute is that any wrestling with those questions must necessarily constitute a "spirituality." There is ample contemporary and historical evidence that many have succeeded in answering to their own satisfaction big questions about human life without appealing to religious or "spiritual" warrants. Freud's sweeping dismissal of religious beliefs as wish

fulfillments and illusions and his epigrammatic recommendation of "education to reality" represent a pointed and memorable example.⁴ Serious consideration of such secular answers to life's big questions, in comparison to traditional religious and contemporary "spiritual" ones, can only enrich collegiate conversations about them both in the classroom and outside it. Forced conversions of secular viewpoints into putatively "spiritual" ones, and religious and "spiritual" viewpoints into secular ones, can only impoverish those same conversations by promoting a taken-for-granted and unexamined homogeneity. If training in argument is the *sine qua non* of undergraduate education,⁵ the fullest possible range of arguments about the answers to big questions should be introduced to students so that through the patient and detailed work of comparison they can, for themselves, evaluate their strengths and weakness and develop the ability to defend and extend their own judgments. The premature amalgamation of even atheist perspectives into an all-encompassing but amorphous "spirituality" deprives students of the opportunities to consider seriously what some people have perceived to be a compelling way of understanding life in this world but also of a potential whetstone against which they can sharpen their own perspectives.

Beyond the particularities of the HERI surveys there are numerous historical, individual, institutional, and ideological issues, and it is on those issues rather than on the mechanics of survey research that we have focused all along. We can raise only a few more of those issues in this brief response. First, whether it is acknowledged by its partisans or not, the contemporary interest in spirituality, often explicitly constructed in opposition to a distinctive if implicit understanding of what constitutes religion, has its own pedigree. Leigh Schmidt describes it as "a historically shaped tradition of its own" that developed in the 19th century United States among an array of religious liberals as "a search for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance."⁶ Schmidt's even-handed appraisal of that tradition provides a bracing antidote to the exuberant enthusiasm of some in the "Spirituality in Higher Education" movement. He also argues that "spotted with its own failed inclusions, dubious appropriations and misguided causes, the Spiritual Left must also know itself as a tradition of mixed blessings."⁷ Precisely what is missing in some of the more far-reaching endorsements of Spirituality in Higher Education is just that sense of mixed blessings, of the benefits and drawbacks, for example, of imputing a "spirituality" to those who would wholeheartedly reject the notion.

Writing from what he calls the "worldly" as opposed to the spiritual Left, Roland Boer offers a different history for the contemporary embrace of spirituality. He contends that "the rise of spirituality is a major—I hesi-

tate to write 'first'—sign of the tensions within secularism and the beginnings of post-secularism."⁸ Boer denies that the contemporary fascination with spirituality can be traced to a hunger for meaning that is located beyond the material, and he argues that the conception of spirituality as primarily a private affair that is, and should be, separate from someone's various engagements with the world actually echoes the typical emphases of secularism. Focusing specifically on the Christian Bible, Boer asserts that "the assumption that you need to believe in order to be interested in the Bible would have to be one of the strangest making the rounds today."⁹ Following Boer's lead, we submit that the assumption that you have to be spiritual in order to address life's big questions is at least equally strange. In the terms of Pence's response, neither a spiritual nor a secular approach to making meaning is a *necessary* pre-requisite to addressing fundamental questions of meaning; nor does addressing fundamental questions of meaning *necessarily* indicate that one is religious or spiritual. To assert the contrary of either position is to deny the diversity of human approaches to life's big issues. At a time when diversity of all sorts plays such a prominent role in the missions of institutions of higher education, that seems ill-advised, to say the least.

Second, Schmidt's location of the genesis of the contemporary embrace of spirituality among a group of 19th century liberal Protestants and their fellow travelers also provides a context for our concern that the "Spirituality in Higher Education" movement represents, again whether intentionally or not, an effort in the direction of a re-Protestantization of American collegiate education. Schmidt identifies the rudiments of the 19th century religious liberalism in which the focus on "spirituality" took shape as the following:

- Individual aspiration after mystical experience or religious feeling
- The valuing of silence, solitude, and serene meditation
- The immanence of the transcendent—in each person and in nature
- The cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety as well as unity in diversity
- Ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing reforms or "social salvation"
- An emphasis on creative self-expression and adventuresome seeking.¹⁰

Clearly, those characteristics of 19th century American religious liberalism are remarkably congruent with the evocations of "spirituality" that dominate the discourse of the movement to promote Spirituality in Higher Education. They also express a distinctively Protestant Christian understanding of both religion and "spirituality." We remain very concerned that, should such characteristics continue to be unquestioningly accepted as limning the outlines of contemporary spirituality, they will in effect reinforce a Protestant hegemony in the discourse about spirituality. Partisans of "Spirituality in Higher Education" would do well to attend to the potential exclusionary effects of such an unexamined conception of "spirituality" might have for those who do not accept or endorse a Protestant way of understanding their own ways of making sense of the world, including those who espouse unflinchingly secular viewpoints.

Those who advocate for "Spirituality in Higher Education," and particularly those implicated and invested in the analysis of HERI survey data regarding the spiritual proclivities of college students, might suggest that an implicit Protestant emphasis does not hold since contemporary college students, in fact, declare themselves to belong to many Christian denominations and other of the world's religious traditions. Such a plurality of religious commitment, seemingly demonstrable through empirical data, appears to belie a measure of healthy religious diversity among college students. One possible conclusion from such a representation is that people across religious traditions are concerned with "spirituality." Herein resides an important analytical problem with which people who study and teach religion professionally are rightly concerned. We contend that the criteria and assumptions infused into assertions about spirituality and religion betray an unarticulated Protestant Christian framework that is presented as natural, inevitable, and universal—even as it deploys a modicum of rhetoric toward vaguely valuing religious pluralism. As Tomoko Masuzawa has recently argued, the very idea of "world religions" developed from European processes of comparison and classification according to relationships with Protestant Christianity at a particular historical moment in northern Europe, and discourses invoking religious pluralism and multiculturalism often reify Protestant assumptions while simultaneously hiding them.¹¹ Following Masuzawa, let us reiterate here that the point is not whether proponents of "Spirituality in Higher Education" name their latent, or not-so-latent, Protestantism. The point, for teachers and researchers in religious studies, is precisely that these researchers and interpreters do *not* do such naming, thus allowing Protestant presuppositions to shape the discourse on "spirituality," even across religious traditions—a range of traditions that are themselves defined, cat-

egorized, and evaluated in relationship to hegemonic conceptions of "spirituality" and "religion."

Such a circular process has the appearance of what philosopher Jean Baudrillard famously called "the hyperreal"—that is to say, a system of signs and significations referring only to themselves in their own closed semantic universe, producing a map so detailed that it covers, erases, and replaces the actual terrain it is meant to represent.¹² In this case the actual terrain of people's provisional and relational conceptions of themselves and the world, and real questions thereof, has been mapped over by a simulacrum of "spirituality"—and, perhaps, a simulacrum of higher education as well. Furthermore, attempts to close the system within the discourse of "Spirituality in Higher Education," evidenced by significant rhetorical maneuvers attempting to preclude the possibility of critical appraisal and intervention, serve the ideological function of suggesting that nothing lies outside of that discourse—which is in itself a clue as to the discourse's embedded Protestant universalism.¹³

Third, we noted in our individual contributions that the "Spirituality in Higher Education" movement advocates far-reaching changes in American higher education. In addition to raising questions about the appropriate division of responsibility for aspects of student development in contemporary colleges and universities, Dena Pence has aptly pointed out some of the ways in which those changes might impact a religious studies classroom. Her concern about how strong interest in students' "formation and maturation" might displace the designated subject matter of a course (see p. 9) is well-founded and clearly articulated. One of the things that is still missing in the broad programmatic statements in favor of introjecting "spirituality" into higher education is precisely how that is to be done in specific courses, offered within the constraints of particular programmatic and institutional contexts, by faculty members with certain kinds of expertise. Since it may appear self-evident to some that courses in the study of religion may address big questions or issues of "spirituality," and that the religion classroom is a logical place for the implementation of a curriculum focused on "spirituality," that does not excuse the proponents of "Spirituality in Higher Education" from explaining in some detail just how treatments of those broad topics within specific courses are to be used to promote student formation and maturation, without turning students' away from the subject matter at hand and towards, only or primarily, their own appropriation or rejection of it. More challenging, perhaps, is figuring out the actual role of the chemistry teacher or elementary foreign language instructor in carrying out a lightly outlined program to promote spirituality among college students.

Finally, efforts to promote spirituality in collegiate life raise difficult and contentious ideological questions. The most far-reaching promoters of "Spirituality in Higher Education," when they sometimes claim directly and other times imply that everyone is in some way spiritual, appear to be indirectly mounting a case against all secular views of the world and critiques of religion, be they inspired by Marx, Freud, or anyone else. The assertion that even atheists possess a "spirituality" is simply a convoluted way of asserting that secular views of the world hold no credibility, cannot be taken to mean what they actually say, and can be dismissed out of hand. There may even be echoes of a distant but distinct religious or at least "spiritual" triumphalism that longs to trumpet the demise of the secular. At its core, then, the "Spirituality in Higher Education" movement would represent a politics by another name. If so, we ask only that its politics be clearly declared and opened to the kind of careful, patient, and probing consideration that represents American higher education at its best.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank Dr. Tamara Leech (Department of Sociology, IUPUI) for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this response.
2. See his *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 194.
3. For example, see Speck, "Literature Review," in *Searching for Spirituality*, p. 19; see p. 25; Thomas J. Buttery & Philip S. Roberson, "Spirituality: The Physiological-Biological Foundation" in *Spirituality in Higher Education*, pp. 37-42, esp. p. 37; Allen L. Pelletier & John W. McCall, "A Modular Curriculum for Integrating Spirituality and Health Care," in *ibid.*, pp. 51-58, esp. p. 51.
4. See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, James Strachey trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), pp. 38, 40, 62, 63.
5. See Jonathan Z. Smith, "'Narratives into Problems': The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion," *JAAR* 56 (1988) 727-739.
6. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 2, 5.
7. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, p. 287.
8. Roland Boer, *Rescuing the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
10. Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, p. 12.

11. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

12. A distinct quality of the hyperreal which is arguably a hallmark of consumer capitalist culture, is the inability of the observer to perceive the differences between reality and fantasy. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

13. An attempt to close the system and preclude critical intervention is evident, for example, in the Astins' implied charge that we do not fully understand, or that we have willfully miscast, their work in their response to our papers in this volume.