

# Peter van der Veer

## Spirituality in Modern Society

### 1. SPIRITUAL AND SECULAR

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN SPIRITUALITY ARE, IN MY VIEW, TO BE found in the nineteenth century and in the West. One can, obviously, find deep histories of spirituality in mysticism, gnosticism, hermeticism, and in a whole range of traditions from antiquity, but modern spirituality is something that is, indeed, modern. It is part of modernity and thus of a wide-ranging nineteenth-century transformation, a historical rupture. Spirituality is notoriously hard to define, and I want to suggest that its very vagueness as the opposite of materiality, as distinctive from the body, as distinctive from both the religious and the secular, has made it productive as a concept that bridges various discursive traditions across the globe.

The argument of this paper is that the spiritual and the secular are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity. The paper also argues that a central contradiction in the concept of spirituality is that it is at the same time seen as universal and as tied to conceptions of national identity. Moreover, while the concept travels globally, its trajectory differs from place to place as it is inserted in different historical developments. My focus is on India and China, but not in an attempt to provincialize Europe or America, but in recognition of the fact that Indian and Chinese modernities are a product of interactions with imperial modernity (van der Veer 2001). The examination of Indian and Chinese spiritualities is important in itself, but in the context of this special issue of *Social Research* it has the

added advantage that it also yields a better understanding of the interactional history of Euro-American modernity with Asian modernity.

The spiritual as a modern category emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century as part of the Great Transformation. As such it is part of nineteenth-century globalization, a thoroughgoing political, economic, and cultural integration of the world. As Prasenjit Duara has convincingly argued, this integration is uneven in time and place, and occurs at different levels of society, integrating markets and political systems in a differential process. In this paper we are dealing with what an instance of what Duara calls “cognitive globalization,” which produces “unique” national formations of spirituality within a global capitalist system (Duara 2009: 5-7).

The emergence of spirituality is tied to the better-known ascendancy of the secular. Again, like spirituality, the concept of the secular also has deep histories, as in the separation of worldly and transcendent orders or in that of transcendence and immanence, but modern secularism is, indeed, modern and another aspect of the Great Transformation.<sup>1</sup> Much sociological attention and imagination has gone into, first, the development of the secularization thesis as part of the modernization paradigm and, more recently, its dismantling. José Casanova has been in the forefront of this dismantling with his important book, *Public Religions* (1994). He has argued that the three propositions of the secularization thesis—the decline of religious beliefs, the privatization of religion, and the differentiation of secular spheres and their emancipation from religion—should be looked at separately in a comparative analysis. He comes to the conclusion that comparative historical analysis allows one to get away from the dominant stereotypes about the United States and Europe and to open a space for further sociological inquiry into multiple patterns of fusion and differentiation of the religious and the secular across societies and religions. This means moving away from teleological understandings of modernization. Or perhaps better, it means questioning that telos by recognizing its multiplicity and its contradictions. Casanova’s intervention can be understood as building on the Weberian project of comparative and historical sociology, but

going beyond it by avoiding the reduction of civilizations to essences that can be compared and by avoiding a Hegelian evaluation in terms of “lack” or “deficit” in the world-historical process of modernization and rationalization. Eisenstadt’s proposal to speak about multiple modernities similarly creates space for such a post-Weberian project, but the question has to be asked what the role of secularity and secularism is in the production of these multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2002).

Casanova’s post-Weberian perspective is entirely acceptable, but I want to make a few observations. The first is that the project of European modernity should be understood as part of what I have called “interactional history” (van der Veer 2001). That is to say that the project of modernity with all its revolutionary ideas of nation, equality, citizenship, democracy, and rights is developed not only in Atlantic interactions between the United States and Europe but also in interactions with Asian and African societies that are coming within the orbit of imperial expansion. Instead of the oft-assumed universalism of the Enlightenment, I would propose to look at the universalization of ideas that emerges from a history of interactions. Enlightened notions of rationality and progress are not simply invented in Europe and accepted elsewhere, but are both produced and universally spread in the expansion of European power. This entails a close attention to the pathways of imperial universalization. Examining India and China uncovers some of the peculiarities of this universalization by showing how it is inserted in different historical trajectories in these societies.

The second is that with all the attention to secularization as a historical *process*, there is not enough attention to secularism as historical *project*. Casanova has in his recent writings rightly drawn attention to the importance in Europe of secularism as an ideological critique of religion, carried out by a number of social movements (Casanova 2004). Secularism as an ideology offers a teleology of religious decline and can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is important to examine the role of intellectuals in furthering this understanding of history, but also their relation to sources of power: state apparatuses and social movements. Secularism is a forceful ideology when carried by political movements that capture both the imag-

ination and the means to mobilize social energies. It is important to attend to the utopian and indeed religious elements in secularist projects in order to understand why many of these movements seem to tap into traditional and modern sources of witchcraft, millenarianism, and charisma, while at the same time being avowedly anti-traditionalist. Much of this remains outside of the framework of discussions of secularization, but the cases of India and China show us how essential this is for understanding the dynamics of religion and the secular.

Third, I would like to point out that the spiritual and the secular are produced simultaneously and in mutual interaction. As many scholars have been arguing, religion as a universal category is a modern construction with a genealogy in universalist Deism and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European expansion (Asad 1993). One needs therefore to analyze how the categories of “religion,” “secularism,” and “spirituality” are universalized. This is also true for the category of the secular that has a genealogy in church-world relations in European history but is transformed in modernity both in Europe and elsewhere. The modern origins of “the secular” are already clear when we look at the first use of the term secularism in England by George Holyoake in 1846. Holyoake attacked Christianity as an “irrelevant speculation,” and his attack was carried forward by Secular Societies that were formed in the early 1850s. One of the interesting aspects of these societies is that they combined radical antichurch attitudes, anti-establishment socialism and freethinking with spiritual experimentation. Secular Societies had a membership that was hugely interested in connecting to the other world by do-it-yourself science. These practices were not considered to be antirational, but rather to constitute experiments that were scientific though different from what was going on in the universities. They did not need (or want) to be legitimated by a scientific establishment that was considered to be intimately intertwined with high society and the established church, as indeed Oxford and Cambridge were in this period.

A good example of the combination of socialist radicalism, secularism, and spirituality is the prominent feminist Annie Besant. In the 1870s Annie Besant became a member of the Secular Society of London

and began to collaborate with Charles Bradlaugh, a prominent socialist and president of the National Secular Society, in promoting birth control and other feminist issues. She combined her radical socialist views and her scientific training as the first woman graduating in science at University College in London with a great interest in spiritual matters. After meeting Madame Blavatsky she became a leading Theosophist, and after going to India she even became for a short moment president of the Indian National Congress (Nethercot 1961, 1963).

Science and scientific rationality are fundamental to the secular age, and scientific progress is often seen to depend on the secularization of the mind (Chadwick 1990). From our contemporary viewpoint it seems strange that spirituality and secular science were not seen as at odds with each other in the nineteenth century. A common view of the history of science is that science purifies itself from unwarranted speculation. So, for instance, while the contribution of Alfred Russell Wallace in developing evolutionary theory concurrently with that of Darwin is generally acknowledged, Wallace's spiritual experiments are generally seen as an aberration from which science has purified itself (Pels 2003). What falls outside of this teleological perspective on science as a process of progressive purification is the social and political embedded nature of both the elements from which science is purified and of purified science itself. Spiritualism was seen as a secular truth-seeking, experimental in nature and opposed to religious obscurantism and hierarchy. This was a truth-seeking that was hindered by both the state and the church, which in England were two intertwined institutions. It is within the context of spiritualism, spirituality, and the antinomian traditions of Britain that an anticolonial universalism was born.

An important element in the emergence of spirituality was that it offered an alternative to religion. This was first and foremost institutionalized religion. In the West, spirituality formed an alternative to church Christianity. Together with the so-called secularization of the mind in nineteenth-century liberalism, socialism, as well as in science (especially Darwin's theory of evolution), one can find widespread movements in different parts of the world that search for a universal

spirituality that is not bound to any specific tradition. Good examples in the United States are the transcendentalists from Emerson to Whitman as well as Mary Baker's Christian Science. Theosophy is another product of spirit-searching America. In fact, not only America is full of spirituality, as Catherine Albanese has shown (Albanese 2007), but there is a huge proliferation of this kind of movement that parallels the spread of secularist ideologies around the world.

However, it is important to highlight that spirituality should not be relegated to the fringes of modernity, as often happens, but that it is located at the heart of Western modernity. The extent to which spirituality emerged as a sign of Western modernity can be best shown by its direct connection to abstract art. In December 1911 Wassily Kandinsky published his *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* ("On the Spiritual in Art"), one of the most influential texts by an artist in the twentieth century. He stated that the book had as its main purpose to arouse a capacity to experience the spiritual in material and abstract things, and that it was this capacity that enabled experiences that were in the future absolutely necessary and unending. Kandinsky emphasized that he was not creating a rational theory, but that as an artist he was interested in experiences that were partially unconscious. One of the formative experiences he describes is his encounter at a French exhibition with Monet's "Haystack":

And suddenly for the first time I saw an *Image*. That it was a "haystack" I learned from the catalogue. That I had not recognized it was painful for me. I also thought that the painter had no right to paint so unclearly. I experienced dimly that there was no object in this image. And noticed astonished and upset that the image did not only catch, but that it imprints itself indelibly in memory and floats always totally unexpected in final detail before one's eyes  
Kandinsky (1952 [1913]: 9).

Abstract art is one of the most distinctive signs of European modernity. One can study its gradual development from the impres-

sionism of Monet and others through symbolism, but it is hard to escape the sense of drastic rupture with representational art. Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstract art, connects abstraction with the spiritual. He is certainly not exceptional, since other leading abstract pioneers, such as Frantisek Kupka, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich, similarly saw themselves as inspired by spirituality, either through the influence of Theosophy and Anthroposophy or otherwise (Tuchman 1986). This may be somewhat unexpected for those who see the modern transformation of European life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Weberian terms as demystification. In one of the most pregnant expressions of modernity—namely, modern art—the spiritual stages a come-back as the return of the repressed. The connection between art and spirituality points at the way in which art comes to stand for the transcendental interpretation of experience that is no longer the exclusive province of institutional religion. While some of the theories one encounters in this area seem to be of the crackpot variety (especially Mondrian tends to be incredibly confused and confusing in his writings), one should be careful not to dismiss them too quickly as irrelevant. Artists are groping for a radically new way of expressing transcendental truth and are often more successful in their chosen medium than they are in words. The transcendental and moral significance of modern art, enshrined in museums and galleries, makes ideological attacks on art seem inevitable. Such attacks acquire the status of blasphemy and iconoclastic sacrilege, as in the Nazi burning of *entartete Kunst* (“degenerate art”). One could legitimately argue that the spirituality of Western modernity is enshrined in art.

## **2. ORIENTALIST SPIRITUALITY**

In Christianity, the religion of the colonial powers, we find in the second half of the nineteenth century attempts not so much to convert people to Christianity but to find a universal morality or spirituality in other religious traditions, and thus a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* of all traditions. This is exemplified in the Unitarian organization of the

World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago, where representatives of world religions were invited to speak on a common platform, as well as in the newly developed discipline of science of religion that went beyond Christian theology. The term “world religions” has been coined in this period to designate religious traditions of a high morality that could be treated as relatively equal. Buddhism was a perfect candidate to be included in this category, while Islam, despite its clear global presence and similarity to Christianity, was excluded at first (Masuzawa 2005).

These attempts to isolate core elements of spirituality in existing religious traditions were dependent on the development of new philological and linguistic tools to analyze religious traditions. The most important two figures for translating Indian and Chinese traditions into the new category of world religion were Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900) and James Legge (1815-1897). Both have been the subject of a wide interpretative literature, and I want to limit myself to an understanding of their role in the discovery of Oriental spirituality. Muller and Legge were colleagues at Oxford University and Legge produced the Sacred Books of China for Muller’s Sacred Books of the East series, which was published in 50 volumes between 1879 and 1902. India was of much greater interest to British scholarship than China, primarily because India had been colonized and secondly because India’s cultural and linguistic heritage had been shown to be deeply related to that of Europe, while China was not in the Indo-European family and seemed deeply alien to scholars. Nevertheless, Muller accepted Confucianism and Daoism into the fold of World Religion and invited his colleague and friend Legge to make his translations of the classical texts of these religions available for his famous series.

Legge had learned Chinese as a missionary in China for the London Missionary Society and had already begun his monumental work of translating Chinese classics in Hong Kong. When he returned to England he became the first professor of Chinese at Oxford (1876-1897). At Oxford he came more and more under the influence of Muller’s



science of language and science of religion, and turned from a religious missionary into a scientific missionary. A major element of this scientific approach as opposed to a religious approach is the willingness to see some essential Truth shining in all existing religions. This dissuades the student of a particular religion from attacking the other religion and allows for a liberal, tolerant attitude that is clearly most conducive to the scholarly approach to non-Christian religious traditions. This attitude makes the great project of translations contained in *The Sacred Books of the East* feasible in the first place.

Max Muller had made his name early in his scholarly career by editing the *Rg-Veda*, a foundational Sanskrit text, an undertaking financially underwritten by the East India Company and finished in 1874. It was one of the major gifts brought to India by the Prince of Wales on his tour in 1875-1876. Muller had been rejected by Oxford as its Boden Professor of Sanskrit because of his liberal views of religion, a rejection that had deeply disappointed him. However, it seems that Muller had found a perfect response to evangelical orthodoxy by making an arrangement with Clarendon Press for the publication of *The Sacred Books of the East*, dealing equally with the great religions: Brahmanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam. Although he was not allowed to deal with Judaism and Christianity and publish the Old and New Testament in this universalist series, he was able to make his point in an indirect way that God's Truth can be found in all the great traditions ("the Bibles of Humanity" as he called them in a letter to Ernest Renan; quoted in van den Bosch 2002: 134).

It is clear that the Orientalist translation of the great traditions of India and China by Muller and Legge was embedded in Christian theological disputes as well as colonial knowledge. The exception granted to Judaism and Christianity was just as political as the ability to deal with the other religions. Nevertheless, as Girardot observes, the spirit of Muller's and Legge's enterprise was symbolized by the fact that the earlier gift of the *Rg-Veda* by the Prince of Wales to Indian nobles was reciprocated by the gift of the sacred books to Queen Victoria and the

gift of a Chinese New Testament by Wang Tao (1828-1897), Legge's Chinese collaborator in translation projects and a respected intellectual in China, to Cixi, the dowager empress in Peking (Girardot 2002: 351). At the same time, however, that translation also recreated these traditions for the societies from which they came. A Buddhist monastery in Japan sent two pupils to Muller to learn Sanskrit and make the Sanskrit tradition of Buddhism again available in Japan. King Chulalongkorn of Siam (Burma) gave a grant for three volumes of Buddhist Sanskrit texts (van den Bosch 2002: 133).

The choice of traditions to be translated was not easy and was heavily biased toward the center of gravity of Orientalist scholarship, the traditions of South Asia and Iran, seen as the cradle of the Indo-Aryan world. In comparison, the traditions of the Far East were given short shrift. The choice of translators and, especially, convincing them to spend time on translations, were other hard jobs. Translation was seen as much less prestigious than the philological collation of manuscripts and the interpretation of difficult passages. It was considered to be a service to the larger reading public rather than a scholarly achievement. Legge, however, was a willing collaborator, because he shared parts of Muller's scientific and moral program. At the insistence of Muller, Legge translated, in addition to the Confucian texts, Daoist texts to give a larger picture of Chinese traditions.

The emergence of spirituality as a concept enabled the inclusion of a variety of traditions under the rubric of universal morality without the baggage of competing religious institutions and their authoritative boundary maintenance. Missionization and conversion certainly have continued full blast till today and are still in my view the most important religious aspect of modern globalization in its current phase. The so-called decline of religion is limited to Western Europe, but the globalization of Christianity and other religions is continuing (Jenkins 2002). However, the importance of the globalization of spirituality as an alternative to both institutionalized religion and secularism should not be underestimated.

### 3. INDIAN NATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

While modernity and spirituality are conceived to be universal, Asia is thought to have a special connection to spirituality. There is no term equivalent to “spirituality” in Sanskrit or Mandarin Chinese (although there are words for “spirit”), but this term is increasingly used to connect discursive traditions that come to be called Hinduism or Confucianism or Daoism, none of which were “isms” prior to the imperial encounter. Following I. A. Richards’s explorations of the translation of Chinese thought, I would propose that an embracing, vague term like spirituality has been adopted precisely to make peaceful communication between different conceptual universes possible (Richards 1997 [1932]).

At the end of the nineteenth century the discovery of the traditions of the East engendered great interest in the West. The concept of spirituality has played a crucial role continuously throughout contemporary history in the nationalist defense of Hindu civilization. In taking this up, the nationalists adopted the Orientalist perspective of European Romanticism, in which Hindu civilization is highly appreciated for its spiritual qualities. Schopenhauer was deeply influenced by the Upanishads, while Goethe adopted specific theatre techniques from Sanskrit theatre in his writing of *Faust*. Hindu civilization and its offshoot Buddhism are central to what Raymond Schwab has called the Oriental Renaissance. Indian religious movements in the second half of the nineteenth century reappropriated Western discourse on “Eastern spirituality.” The translation of Hindu discursive traditions into “spirituality” meant a significant transformation of these traditions. This process can be closely followed by examining the way in which one of the most important reformers, Vivekananda, made a modern, sanitized version of the religious ideas and practices of his guru Ramakrishna (a practitioner of tantric yoga) for a modernizing, middle class in Calcutta. Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was an illiterate priest in a temple for the Goddess Kali who regularly became possessed by the goddess. Ramakrishna’s ideas and practices were based on a specific, highly eroticized tradition of tantra. Ramakrishna was a particularly gifted practi-

tioner of a tradition that is widespread in North India and he was highly popular in Calcutta. Even leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, a movement propagating Rational Hinduism, became his followers. Vivekananda (1863-1902), who as a member of Calcutta's Westernized elite had received a thorough Western education and had joined the Brahmo Samaj, also came under the sway of this charismatic guru and spent his life translating the guru's beliefs and practices into "Hindu spirituality" of a sort that could be recognized by Western and Westernized audiences alike. This was not an easy task, since it entailed moving out of sight the image of the Goddess Kali with her protruding tongue and her necklace of skulls dancing on the corpse of the God Shiva as well as Ramakrishna's, for Victorian times, outrageous tantric rituals. While we can still interpret most of Ramakrishna's beliefs and practices in terms of Hindu discursive traditions, we enter with Vivekananda the terrain of colonial translation.

Vivekananda's translation of Ramakrishna's message in terms of "spirituality" was literally transferred to the West during his trip to the United States after Ramakrishna's death. He visited the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, a sideshow of the Columbian Exposition, celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the New World, but perhaps more importantly Chicago's recovery from the Great Fire of 1871. Religions represented in this show of religious universalism included Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, and various others (Ziolkowski 1993). But the show was stolen by the representative of Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. In his speech to the parliament, Vivekananda claimed that he "was proud to belong to a religion which had taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance" (Ziolkowski 1993: 221). Vivekananda's spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical, and proud. As the response in the parliament and in his further lecture tours in the United States indicate, this was a message that resonated powerfully among American audiences. His writings in English often compare the lack of spirituality in the West with

the abundance of it in India. Vivekananda is probably the first major Indian advocate of a “Hindu spirituality” and his Ramakrishna Mission, the first Hindu missionary movement, following principles set out in modern Protestant evangelism (van der Veer 1994).

Vivekananda’s construction of “spirituality” has had a major impact on Hindu nationalism of all forms, but also on global understandings of “spirituality.” Two major figures in the history of modern India were deeply influenced by Vivekananda’s ideas about spirituality: the great Indian political leader Mohandas Gandhi and the Noble Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore. The first developed the nationalist strand in the idea of spirituality while the second developed the international strand, both showing the extent to which the national and transnational are actually interwoven. They argued that the materialism of the West created warfare and colonial exploitation, while the spirituality of the East provided an alternative that would lead to world peace and equal prosperity for all. After the Second World War some of these ideas entered into the ideology of the Third Way, especially exemplified by the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Nonaligned Movement.

As in the West, Indian spirituality transcends institutionalized religion. It uses and transforms existing traditions, but goes beyond the authority of priestly lineages and monastic institutions. Gandhi used the ideas of Tolstoy, Ruskin, and Nordau concerning civilization, spirituality, and industry to transform the Hindu traditions in which he had been socialized. His political actions against the British colonial state were meant to pose a spiritual alternative to materialist exploitation. Since one of the biggest problems in the Indian subcontinent that continues today is the relation between Hindus and Muslims, a transcendence of religious difference in universal, all-embracing spirituality is of the utmost political significance. Interestingly, Gandhi found a way to tie this universalist spirituality to the nationalist project by arguing that since one was born in a particular tradition and civilization, one should not proselytize or convert. Instead, each person had to find the Truth in his or her own traditions. In this way Gandhi could argue

for a spiritual nation that transcended internal religious differences. It is clear that Gandhi's brand of spirituality found as many supporters as opponents. Within his own Hindu community, his assassins, inspired by a radical form of Hindu nationalism, argued that his spirituality was "foreign" and meant to emasculate the Hindu nation by bending over backwards in allowing privileges to Muslims. Regarding "foreignness" they had definitely a point, since spirituality was indeed a modern concept born out of the interaction between India and the West.

Although most students of Indian society would maintain that Gandhi was spiritual but not secular and that it was Nehru who was secular and not spiritual, I want to suggest in line with my general historical argument that Gandhi's spirituality was deeply entwined with secularism. He argued that all religions should be treated equally (*sarvadharmā samābhava*) and that the state should be neutral to them (*dharmanirapeksha*); these principles are still maintained in India and show continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial situation. One can indeed call this Indian secularism and often scholars and others argue that it is deeply rooted in India's spiritual civilization, citing the examples of the Buddhist ruler Ashoka or the Muslim ruler Akbar. Tolerance is often seen as an aspect of Indian civilization and thus connected to the idea of secular neutrality. I do not want to engage here in a critical discussion of these notions, but would like to point out how much also in Nehru's major book, *The Discovery of India*, it is this particular civilizationally or nationally inflected spirituality that is the basis of his nationalism and his rejection of Communism. It is also what motivated Nehru to coin the term *nonalignment* in 1954 and become a leader of the nonaligned world as an alternative to capitalism and communism (Nehru 1946).

One of the difficulties in Gandhi's all-embracing spirituality and rejection of conversion is that it does not easily allow exit as an option. The encompassment of religious and social difference within a hierarchical order has been a long-standing feature of the Indian caste system and exit through conversion had been at least an option under Muslim rule or under British rule. While it is clear that Gandhi rejected

the structure of purity and impurity underlying the caste system, his attempt to incorporate the Untouchables as *harijan*, “children of god,” fell far short of the revolution needed to change the discrimination of this large community in India. If, in Gandhi’s understanding, change of heart had to come from within a community rather than being imposed from outside, it is hard to see that his spirituality would be able to achieve this. The great Untouchable leader Ambedkar, one of the authors of the Indian constitution, was at first a great believer in the possibilities of reform through secular law, but became gradually disappointed about secular progress. He rejected Gandhi’s ideas about the possibilities of reform from within and the ensuing absence of a need for conversion. He converted to Buddhism, since he believed that Hindu traditions would always sustain deep inequality and that one could still be a nationalist by choosing a spiritual tradition from the Indian soil rather than converting to foreign religions like Islam or Christianity.

#### **4. ASIAN TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY**

Besides Gandhi, it is the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) whose understanding of spirituality has been very influential both within India and outside of it. Tagore was, however, deeply ambivalent, if not hostile toward “the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship” (Tagore 1916: 15). However, as the irony of history has it, today both India and Bangladesh use his poems as national anthems. Tagore was convinced that a unique spirituality unified Asia and in a series of lecture tours in Japan and China tried to persuade Chinese and Japanese intellectuals to create a pan-Asian movement toward a common Asian civilization. Crucial for the pan-Asian turn that Tagore’s Bengali spirituality took is his encounter with Kakuzo Okakura (1862-1913), a leading figure in the Japanese art scene, who in 1901 stayed a year with the Tagore family in Calcutta. In Japan, Okakura had established a national art school combining traditional art with modern techniques. Rabindranath was very interested in Okakura’s educational experiences, since he himself was starting an educational experiment in *Shantiniketan* (“Abode of

Peace”) outside of Calcutta. Okakura had been trained in art history in Japan by a Harvard graduate, Edward Fenollosa (1853-1908), who had taught him to have a new, basically Orientalist understanding of Japan’s religious and artistic traditions and brought him to Europe and America. While in Calcutta, Okakura wrote his first book in English, *The Ideals of the East* (1903), which opens with the famous line, “Asia is one.” Between 1904 and 1913, Okakura became the curator of the Japanese collection of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, which was (and still is) the greatest collection of Japanese art outside Japan. Like Vivekananda before him, Okakura was a great embodiment of Oriental spirituality in Boston.

After receiving the Noble Prize in 1913 and with the outbreak of World War I in Europe, Rabindranath Tagore felt that Asia should assume a role of spiritual leadership in the world. Three years after Okakura’s death, he visited Japan and was received by huge crowds with unbridled enthusiasm. At Tokyo Imperial University he delivered a speech on June 11, 1916, entitled, “The Message of India to Japan.” His major theme was the unity of Asia and the spiritual mission of Asia in the world. While Europe’s achievements are not denied, Tagore points at its great materialistic pursuit of self-interest and the need for the spiritual resources of a regenerated Asia. Japan had at that time already made the most successful transition to modernity and certainly not by rejecting material civilization. Not being colonized by Western powers but acutely feeling their backwardness, the Japanese Meiji reformers had embarked on a very ambitious adoption of Western science and technology, while creating a religious nationalism centering on the emperor. All Asian nations looked with awe at the Japanese model and especially the Chinese nationalists tried to adopt important elements from it. The Japanese also saw themselves very much as the leaders of Asia. What, then, did the Japanese make of Tagore’s claim of an Asian spirituality that transcended national boundaries?

While Japanese intellectuals accepted that there was a spiritual element in Japanese civilization, they tended to see it as a part of their



national heritage in a way very similar to followers of Vivekananda in India who interpreted Hindu spirituality as a part of religious nationalism. They also definitely liked Tagore's denunciation of Western imperialism, but rejected Tagore's denunciation of Japanese fledging imperialism. Tagore's attitude toward Japanese militant nationalism was explained as a sign of his membership of a defeated, colonized nation. His critics rightly saw that there was a contradiction between his rejection of Japanese militancy and his praise of Japanese spirituality of which that militancy was part and parcel. Tagore's and Gandhi's interpretation of Eastern spirituality as nonviolent ignored or rejected the militant aspects of Asia's religious traditions. In India this rejection led to an antagonism between Gandhi's pacifistic nationalism and the militant nationalism of Hindu radicals who ultimately murdered him. In Japan militancy was even more pronounced in the samurai traditions that became foundational to Japan's nationalism. When Japan attacked China, the correspondence between Tagore and his friend Yoneuo Noguchi, the Japanese poet, showed the extent to which pan-Asianism had become a slogan ("Asia for Asia") to justify Japanese imperialism (Tagore-Noguchi correspondence 1938).

In 1924, Tagore went to China. His reception in China resembled the one in Japan. At first there was great interest in this great poet from unknown India and in general he drew large audiences. But quickly his message of pan-Asian spirituality and the revival of ancient religious traditions in China were met with strong criticism—especially in Beijing, where there was considerable student activism. Tagore was received by Liang Qichao (1873-1929), one of China's most prominent nationalist intellectuals who supported Tagore throughout his visit, as well as by younger leading literary and intellectual figures like Hu Shih (1891-1962), who had studied at Columbia with John Dewey. Much of the opposition against Tagore was organized by Communist activists who painted Tagore as a traditionalist from a weak and defeated colonized nation. But more generally, the poet's visit was a failure because Chinese intellectuals had been leading a revolution against the Qing

Empire and the traditions that supported the ancient regime. They were too much inclined to reject the past in building a modern society to be able to accept Tagore's praise of ancient traditions.

The response to the imperial encounter in India and China is quite different. After the great Taiping and Boxer rebellions of the nineteenth century, Chinese nationalists decided that Chinese traditions were to be blamed for the backwardness of Chinese society and that in order to progress, China had to adopt Western materialism, based on science and secularism. In Chinese modern fiction of the first part of the twentieth century, there is a strong sense that China is a society not so much endowed with a spiritual heritage but afflicted with a spiritual disease (Goldman and Lee 2002: 142). Nevertheless, there are important currents of thought in China that attempt to recuperate some of the spiritual resources of the past and especially those of Buddhism and Confucianism. Someone like Liang Qichao, who was Tagore's host in the 1920s was in fact critical of the exclusive emphasis on science and rationality in the West and argued that the East was spiritual. In his foundational work on Chinese historiography he gradually replaced evolutionary history and chains of causality with the Buddhist notion of "interdependence" (*yinyuanjiebao*, 因缘捷报) (Schneider 2001: 8). While Liang rejected Confucianism as a model, others tried to develop a modern understanding of history as a sign of the nation by referring to Confucian social ethics as the "spirit of the nation" (*minzujingshen*, 民族精神). This form of neo-Confucianism as a kind of spiritual nationalism ultimately failed to take root in China, since it turned out to be too difficult to unmoor Confucianism from the now defunct imperial system and turn it into the civil religion of the modern nation-state (Kuo 2008).

## **5. ASIAN SPIRITUALITY TODAY**

With the victory of the Communists in 1949, historical materialism became the official ideology of the state, and spirituality was seen as an aspect of the feudalism of the past that had to be removed violently. Spirituality as a major term, however, kept coming up in cultural and

philosophical arguments in nationalist Taiwan and in the periphery of China, especially Hong Kong and Singapore. This is why the neo-Confucian intellectual Tu Wei-Ming, who teaches at Harvard University, emphasizes a role of leadership for Chinese intellectuals who live outside of China. In his view, the Chinese desire for material progress after the collapse of the Qing Empire led Chinese intellectuals to launch a frontal attack on Confucian spirituality that was seen to have caused China's decline. This successful attack on what Tu sees as the very spiritual essence of Chineseness had the marginalization of the Chinese intelligentsia as its unintended consequence.

It is only after the development of Deng Xiaoping's socialism with Chinese characteristics and especially under Jiang Zemin in the early nineties that Chinese intellectuals could again develop neo-Confucian spirituality both as the spirit of the nation and as a Chinese contribution to global humanism (Tu 2005; Tu and Tucker 2003; Tu and Tucker 2004).

The relative success of "spirituality" in India and its relative failure in China cannot merely be explained by the rise of communism in China. More deeply, it is the conviction that Chinese traditions had to be replaced by Western science that has characterized Chinese modernity long before the Communist takeover, while in India traditions were made into resources in the anti-imperialist struggle against a material modernization that culturally and politically subjected India to Western power. The distrust of material civilization was shared by both metropolitan and Indian intellectuals criticizing imperialism in a dialogue that was fed by the use of a common English language.

The wide span of worldviews and traditions that are bridged by the word spirituality ranges from American transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, to European abstract painters like Kandinsky and Mondrian, to neo-Confucian thinkers like Tu Wei-Ming, to political leaders like Gandhi. Boycotts and *satyagraha* can be seen as attempts to create bridges between radically different conceptual universes in order to create possibilities for nonviolence. At the same time it is important to realize that spirituality can also be

harnessed to a narrow vision of the spirit of the nation, as Tagore was well aware.

Spirituality is not quite the opposite of secularity or materiality. The aggressive secularism in China that attacked religion, destroying temples and their priests, simultaneously promised a transcendence of bodily limits and the coming of a socialist paradise. The charisma of Mao Zedong seemed hardly secular, but on the contrary rather close to that of the Son of Heaven. In India it was colonial rule that brought the legal and constitutional fiction of secular neutrality, but it was Gandhi who made that secular neutrality of the state into a feature of Indian spirituality. Today it is not only with the opening up of Indian and Chinese production and consumption that materialist consumption is enabled and grows, but also with the marketing of spirituality by entrepreneurs in yoga, taiji quan, qi gong, shaolin wushu.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the alignment with neoliberal capitalism is global business practices, in which spirituality is part of the training for more success in the marketplace as well as better living. A number of Indian spiritual leaders today have a following in secular business schools and IT companies. Their mediation techniques and emphasis on spiritual experience seems to fit well with the lifestyle and case-study-oriented intellectual style of young urban professionals. Experiential styles of spiritual life are central to what is presented as both an alternative to empty secular and religious life. From an outside perspective, however, it seems to allow people to pursue their secular goals in career and life within deeply disciplining institutions without being too stressed or depressed. Instead of challenging the nature of one's life, it leads to feeling comfortable with it from an experience of spirituality, however produced. In the postcolonial period it is really the liberalization of the Indian and Chinese economies under the impact of global capitalism that frees the energies of spiritual movements to organize civil society. This is very clear in the Chinese case, where liberalization first gives space to a spontaneous *qigong re* and later to the rise

of movements like Falun Gong that connect *qigong* to older ideas of a moral and political nature. In India one can see this especially in the rise of a Hindu nationalism that rejects an earlier secular and multicultural project of the state by emphasizing Hindu traditions as the basis of Indian civilization, thereby excluding other contributions by religious minorities. It is especially a newfangled urban religiosity that is both interested in yoga and in a strong nation that supports this kind of politics.

As we have seen, Indian spirituality has been formulated by Vivekananda during a trip to Chicago and has been further developed in constant interaction with the rest of the world. A political figure like Mahatma Gandhi fits seamlessly in this history. Since the 1970s and 1980s, highly educated members of the Indian middle class have migrated to the United States for medical and engineering jobs and have been confronted with an aggressive marketing of Indian spirituality in a market for health, for exercise, and for management practices. This, in turn, is brought back to India, where especially successful new movements, like the Bangalore-based Art of Living with Guru Ravi Ravi Shankar cater to a mobile, transnational class of business entrepreneurs. China's isolation between 1950 and 1980 has ensured a belated entry of Chinese spirituality on this market, but nevertheless it is quickly catching up with products like *taiji quan* and *qigong*. In the Chinese case there is a stronger connection with sports and especially martial arts, which are also promoted by Hong Kong and mainland movies. In both India and China one finds a similar appropriation of spiritual traditions to cater for the newly emerging middle classes. These newly manufactured spiritualities have a tenuous relationship with textual traditions, guarded by centers of learning and spiritual masters. They are creative in their response to new opportunities and anxieties produced by globalization and are, as such, comparable to Pentecostal and charismatic varieties of Christianity.

This new political deployment of spirituality is what is now considered to be "new age" or indeed a form of depoliticization. I hope

to have shown, however, that these understandings of spirituality as apolitical or even antipolitical obscure the fact that spirituality, as much as secularity, can be and has been deployed in radical struggles both in the East and in the West.

## NOTES

1. For an intellectual history of the Western concept of the “secular,” see Taylor (2007).

## REFERENCES

- Albanese, Catherine. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- . “Religion, Secular Identities, and European Integration.” *Transit* 27 (2004).
- Chadwick, Owen. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *The Global and Regional in China’s Nation-Formation*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel, ed. *Multiple Modernities*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2002.
- Girardot, Norman J. *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge’s Oriental Pilgrimage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Goldman, Merle, and Leo Ou-Fan Lee, eds. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Über das Geistige in der Kunsz*. Bern: Benteli, 1952 (1912).
- Kuo, Ya-Pei. “Redeploying Confucius: The Imperial State Dreams of the Nation, 1902-1911.” *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and*

- State Formation*. Ed. Mayfair Yang. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Nethercot, Arthur H. *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*. London: Hart-Davis, 1961.
- . *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*. London: Hart-Davis, 1963.
- Pels, Peter. "Spirits of Modernity Alfred Wallace, Edward Taylor, and the Visual Politics of Fact." *Magic and Modernity*. Eds. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Richards, I. A. *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*. Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1997 [1932].
- Schneider, Axel. "China and the Crisis of Modernity." Inaugural Lecture. Leiden University, Netherlands. 2001.
- Tagore-Noguchi correspondence on Japanese aggression, 1938. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts <[http://www.ignca.nic.in/ks\\_40042.htm](http://www.ignca.nic.in/ks_40042.htm)> <[http://www.ignca.nic.in/ks\\_40042.htm](http://www.ignca.nic.in/ks_40042.htm)>.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. New York: MacMillan, 1916.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Tu Wei-ming. "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center." *Daedalus* (Fall 2005): 145-167.
- Tu Wei-ming, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. *Confucian Spirituality*. Vols. 1 and 2. New York: Crossroads, 2003 and 2004.
- Tuchman, Maurice, ed. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986.
- van den Bosch, Lourens. *Friedrich Max Muller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*. Leiden: Brill 2002.
- van der Veer, Peter. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- . *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Ziolkowski, Eric, ed. *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993.