Lucy Rawlinson, who paints under her maiden name, is a dear old friend. A person with a profound spiritual sensibility, *Flying the Kite* captures the magic of expressive freedom; of harmony. Viewing Ingleborough from the farmhouse where she and her family used to live, not far from our own family home, the painting captures the ‘presence’ of nature as well. I’m sure Lucy would appreciate the words of the Lonsdale hermit – ‘To all blessed with true insight, he [‘the mere man of craggy limestone’] is nothing less than a real personality, a creature with a soul’. In the spirit of Lucy, a hermit who has rejected the clamour of life distorted by the lures of the capitalistic mainstream:

I often seek his quiet company and take advantage of his noble patience. How can I estimate in words or numbers the calm that he has breathed down upon me from his ancient heights when the stirring voices of the far away multitudes have broken through to my seclusion and tempted me from my loneliness into the thick of human conflict? Or how can I describe the benediction of contentment he has bestowed upon me when thoughts of foolish ambition and of the plaudits of crowds have risen to make me restless? He is a being full of speechfulness, full of experience, full of romance, full of history...a living influence. (H. M. White, 1904, *Old Ingleborough*. Ingleton: J. Brookes, pp. 6–7)
RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

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New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism

Paul Heelas
In memory of my teachers, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham and Ninian Smart, and my old friends, Malcolm Crick and Ursula Lister
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Preface

I was extremely fortunate to have been born in 1946. This has meant that I have witnessed, and in measure experienced, the unfolding of spiritualities of life from the time I came of age during that great ‘inner era’ known as the sixties. My awareness of what has come to be called the ‘New Age’ dawned whilst I was studying at Oxford. I was more a participant than an observer. Since moving to the Yorkshire Dales, I have also been fortunate to live so close to the homeland of the English Romantics, the Lake District. Students who I taught at Lancaster University during the later 1970s and the 1980s helped keep me abreast of developments: the way in which Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s movement sustained the ‘sixties’ after the decline of the counter-culture in the West (Thompson and Heelas, 1986), and the seminar spirituality which flourished at this time, thereby contributing to my research on ‘alternative spiritualities’ during the period. From 1997, I have been much preoccupied with what has come to be called the ‘Kendal Project’ – a project which has helped take me into the realm of wellbeing spirituality. During the last decade or so, I have also been studying spiritualities of life overseas – first Dacca, then Kampala, currently Islamabad and environs. All settings where ‘wellbeing’ is frequently a much more fundamental issue than in most western settings.

During this long period of looking at the New Age, I have had three experiences which will be with me until the day I die. In the spirit of Aldous Huxley, a trip to remoter realms whilst listening to the Pink Floyd during an open air festival; ‘participant’ observation of a 100 or so hour long Exegesis seminar; and a sudden realization concerning the significance of the term ‘life’ whilst waiting at Schiphol airport. Academically useful experiences – but not as useful as having had the fortune to live through the ‘working out’ of what Charles Taylor (1991) calls the ‘massive subjective turn of modern culture’ (p. 26): a turn which is very much bound up with the growth of subjective wellbeing culture, including wellbeing spirituality.

This book completes a trilogy with Blackwell Publishing on the topic of alternative spiritualities. The first volume, The New Age Movement, was
published in 1996. Much of it dwelt on seminar spirituality, studied during the 1980s. The second volume, co-authored with Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, was published in 2005. It contains a fair amount on the wellbeing spirituality which has become increasingly popular since the early 1990s. Neither of these two volumes was of an especially ‘evaluative’ nature; and neither paid much attention to the matter of consumption. Attending to these matters, *Spiritualities of Life* is significantly different from what has gone before. Furthermore, account has had to be taken of the consideration that the key word has ever more become ‘life’, in measure supplanting ‘self’. I have also felt that it is now time to spread my wings, to turn more controversial.

Consumption, it is often said, dominates life. Subjective wellbeing culture – in the form of shopping to satisfy desire – is widely held to be a primary, perhaps the primary, exemplification of consumer culture. My interest in consumption derives from the consideration that New Age spiritualities of life have come to make their mark within various realms of the culture of subjective wellbeing. Accordingly, much of what follows is a critical assessment, written through the lens of consumption.

During the heyday of the Lancaster University Centre for the Study of Cultural Values, the early 1990s were devoted to the interdisciplinary study of aspects of consumer society and selfhood. Edited by Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley and Nicholas Abercrombie, *The Authority of the Consumer* (1994) was perhaps the most significant outcome. The volume explores an apparently radical shift of authority, away from the provider or producer, towards the recipient or consumer. Judging the value and meaning of the activities involved in this shift, judging the character of the social relations at stake, the volume contributes to the debate between those who decry the commercialization, populism and loss of integrity associated with the apparent shift of authority, and those who commend the shift on the grounds of its anti-elitism, empowerment and democratization. Stimulated by the intellectual creativity of the Centre for the Study of Cultural Values, I tried my hand at writing an essay – ‘The Limits of Consumption and the Post-modern “Religion” of the New Age’ – which appeared in *The Authority of the Consumer*. The buzz of the time, however, was rather overwhelming. As a consequence, the essay left me with a series of questions: questions which have been nagging me ever since; questions which are now tackled to the best of my ability.

Profound thanks are due to the inspiration of the ‘core’ team of the Centre during the early 1990s, Nicholas Abercrombie, Russell Keat, Scott Lash, Celia Lury, Paul Morris, John Urry and Nigel Whiteley. More recently, I owe a great deal to conversations and correspondence with Colin Campbell – whose writings on consumer culture and spirituality are surely of the highest order. Steve Bruce – the Gordon Brown of the social scientific assembly north of the Border – has been as invaluable as ever, his no-nonsense arguments providing the perfect foil to what I hope are equally effective
counter-arguments. My wife, Mia Haglund Heelas, has been even more invaluable. Having experienced holistic activities, she emphatically outdoes Steve Bruce on the forthrightness front: simply consumeristic, ineffectual, money-making ‘nonsense’, as she recently concluded after staying in that hotbed of holistic activities, Bangkok. Discussion with the National Cancer Research Institute’s Psychosocial Oncology Spirituality Subgroup has proved exceptionally helpful, as have detailed comments provided by one of the readers of the manuscript of the present volume and the first-rate copy-editor, Jack Messenger. I also greatly appreciate insights provided by my daughter, Elissa Standen, friends and colleagues Dick Houtman, Gordon Lynch, Stefania Palmisano, Elizabeth Walton and Scott Taylor, and – as ever – my students, some of whom are referred to in what follows. A great debt is owed to Steve and Zeba Rasmussen, guides par excellence in Pakistan. At Lancaster University, I must acknowledge my gratitude to colleagues and personal friends Gavin Hyman and Deborah Sawyer for having helped keep me sane during a most difficult time at work, a time when I also benefitted from close friends Bobby and Besty Ben, and GP Bill Hall. Born in the sacred city of Kanchipuram, our 12-year-old son, Sebastian Heelas, has been of great significance: not only by being so patient whilst I have worked away in Islamabad, but also for being such an enthusiastic student of culture, stimulating my concern for inner-life universalism and freedom, and for telling me more about the slogans of wellbeing culture.

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What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason!
how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how
express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in
apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world!
the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this
quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor
women neither…(Hamlet, Act II, Sc. II)

It is in reverence for life that knowledge passes over
into experience…My life bears its meaning in itself.
And this meaning is found in living out the highest
and most worthy idea which my will-to-live can
furnish…the idea of reverence for life. Henceforth I
attribute real value to my own life and to all the
will-to-live which surrounds me; I cling to an activist
way of life and I create real values. (Albert Schweitzer,
1966, p. 261)
Like the ocean is your god-self;
It remains for ever undefiled.
And like the ether it lifts but the winged.
Even the sun is your god-self;
It knows not the ways of the mole nor seeks it
the holes of the serpent.
But your god-self dwells not alone in your being . . .
He who defines his conduct by ethics
imprisons his song-bird in a cage.
(Kahlil Gibran, 1976, pp. 46, 90)

. . . an . . . explosion in cultural consciousness – the
fusion of people not with one another, but with
material. Modernism has done much to unseat the
humanist tradition . . . The demise of romanticism
. . . (Kenneth J. Gergen, 2000, pp. xix, 227)

He who knows only his own side of the case knows
little of that. (John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, 1859)
Introduction

Of all conceivable forms of enlightenment the worst is what . . . people call the Inner Light. Of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within . . . That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones . . . The mere pursuit of health always leads to something unhealthy. (G. K. Chesterton, 1909, pp. 136, 138)

I believe that art therapy saved my life by giving me the opportunity to get in touch with my authentic self. This part of me is now allowed to have a life. The part that existed before was a highly developed false self . . . [Art therapy] was a process of gathering – my grief, my desolate childhood, my feminine qualities, divinity. They were brought to my centre, later I mixed with a pulse of light and leaps of joy. (Julie, with breast cancer, cited by Connell, 2001, p. 105)

. . . a spiritual stew. (Christopher Lasch, 1987, p. 80)

All life is sacred, interdependent and growing to fulfil its potential. Love, Support and Protect all beings.


There’s only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving and that’s your own self. (Aldous Huxley, Time Must Have a Stop, 1944)

Surprisingly, a recent survey finds that 37 per cent of the British sample agree with the statement, ‘I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there’. Whatever might be made of this – and some will express disbelief – the finding serves to direct attention to inner forms of the sacred. More specifically, it serves to direct attention to looking at spirituality within life. Not the life of a transcendent theistic God, but the life embedded within the here and now. A life, it is said, which can only make a ‘true’ difference when it is experienced by the self. And a life which
is very much to do with the free expression, and thus development, of what it is to be ‘truly’ human. Such is the subject matter of this volume. So to the big question of the volume: what, if any, are the capacities of New Age spiritualities of life to make a positive difference to individual, social or cultural life?

The significance of this question derives from the nature of modernity. In the contemporary west, powerful forces are at work. Life is becoming ever more regulated by legal, quasi-legal or economically justified procedures, rules, systems. David Boyle (2000) writes of ‘the tyranny of numbers’. As has frequently been argued, the sacrifices to be paid for the positivistic rule of reason are considerable. The freedom of the expressive self to live ‘out’ its own life by exercising experimentation is stifled. The affect/ive is disempowered. Quality of life suffers by virtue of the stresses generated by the culture of targets. The instrumentalization of relationships for the sake of economic utility threatens the integrity and possibilities of personal relationships, not least ‘being trusting’. Spontaneity – well! It might well seem that life is becoming more and more akin to the antlike life of Dubai, that most capitalistic of places, with money, security, comfort, wellbeing galore for the better off, but with a deep, boring vacuum when it comes to self-expression, creativity, that great Romantic theme of learning through ‘bitter’ experience. From atop a skyscraper in Dubai, the flow of gleaming Mercedes revolving around the gleaming malls really does look like a series of columns, manifesting those perquisites for control – barren purity, officiated mundanity and self-mendacity.

Human flourishing is at stake. And I have to admit that as a libertarian humanist, with a liberal Quaker background, I look with horror at the ways in which life is becoming ever more restricted. The expressive self undergoing the suffocating squeeze. The ability of modernity to ‘kill the spirit’, as Kieran Flanagan (2007, p. 1) puts it. What makes things worse is that the value of expressivistic-cum-humanistic values is increased in the face of opposition. The possibility of becoming institutionalized aside, one never values freedom so much as when one is in prison. Analogously, one never values ‘human’ aspects of life – time to ponder, the opportunity to be oneself, the possibility of living as a free spirit – so much as when one feels oneself under the systems of capitalistic or quasi-capitalistic modernity; the experiences of engulfment, of invasion; the sense of the doors clanging shut to exclude ‘life’. What provides hope, though, is that by enhancing the value of the values it excludes, capitalism fuels its own opposition. Furthermore, without capitalism or similar ‘spanners in the works’, values like freedom and equality would presumably lose their significance: now on the grounds that to be free and equal all the time means that freedom and equality cease to matter. (A reason, incidentally, why the utopian is ‘nowhere’.)

Emphasizing autonomous expressivity, emphasizing the ‘unbounded self’ (Wexler, 2000, p. 2), New Age spiritualities of life appear to be opposed
to the restrictive, the regulatory, those impositions of external sources of authority which are served by formal rules and regulations. So to the political dimension of this volume. Quite simply, are New Age spiritualities of life up to the task of responding to the ‘iron cages’ so widespread within mainstream society and culture, with their strongly positivistic, that is measurable and ‘narrow’, criteria of what it is be a ‘successful’ human? Do we find significant responses to what Guy Debord (1995, p. 26) calls ‘the world of the spectacle’, ‘the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience’? Do we find a form of the sacrality of the ‘bare life’ able to resist the sociocultural inscriptions explored in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998)? In the spirit of Richard Sennett (2008), do we find ‘crafts of life’, cultivating human flourishing, ‘making’ it happen, in the face of mainstream forces as they move ever closer to the deeply pessimistic appraisal of modernity provided by Weber in the closing pages of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1985)? Do we find a counter-balance to the fact that life is ever more threatened by the ever-increasing ability of capitalist, quasi-capitalist and other organizations (including state education) to implement the idea that a (variously) specialized, boxed or bounded self is the prerequisite for remunerative progress?

A great deal hangs on the extent to which New Age spiritualities of life are privatized or consumerized. The common assumption among academics is that the internalized authority which is such a pronounced feature of New Age understanding is used to consume. Here we find ‘the self for itself’. Here we find intake for the sake of what it brings to what lies within. Here we find those ‘living a life turned in on itself where people ignore the consequences of their actions’, as the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, puts it in a succinct formulation (Leake, 2006, p. 1). Here we find people intent on capturing their dreams by way of commodities.

If autonomy is exercised to consume in a self-absorbing fashion, the response to positivistic iron-cage tendencies is going to be minimal, if not non-existent. If Zygmunt Bauman is right with the theme of his book, *Consuming Life* (2007), life is used up, engorged, for the sake of capitalistic consumer culture. New Age spiritualities of life are an integral tool of capitalism. If all those who treat New Age spiritualities of life as a form of junk capitalism – providing tacky forms of ‘interior decoration’, handling the suffocating squeeze by contributing to the great engorgement – are right, their ‘revolutionary’ capacity is obviously zilch.

Alternatively, the argument is that ‘life’ is ‘consumed’ and ‘consuming’. From this perspective, inner-life spirituality is drawn upon, that is ‘consumed’ in the sense of ‘used’ and put to work, to cultivate what it is to be alive. To explore what it is to live beyond the narrow horizons of that utilitarian individualism which focuses the self on the quantifiable externals of life. And at least for some, inner-life spirituality takes one over (that is, is ‘consuming’). Rather than the emphasis lying with the ‘good life’ of