

## Spirituality and the Rebranding of Religion

# Introduction

God is dead but has been resurrected as ‘Capital’.

From feng shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus, spirituality is big business. There has been an explosion of interest and popular literature on mind, body and spirit and ‘personal development’. We now see the introduction of modes of ‘spirituality’ into educational curricula, bereavement and addiction counselling, psychotherapy and nursing. Spirituality as a cultural trope has also been appropriated by corporate bodies and management consultants to promote efficiency, extend markets and maintain a leading edge in a fast-moving information economy. For many people, spirituality has replaced religion as old allegiances and social identities are transformed by modernity. However, in a context of individualism and erosion of traditional community allegiances, ‘spirituality’ has become a new cultural addiction and a claimed panacea for the angst of modern living. Spirituality is celebrated by those who are disillusioned by traditional institutional religions and seen as a force for wholeness, healing and inner transformation. In this sense spirituality is taken to denote the positive aspects of the ancient religious traditions, unencumbered by the ‘dead hand’ of the Church, and yet something which provides a liberation and solace in an otherwise meaningless world. But is this emergence of the idea of spirituality all that it seems? Is something more complex and suspicious at work in the glorification of the spiritual?

To contest some of the dominant readings of ‘spirituality’ within western societies and their silencing of traditions will require some examination of how these discourses operate in the contemporary socio-economic world. This book emerges from a frustration with the lack of clarity and critical discussion of the concept of spirituality, a notion that has become pervasive in contemporary society in the

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consciousness of its advocates and its detractors. The concept therefore represents on the one hand all that is banal and vague about New Age religiosity, while on the other signifying a transcendent quality, enhancing life and distilling all that is positive from the ‘ageing and outdated’ casks of traditional religious institutions.

This book attempts to uncover what amounts to a silent takeover of ‘the religious’ by contemporary capitalist ideologies by means of the increasingly popular discourse of ‘spirituality’. We seek to challenge the contemporary use of this concept as a means of reflecting and supporting social and economic policies geared towards the neo-liberal ideals of privatisation and corporatisation, applied increasingly to all spheres of human life.

## QUESTIONING MODERN SPIRITUALITY

## What is neoliberalism and what exactly does it have to do with spirituality?

Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time – it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximise their personal profit. Associated initially with Reagan and Thatcher, neoliberalism has for the past two decades been the dominant global political economic trend adopted by political parties of the center, much of the traditional left, and the right. These parties and the policies they enact represent the immediate interests of extremely wealthy investors and less than one thousand large corporations.

(McChesney, 1999: 8)

For many, spirituality would seem to have little to do with questions of economics and politics. The roots of this modern attitude go back to eighteenth century European thought (the Enlightenment), where the underlying principles of liberalism were born. In challenging the traditional social, moral and philosophical authority of the Church, European intellectuals sought to establish a framework for society and politics that avoided the religious conflicts of previous centuries. The solution, outlined most notably by philosophers such as John

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Locke, was to relegate the religious to the private sphere of life – to clearly demarcate it from the public realms of politics, science and philosophy.

The Enlightenment is also a period characterised by attempts to define the specificity of these different aspects of cultural life. This led to an intellectual obsession with defining the precise characteristics of religion (a preoccupation that continues to this day). This is a misleading enterprise because it takes conceptual distinctions with a specific history of their own and treats them as if they are features of the world rather than of a culturally specific way of understanding it. It is clear for instance that it makes little sense to draw a sharp distinction between the secular (politics, economics, science, philosophy) and the religious dimensions of human life in any other culture than those conditioned by modern liberalism and the European Enlightenment philosophies of the eighteenth century. We should also make our position on this question clear from the start: *There is no essence or definitive meaning to terms like spirituality or religion.* The attraction of defining an essence is that it clearly demarcates a field for the purposes of analysis. Such a move, however, leaves the impression that spirituality is some- how *really* divorced from other spheres of human life such as economics, culture and politics. The desire to attribute a universal essence to the meaning of spirituality also ignores the historical and cultural traces and differences in the uses of the term. Searching for an over- arching definition of ‘spirituality’ only ends up missing the specific historical location of each use of the term. There is no view from nowhere – no Archimedian point outside of history – from which one could determine a fixed and universal meaning for the term ‘spirituality’.

This book seeks to shift debate about religion and spirituality away from a misleading emphasis upon truth and authenticity (‘What counts as real spirituality?’) towards a consideration of the socio- political consequences of such claims (‘Who benefits from particular constructions of “spirituality”?’). Our approach is to pay attention, following William James, to the ‘fruits not the

roots' of contemporary uses of the term. What are the socio-political *effects* of the decision to classify specific practices or philosophies as 'spiritual' and who

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benefits from such constructions? However, where we differ from James – a primary exponent of a psychological definition of religious experience – is in wishing to displace the individualisation of the spiritual, since it is precisely this which has allowed consumerist and capitalist spiritualities to emerge in the late twentieth century.

There are two features of this relatively new phenomenon that we seek to contest. First, we wish to challenge constructions of spirituality that promote the subsuming of the ethical and the religious in terms of an overriding economic agenda. We do not do this out of some attempt to privilege some pure realm known as 'the religious' or 'the spiritual' and separate it from apparently 'worldly' concerns. In our view there is no distinct realm known as 'the religious' that exists in isolation from the social, political and economic world (King, 1999a; Carrette, 2000). This is not to reduce 'the religious' out of existence but to refuse to isolate it from those other dimensions of human life (except for the purposes of analysis). There may be no pure *homo religiosus* but there is also no *homo oeconomicus*, despite the increasing dominance of the economic as an apparent indicator of fundamental human motivation and action.

Those traditions classified as 'religions' in the modern consciousness have always been bound up with economics and modes of exchange. However, a fundamental ground shift has taken place in American and British culture in the last twenty years, related to the deregulation of the markets by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and this is changing the relationship of cultural forms to the market. With the development of organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the emergence of neoliberalism as the dominant economic ideology of our time, this cultural and political shift has already gone global. With the emergence of capitalist spirituality we are seeing an attempted takeover by a specific economic agenda of the cultural space traditionally inhabited by 'the religions'. Entering public institutions that provide education, health-care and professional expertise within society as a whole, the ideologies of consumerism and business enterprise are now infiltrating more and more aspects of our lives. The result of this shift has been an erasure of the wider social and ethical concerns associated with

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religious traditions and communities and the subordination of 'the religious' and the ethical to the realm of economics, which is now rapidly replacing science (just as science replaced theology in a previous era), as the dominant mode of authoritative discourse within society.

This represents the second feature of dominant conceptions of spirituality that we wish to challenge and this is their essentially accommodationist orientation. In a sense, the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough. They promote

accommodation to the social, economic and political mores of the day and provide little in terms of a

challenge to the status quo or to a lifestyle of self-interest and ubiquitous consumption.

One response to the emergence of capitalist spirituality might be to argue that this is not ‘true’ or real spirituality. Such a move would imply that there is something easily identifiable as ‘spiritual’ in the world that would correspond to the real or proper usage of the term. In any case, whose construction of the term are we to take as the normative standard by which all others are to be judged? Rather, we wish to challenge the individualist and corporatist *monopoly* of the term spirituality and the cultural space that this demarcates at the beginning of the twenty-first century for the promotion of the values of consumerism and corporate capitalism. We do this, not because we wish to appeal to some kind of ancient ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ spirituality to which they do not conform (as if that or any definition could encompass the historical phenomena captured by the diverse uses of the term ‘spirituality’), but rather to open up a contested space that will allow alternative, more socially engaged, constructions of the term to express themselves.

What is being sold to us as radical, trendy and transformative spirituality in fact produces little in the way of a significant change in one’s lifestyle or fundamental behaviour patterns (with the possible exception of motivating the individual to be more efficient

‘The danger is that religion could become no more than a service sector to the global civilization, no longer shaping its values but merely repairing the spiritual damage it inflicts.’

Harvey Cox, ‘Christianity’, in Mark Juergensmeyer (ed.), *Global Religions: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 24.

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and productive at work). By ‘cornering the market’ on spirituality, such trends actually limit the socially transformative dimensions of the religious perspectives that they draw upon by locating ‘the spiritual’ firmly within a privatised and conformist space. Sadly, not only have the primary exponents of ‘the spiritual’ generally failed to address this issue, but academic commentators upon these new forms of spirituality, even when noticing such trends, have generally preferred the language of so-called ‘neutral description’ rather than that of cultural critique. Most have emphasised the 1960s and 1970s context, and ignored the spread of market ideology within culture in the 1980s and 1990s. What we have seen emerge in the last few decades of the twentieth century has been a form of ‘New Age Capitalism’ (Lau, 2000) and it offers a fundamental challenge to our global cultural heritage that it is in the process of colonising.

## CULTURE AS NETWORK: SOCIAL PATTERNS AND

### THOUGHT-CONTROL

As critics such as Karl Marx pointed out long ago, those traditions that we now classify as ‘religions’ (but which in the past simply amounted to the dominant cosmologies and civilisations of their time), have always provided a means of controlling the thought-processes of people, if only because of their ideologically privileged position within society. To apply Marx’s critical eye to the religions, but then to fail to observe the development of new institutions of thought-control in so-called modern ‘secular’ societies, is to take our eyes off the ball and become too attached to Marx’s emphasis upon

‘the religions’ as opiates of the masses. To follow Marx in his analysis is to go beyond him (Maduro, 1977). The rise of capitalist spirituality is a manifestation of a wider process of cultural shifts (and forms of ‘thought-control’), linked to what Noam Chomsky has called ‘the control of the public mind’, and is associated with the rise of new institutions and dominant ideologies within society. The most striking feature of our brave new world is the emergence of large multinational corporations (many of which are economically more powerful than most nation-states), and the rise in the 1990s

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of an economic orthodoxy within the post-war Bretton Woods institutions (such as the IMF and the World Bank) that sought to extend the Thatcherite/Reaganite agendas but on a global scale. The so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ that has emerged, consolidated by the establishment of unelected organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO, founded in 1995), remains intent upon promoting a global deregulation of markets (euphemistically called ‘free trade’), an ideology of unfettered global consumption (‘continued economic growth’) and the privatisation of public assets and services (‘ending state-owned monopolies’; ‘introducing market competitiveness and business efficiency to health, education, transport, media, etc.’).

In the political, cultural and ideological space evacuated by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a triumphalist form of corporate capitalism has emerged with a new cadre of powerful leaders and institutions seeking to promote its spread. The new economic and political orthodoxy in this emerging world order is known as neoliberalism and it puts profits before people, promotes privatisation of public utilities, services and resources, and is in the process of eroding many of the individual civil liberties that were established under its forerunner – political liberalism. The rights once given to individuals and enshrined in historic documents like the American Bills of Rights and the French Declaration of Human Rights (1789) are now being displaced by an ideology that sees everything (and we mean *everything*) as a commodity that can be bought and sold and which promotes corporate rights over respect for individual and community rights. Recently, for instance, in response to a legal challenge to the alleged mendacity of their own publicity about workers’ conditions, we have seen Nike argue in US courts that the American right to free speech applies to corporations as much as to individuals and that they

Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations; only 49 are countries.

While the sales of the Top 200 corporations are the equivalent of 27.5% of world economic activity, they employ only 0.78% of the world’s workforce.

The Top 200's combined sales are 18 times the size of the combined annual income of the 1.2 billion people (24% of the total world population) living in 'severe' poverty.

Report of the Institute of Policy Studies, New York, 2000.

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have the right to express their own views about themselves (*Guardian*, 23 June 2003). Similarly, in 2004 we find 'yoga entrepreneurs' such as Bikram Choudhury, a former weightlifter based in Los Angeles, asserting copyright ownership of a set of yoga postures. According to the the *Guardian*:

Mr Choudhury has sent letters to more than 100 Bikram yoga schools and teachers, accusing them of violating his copyright and trademark by deviating from his strict teachings and employing instructors who were not trained by him. In response, a collective of US yoga teachers are suing Mr Choudhury in a San Francisco federal court, arguing that his copyright and trademark claims are unenforceable, because his teachings draw on postures that have been in public use for centuries. 'No one can own a style of yoga,' James Harrison, a lawyer for the collective said.

(*Guardian*, 9 February 2004)

In response to creeping marketisation and the emergence of neo-liberalism as the dominant ideology of globalisation in our era we have seen the rise of a coalition of groups, of various shades and creeds, that have been labelled variously as 'anti-capitalist', 'anti-globalisation' or, to use the French expression, 'alter-mondialiste'. Despite their great diversity, what tends to unite these movements is their resistance to the spread of neoliberal ideology, as summed up in the slogan: 'The World Is Not For Sale'. Whereas twentieth-century politics was dominated by competition between 'the Left' and 'the Right', it is likely that the twenty-first century will bring new reconfigurations that will emerge from this tension between corporate-driven globalisation and community-driven internationalism. As Leslie Sklair (2002: 277) notes,

the real distinction [is] between diametrically opposed beliefs based on entirely different conceptions of the satisfaction of human needs, between the quest for the good life promoted by capitalist globalization and the quest for the good society at the base of the radical alternatives to capitalist globalization. This is one of the central issues around which the embryonic anti-globalization movement is coming

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Of course, as the conservative American commentator Thomas Friedman (2000: 164) admits, the world of business cannot flourish without the support of the state and the military in particular:

The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. Markets function and flourish only when property rights are secured and can be enforced, which in turn requires a political framework protected and backed by military power . . . Indeed, McDonalds cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the US Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

Military force of course is not enough to impose any belief-system or ideology upon a population. One also needs, as Chomsky reminds us, to 'manufacture consent' and encourage complicity, whether consciously or unwittingly, among key institutions and groups within society. This requires

the involvement of educational institutions, communications and media providers and a whole host of professional organisations (representing ‘authoritative knowledge’ and ‘specialist expertise’) to mould public perceptions of reality. It is in this broader context that we would like to explore within this book the ways in which professional organisations (education, health-care, counselling, business) within western societies have become increasingly interested in the notion of ‘spirituality’.

In the democratic system, the necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means . . . Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very

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condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns.

(Chomsky, 1989: 48)

How exactly do ideas control people?

In order to understand how we see

‘spirituality’ in general functioning as a

political and economic concept, it is

necessary to move beyond mainstream

ways of thinking about religious ideas –

ideas that we have been taught in our schools and universities and through the media. Culture is a dynamic network of relations that can never be adequately represented by fixed categories such as ‘religion’, ‘politics’, ‘economics’, etc., even though people often use these terms as if they refer to distinct spheres of human life. For analytic purposes such distinctions can be useful in order to separate out aspects of intricate cultural phenomena from the wider cultural network in which they operate. We should not be fooled however into believing that these abstractions somehow directly mirror the complexity of culture itself. When we use terms like ‘religion’, ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ the impression can be created that these are autonomous realms of human cultural experience, which bear little or no relation to each other. In reality, of course, all of these dimensions of human life form a complex network of relations. We are led to compartmentalise in this way partly because modern liberalism (deriving from the Enlightenment) has encouraged us to fear the mixture of politics and religion and promoted in its place a model of the modern secular state where religion is safely kept at the margins of society or in the minds of its individual members. As a result, we are peculiarly predisposed to see religion, economics and politics as separate domains of the social world. Any detailed analysis of human history will soon demonstrate, however, that this is a gross over-simplification.

We are all predisposed to see the world according to a set of inherited cultural habits, embodied practices and thought forms (what Bourdieu called ‘habitus’). Patterns of thinking emerge in the

‘The most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.’

Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs, Rand Press, 1996.

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social world that prevent people from seeing both the interconnections of culture and power and also the ability of ideas to disrupt and challenge the established order. Moreover, most of us, even if at times reluctantly and with considerable cynicism, tend to accept the picture of the social world presented to us by the mass media, the state apparatus and our educational systems, because we are simply trying to cope with the everyday struggles of life. As Robert Bellah notes in *The Good Society* (1992), there is widespread disillusionment within contemporary western societies and a growing sense of disempowerment with regard to the operations of the major institutions that govern our lives. Moreover, he argues, the rugged individualism of the new market-oriented society encourages citizens to lose themselves in private pursuits and pleasures, allowing the major institutions of government and the economy to operate ‘over our heads’ without proper democratic accountability.

Since humans have a basic need for security and a sense of certainty about how the world is constructed, it is often easier to accept the picture of the world given to us rather than to question it. Too much questioning and change can cause anxiety. Often it is only when the basic ‘comfort zone’ of living is threatened, as in the face of oppression, poverty or perceived danger, that people start to protest. This reluctance to question how we think and to challenge basic assumptions means that powerful institutions are able to take the initiative in influencing and shaping the world and our conception of it.

In order to appreciate the critique offered in this book, one is required to accept two basic principles: first, that how we think is formed through interaction with the social world and its institutions; and, second, that power is exercised by a network of institutions, with the aim of directing the flow of information and shaping public perceptions of what counts as truth. In this way, members of society are conditioned – socialised is the polite word for it – to see the world in a particular way. This is what Chomsky calls ‘manufacturing consent’, that is the setting of limits on the very possibility of thinking. In the pre-modern period, much of this ‘thought-control’ at the social level was exerted by institutions such as the Church. With the

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emergence of the nation-state in the modern period much of the burden for conditioning the masses passed from religious institutions to state institutions through the establishment of national education systems, social welfare structures, parliament, the legislature and the various media of communication. In a contemporary context we are seeing the emergence of what Philip Bobbitt (2002) has called the ‘market-state’.

Whereas the nation-state, with its mass free public education, universal franchise, and social security policies, promised to guarantee the welfare of the nation, the market-state promises instead to maximise the opportunity of the people and thus tends to privatise many state activities and to make voting and representative government less influential and more responsive to the market.



(Bobbitt, 2002: 211)

Power again is shifting (as it always does). This time, however, the institutions increasingly exerting their influence upon us are multi-national corporations, big business and the mass media (increasingly owned by those same corporations). In all cases throughout history such institutional control has resulted in various forms of resistance. Knowledge is always political and power always produces resistance.

We are never obliged to accept the dominant version of reality (however conceived throughout history) without question. As human beings we are able to challenge regimes of thought-control, but only if we become aware of them, and of the possibility of alternatives. The social world is a fermentation of attitudes and practices produced from the interaction of multiple forces that thereby constitute the social space. Information and ideas are transmitted through this social world via institutions and their public apparatus. Political, legal, educational, financial, religious and media institutions attempt to define 'truth' and inform the values through which people understand the world. These ideas and values are, of course, pushed and shaped in various ways through complex processes of social interaction. This can involve the rejection, acceptance and/or transformation of these ideas as humans live through the celebrations and struggles of being members of society. Once ideas enter the public

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domain they are subject to appropriation, reinterpretation and contestation by other cultural agents.

In a contemporary context the ideas and values of any given society are also subject to a series of negotiations on a global level by contact with other cultural values and ideas. The explosion of information and ideas on the internet, for example, is such that the transfer of ideas, and even money, can no longer be controlled by any single institution or nation-state. If we are now moving into a world that moves beyond the traditional boundaries of the nation-state, the rapid spread of information technology is presenting us with a new knowledge-based economy. In the new 'information age' ideas become even more important as forces of economic change and resistance. It is important to realise that change is always possible.

Domestic and international actors reproduce or alter systems through their actions. Any given international system does not exist because of immutable structures, but rather the very structures are dependent for their reproduction on the practices of the actors. Fundamental change of the international system occurs when actors, through their practices, change the rules and norms constitutive of international interaction.

(Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994: 15)

### **THE TWO PHASES IN THE PRIVATISATION OF RELIGION**

It is often recognised that, since the Enlightenment, 'religion' has been subjected to an erosion of its social authority with the rise of scientific

rationalism, humanism and modern, liberal democratic models of the nation-state (a process often called secularisation). In modern western societies, to varying degrees, this has usually manifested itself as the relegation of 'the religious' to the private sphere. What has not been sufficiently appreciated by contemporary social theorists, however, is that the later stages of this process have become intimately intertwined with the global spread of corporate

'God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to van- quish his shadow, too.'

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882/1887], Vintage, 1974, p. 167.

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capitalism. We can describe both of these trends as the privatisation of religion, but in two distinct senses. In the first instance, the European Enlightenment led to an increased tendency to exclude religious dis- course from the public domain of politics, economics and science. In the main this was achieved by representing 'the religious' primarily in terms of individual choice, beliefs and private states of mind. For philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant, it was important to demarcate the precise domain in which religion should be located, in order to preserve the secular space of liberal political governance from the conflicts, intolerance and violence arising from the conflict between competing religious ideologies and groups within European societies. Religion in this context becomes a matter of personal assent to a set of beliefs, a matter of the private state of mind or personal orientation of the individual citizen in the terms set out for it by modern (i.e. Enlightenment-inspired) liberalism. A consequence of this approach is that, in different ways and variegated forms, religion has been formally separated from the business of statecraft in contemporary Northern European societies (though with different inflec- tions and degrees of smoothness). We can call this process the *indi- vidualisation* of religion.

This cultural shift has allowed a much greater degree of individual experimentation and freedom to explore religious alternatives and has been crucial in the development, for instance, of the melting- pot of religions and spiritualities that is often called the 'New Age'. The individualisation of religious sensibilities, however, has caused some to worry about the erosion of a sense of community and com- passion for others in modern societies. These concerns are picked up by leading religious figures, such as the current Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who argued in his 2002 Richard Dimbleby Lecture that

the future of modern liberal democracies] depends heavily on those perspectives that are offered by religious belief. In the pre-modern period, religion sanctioned the social order; in the modern period it was a potential rival to be pushed to the edges, a natural reaction. But are we at the point where as the 'public sphere' becomes more value-

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free, the very survival of the idea of public sphere, a realm of political argument about vision and education, is going to demand that we take religion a good deal more seriously

However, there are problems with Williams's understanding of 'religion'. It is already the case that the 'religious' is seeping into the public domain of modern secular societies. First, this is occurring in the commodification of religion as spirituality – a trend that this book seeks to address. Second, it has entered the twenty-first century public discourse of western nations in a violent way through the appropriation of 'Islam' by certain radical groups from the Middle East and South Asia. Moreover, Williams does not express an awareness of the problems in deciding what exactly counts as a 'religion'. The secular space of modernity, that which is deemed to exclude the religious, is itself a product of a particular 'religious' history (that of European Christianity) and the Enlightenment reaction to it. It is also far from clear that one can map the 'secular-religious' division onto non-western cultures without severe distortion occurring (King, 1999a). Nevertheless, we agree with Williams in his view that the traditional perspectives and ethical orientations of the 'religious traditions' are essential for the very preservation of the values of tolerance and respect that secularism and liberalism sought to preserve in the initial attempt to exclude the religious from the public domain.

In the late twentieth century, however, there has been a second form of privatisation that has taken place. It partially builds upon the previous process, but also has important discontinuities with it. It can be characterised as a wholesale *commodification* of religion, that is the selling-off of religious buildings, ideas and claims to authenticity in service to individual/corporate profit and the promotion of a particular worldview and mode of life, namely corporate capitalism. Let us imagine that 'religion' in all its forms is a company that is facing a takeover bid from a larger company known as Corporate Capitalism. In its attempt to 'downsize' its ailing competitor, Corporate Capitalism strips the assets of 'religion' by plundering its material and cultural resources, which are then repackaged, rebranded and then sold in the

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marketplace of ideas. This reselling exploits the historical respect and 'aura of authenticity' of the religious traditions (what in business terms is often called 'the goodwill' of the company) while at the same time, separating itself from any negative connotations associated with the religious in a modern secular context (rebranding). This is precisely the burden of the concept of spirituality in such contexts, allowing a simultaneous nod towards and separation from 'the religious'. The corporate machine or the market does not seek to validate or reinscribe the tradition but rather utilises its cultural cachet for its own purposes and profit.

Like the selling to private companies of public utilities and services in our modern neoliberal economies, such as gas, electricity, water, healthcare and transport systems, the material and cultural 'assets' of the various religious traditions are being plundered, 'downsized' and sold off as commodities. 'Religion' is facing a 'takeover bid' from the business world, without the protection of the state, which increasingly recedes from social welfare and public service initiatives in a neoliberal context. Today in most British cities you will find old church buildings that have been sold off to become business offices, super-markets, public houses, nightclubs and private apartments. However,

it is not primarily the sale of buildings that we are concerned with here, but rather the exploitation of the ‘cultural capital’ of the religious for the purposes of consumption and corporate gain. From the branding of perfumes using ancient Asian concepts and the idea of the spiritual (‘Samsara’ perfume, ‘Zen’ deodorant, ‘Spiritual’ body-spray) to clothe the product in an aura of mystical authenticity, to the promotion of management courses offering ‘spiritual techniques’ for the enhancement of one’s work productivity and corporate business-efficiency, the sanitised religiosity of ‘the spiritual’ sells. However, this use of spirituality involves a number of complex levels of engagement. While appearing to endorse the values of the ancient traditions that it is

‘A Religion may be discerned in capitalism – that is to say, capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers . . . Capitalism is a religion of pure cult, without dogma.’

Walter Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belnap Press, 1996, pp. 288–9.

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alluding to, such moves represent little more than a silent takeover of religion. Marketing ‘the spiritual’ allows companies and their consumers to pay lip-service to the ‘exotic’, rich and historically significant religions of the world at the same time as distancing themselves from any engagement with the worldviews and forms of life that they represent. Religion is rebranded as ‘spirituality’ in order to support the ideology of capitalism.

### **A TYPOLOGY OF SPIRITUALITIES IN RELATION TO CAPITALISM**

When trying to understand the nature of what we are calling capitalist spirituality, it is necessary to make a number of distinctions in order to appreciate the various relations that exist between contemporary forms of spirituality and capitalism. Although we are not claiming that spirituality should (or indeed could) be separated from economic questions, we do believe that *it should not be fundamentally shaped* by an economic ideology. We wish to challenge the way in which the concept of spirituality is being utilised to ‘smooth out’ resistance to the growing power of corporate capitalism and consumerism as the defining ideology of our time. We do this not out of some misguided belief that traditional religious institutions and systems have been free from authoritarian and oppressive strictures of their own, but rather out of a concern that cultural diversity is being eroded by the incessant march of a single worldview – an economically driven globalisation – driven by a triumphalist and corporate-oriented form of capitalism.

### **The Spectrum of Spirituality – Capitalism Relations:**

#### **The Different Types**

For the purposes of our analysis, one can make a distinction between four degrees of relative accommodation to the ideology of capitalism:

**Revolutionary or Anti-Capitalist Spiritualities:** such movements reject the capitalist ideology of neoliberalism (life determined by market forces alone) and the pursuit of profit as a goal that can be combined with a recognition of a spiritual, religious or ethical dimension to life. Many of these groups have emerged from within specific religious traditions. They ground their spiritual approaches

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in a ‘this-worldly’ commitment to social justice and appeal to a wide range of ancient traditions and movements such as the social critiques of the early Israelite prophets, the Christian Social Gospel movement, Islamic notions of a just economy and universal brotherhood, Buddhist notions of enlightened re-engagement with the world for the sake of alleviating the suffering of others, the radical egalitarian strands of bhakti and Sufi movements in India, etc. Examples of movements and trends that build upon such historical precedents include the various philosophies and theologies of liberation among subaltern groups across the ‘Two-Thirds World’, socially engaged Buddhism, the deep ecology movement, etc.

**Business-Ethics/Reformist Spiritualities:** such movements accept the pursuit of profit as a legitimate goal and therefore do not reject the capitalist system in its entirety, but believe in restraining the market in terms of fundamental ethical principles deriving from a particular religious or spiritual perspective on life. There is a long tradition of religious reform of business activities, as found, for instance, in the various religious co-operative movements and the Quaker tradition of ethically oriented business enterprises, as put forward by such authors as Georgeanne Lamont in *The Spirited Business* (see Chapter Four). These forms of spirituality, like Tom Beaudoin’s Catholic social ethics and his idea of ‘economic spirituality’ in his work *Consuming Faith*, seek to find ways of synthesising traditional ‘religious’ understanding with the values of business and consumer culture. Such approaches accept, with some ethical modification, the status quo of the market and business world, and do not seek to question the underlying basis of its ideology. The emphasis is upon the integration of ethical values into the dominant culture, rather than a radical exploration of how the ethical demands of the religious tradition might require a substantial re-evaluation of the economic system. The ideology of neoliberalism is never placed under radical scrutiny in these forms of spirituality which therefore, in many respects, provide indirect support for a consumerist culture. Such forms, therefore, can easily venture towards and hold aspects of both consumerist and capitalist spirituality, as seen in Tom Beaudoin’s work *Consuming Faith* (2003: 106–7):

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There is an authentic spiritual impulse at the heart of our branding economy . . . We live out our relation to our ultimate meaning through what and how we buy. Let the integration of faith and economy be the mark of the true spiritual seeker today, a consuming faith.

**Individualist/Consumerist Spiritualities:** this trend represents an aspect of what is sometimes called ‘Prosperity Religion’ (for instance US tele-evangelism), but in a modern de-traditionalised

setting. The linkage between religious practices and the profit motive are as old as history itself, but 'prosperity religions' is a term generally used by scholars of religion to refer to movements that emerged in the nineteenth century and developed in response to the Industrial Revolution and the rise of modern capitalism. They have tended to be modernist in orientation and are complicitous with the capitalist system at the same time as maintaining strong links to tradition, scripture and religious specificity. As Woodhead and Heelas (2000: 174) note,

Prosperity religion, of course, is bound up with what would appear to be an ever-more significant feature of modern times: the growth of consumer culture and the associated 'ethicality' – if that is the right term – of people intent on satisfying their consumeristically driven desires. It could well be the case that prosperity religion

is (characteristically) about the sacralisation of utilitarian individualism.

What we are here calling 'individualist or consumerist spirituality' relates to a late twentieth-century development within the broader historical phenomenon of 'prosperity religions'. It refers to those who embrace capitalism, consumerism and individualism and interpret their religious or spiritual worldview in terms of these ideologies. Whereas the nineteenth century prosperity religions were generally modernist in origin, the consumerist spiritualities emerged in the late 1960s and are generally 'postmodern' in orientation, with an emphasis upon eclecticism, individualist experimentation and a 'pick and mix' approach to religious traditions. There is much within the 'New Age' and 'Personal Development/Self-Help' movement that exemplifies this trend. Specific examples include Stephen Russell (The

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Barefoot Doctor), Sharon Janis (author of *Spirituality for Dummies*) and Maslovian psychology (see Chapters Two and Three for a discussion of these examples).

**Capitalist Spiritualities:** the subordination and exploitation of religious themes and motifs to promote an individualist and/or corporate-oriented pursuit of profit for its own sake. Capitalist spiritualities are emerging in response to the rise of global finance capitalism. Like the individualist or consumerist spiritualities upon which they have fed, they are 'postmodern' in the sense that, grounded in an information age and the transfer of electronic data across national boundaries, they tend to disavow explicit association with traditional religions, promoting instead a highly eclectic, dis-engaged and detraditionalised spirituality. This conforms to emerging social trends and the contemporary social Zeitgeist of late capitalist societies. Such trends, however, manifest an uncritical assimilation of business values into their rationale. In many cases, what characterises such trends is a subtle shift beyond an exclusive emphasis upon the individual self and towards a concern with making the individual employee/consumer function as effectively as possible for the benefit of corporate organisations and the 'global economy'.

Traditional religious appeals to the importance of 'community' and social connectedness are here 'rebranded' in terms of the desirability of working for

the corporate community or buying more of this or that product. Such a move allows advocates of capitalist spirituality to use the traditional language of ‘belonging’ but this time orient it towards the need for employees to align themselves with the corporate mission statements of their employers, or to reinforce the ideology of consumer-ism. Examples of this trend include Deepak Chopra, Osho Rajneesh and a variety of authors such as Jesper Kunde (‘Corporate Religion’), Carayol and Firth (‘Corporate Voodoo’) and John Grant (‘The New Marketing Manifesto’). See Chapter Four for a discussion of these examples. Some movements maintain an affiliation to a

‘When the inner self connects to one’s work, work and the inner self seem to know no limits.’

Elmer H. Burack, ‘Spirituality in the Workplace’, *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 12(4), 1999: 284.

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specific religious tradition while expounding a corporatist ethic (such as the Catholic movement Opus Dei and some forms of Neo- Pentecostalism). For a fairly comprehensive list of the literature in this genre to the mid-1990s see Heelas (1996: 66–7).

We offer the above interpretive grid as an alternative to the typology offered by Roy Wallis (1984), which classifies new religious movements in terms of their *world-affirming*, *world-denying* or *world-accommodating* orientation. Wallis’s approach is built upon older (Weberian) classifications of religious attitudes towards the world (‘this-worldly’ vs. ‘other-worldly’) and remains useful at a certain level of analysis. However, the typology naively assumes unanimity about what ‘the real world’ is like (to which each group is said to have a particular orientation), yet this is precisely one of the major points of contention between different traditions and worldviews. Moreover, for the purposes of our current discussion, Wallis’s typology is insufficiently focused on attitudes towards capitalism and consumerism to pick out the trends that we wish to explore.

Using our fourth category as our point of orientation, one can classify contemporary forms of spirituality according to the various degrees of accommodation or resistance they exhibit to the following features of what we are calling capitalist spirituality:

1 2 3 4

5 6

*Atomisation*: the individualisation of responsibility with no consideration of society.

*Self-interest*: an ethic of self-interest that sees profit as the primary motivation for human action.

*Corporatism*: placing corporate (not community) success above the welfare and job security of employees.

*Utilitarianism*: treating others as means rather than ends (e.g. seeing humans as consumers to be

persuaded, other businesses as competitors to be overcome, or employees as resources to be used).

*Consumerism*: the promotion of unrestrained desire-fulfilment as the key to happiness.

*Quietism*: tacit or overt acceptance of the inevitability of social injustice rather than a wish to overcome it.

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*Political Myopia*: a claim to political neutrality – the refusal to see the political dimensions of ‘spirituality’.

*Thought-control/Accommodationism*: use of psycho-physical techniques, described in terms of ‘personal development’, that seek to pacify feelings of anxiety and disquiet at the individual level rather than seeking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress.

This list is far from exhaustive, but we hope that it gives the reader a sense of the particular orientation that is associated with capitalist spiritualities. In terms of our fourfold typology, one can read examples of contemporary spirituality in terms of the degree to which they demonstrate conformity or resistance to the above eight characteristics. It is important to appreciate, however, that the typology that we have outlined is an analytic abstraction for the purposes of classification. It should not be read as referring to fixed types, but rather as four points on a dynamic cultural continuum. There may also be some movement along the spectrum of possibilities in the case of specific movements and individuals at different times. No person or movement, for instance, can claim to be free from all of the eight features highlighted above as characteristic of capitalist spirituality. Rather, it is a question of where one can be placed on the spectrum at any given time in terms of one’s complicity with such trends. We are not claiming, for instance, to be able to step outside the influence of consumerism and inhabit some ‘pure’ realm of ethical or spiritual practice.

We should be done once and for all with the search for an outside, a standpoint that imagines a purity for our politics. It is better both theoretically and practically to enter the terrain of Empire and confront its homogenizing and heterogenizing flows in all their complexity, grounding our analysis in the power of the global multitude.

(Negri and Hardt, 2000: 46)

One of the central concerns of this book is the way that the market-driven economy of corporate capitalism has embraced the concept of ‘spirituality’. This cultural ordering of spirituality in the business

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world exploits the transformative power of traditional ‘spiritual’ disciplines by reorienting their



fundamental goals. Instead of the more traditional emphasis upon self-sacrifice, the disciplining of desire and a recognition of community, we find productivity, work-efficiency and the accumulation of profit put forward as the new goals. In this context, spirituality becomes a way of developing incentives that are conducive to the corporate objectives of the employer. The ‘spiritual’ becomes instrumental to the market rather than oriented towards a wider social and ethical framework, and its primary function becomes the perpetuation of the consumerist status quo rather than a critical reflection upon it.

What is required is an application of the secularist critique developed by thinkers such as Marx and Nietzsche to the emergence of a capitalist spirituality that is claimed to be non-dogmatic, non-institutional and consumer-oriented. The secularist critique of religion, most famously represented by Marx’s claim that religion is the opiate of the masses, now urgently needs to be applied to the ideological institutions and practices of corporate capitalism itself. There is a new set of institutions preaching the gospel of no alternatives and these are the ‘Unholy Trinity’ of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The religious quality of contemporary capitalism is captured well by former Labour MP Tony Benn:

Religions have an extraordinary capacity to develop into control mechanisms . . . If I look at the world today it seems to me that the most powerful religion of all – much more powerful than Christianity, Judaism, Islam and so on – is the people who worship money. That is really [the] most powerful religion. And the banks are bigger than the cathedrals, the headquarters of the multinational companies are bigger than the mosques or the synagogues. Every hour on the news we have business news – every hour – it’s a sort of hymn to capitalism.

(Benn, 2002)

God is dead, but has been resurrected as ‘Capital’. Shopping malls have become the new altars for worshipping the God of money, and

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consumerism is the new esoteric knowledge (disguised as ‘New Age’ spirituality).

We use symbols belonging to a genuinely religious tradition and transform them into formulas serving the purpose of alienated man. Religion has become an empty shell; it has been transformed into a self-help device for increasing one’s own powers for success. God becomes a partner in business.

(Fromm, 2004: 73)

Ironically, one way to respond and extend the scope of Marx’s initial criticism is to draw upon the traditions of ethical reflection and social justice that are found within the religious traditions themselves. Unfortunately, as Harvard theologian Harvey Cox (2003: 25) points out,

For the most part . . . religions have addressed economic disparity with alms and charity. They have not – with some important exceptions – confronted the structural sources of inequality. It now appears that those exceptions, like Islamic notions of a righteous economy, the medieval Christian doctrine of the just price, the Social Gospel movement, and

liberation theology, need to be brought from the past and from theology's edges into the center of reflection on the ethical responsibilities of a global civilization.

In writing this book we hope to broaden the conversation about the role of religions in modern society. We are certainly not advocating an uncritical return to tradition, but rather wishing to extend the scope of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Marx, Freud, Nietzsche) to so-called secular ideologies and regimes of thought-control in a contemporary context. In this respect we are seeking to articulate a position that speaks to two groups within society – the secularists/ atheists with their wholesale rejection of the religious as oppressive and dogmatic on the one hand, and the religious traditionalists and conservatives who promote the sense of community and ethical virtues of traditional religion, but are unwilling to challenge the conservative and oppressive aspects of religious traditions, on the

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other. The situation is much more complicated than the ideological positioning of either of these groups suggests.

The 'brilliance' of the capitalist move is found in the way in which it builds upon older colonial legacies and yet manages to portray itself as 'inevitable' and not a form of colonialism at all. The medieval Christians of Europe sought 'to convert the heathen' to the true faith. This, alongside the profit-motive of course, became a key rationale for the colonisation of Asia, Africa and the Americas. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the rise of Enlightenment humanism transformed this into the goal of bringing enlightenment and civilisation to 'the savage'. Meanwhile, Europe flourished with Britain leading the way with an Industrial Revolution premised upon the cheap labour and plundered resources from its Empire in the East. In our contemporary context, the new rationale for colonialism is the conversion of entire communities and societies into individualised 'consumers' and compliant workers. With the rise of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century, the primary ideological rationale for maintaining domination has become the mythology of 'the free market' and the spread of democracy. This rhetoric hides the reliance of the capitalist enterprise upon these older colonial legacies.

In a context where brands and images are becoming more important than the products themselves, 'spirituality' has become the new currency in the task of winning human minds and hearts. Corporate business interests are served by utilising the 'cultural capital' of the religious traditions – building upon their authority base and, in the case of Asian religions, cashing in on their 'exotic image' at the same time as distancing themselves from the traditions. Ancient cultural traditions and systems of thought become commodities like everything else in this brave new world. Our rich and disparate pasts are now up for sale.

### **OUTLINE OF THE BOOK**

In Chapter One we highlight the shifting meanings of 'the spiritual' throughout history. As a result, we should not expect to be able to use terms such as 'spirituality' as if they have some fixed or definitive meaning free from contestation and debate. Although the term

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‘spirituality’ developed from earlier Greek and Latin roots, there are significant dimensions to these earlier uses that are lost once one defines the spiritual in narrowly privatised terms. While previous studies have plotted this genealogy of the term, we seek to show how the concept has been shaped in the modern period by an initial process of individualisation (linked to the privatisation of religion in modern liberal democracies) and then, more recently, by a second form of privatisation, namely corporatisation. Finally, we attempt to show how the contemporary idea of ‘spirituality’ operates in the context of the rise of neoliberalism as a dominant discourse within society and examine its vagueness and ambiguity, its relation to notions of transcendence and finally its corporate branding. This brief history of the term is then examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapters and the political nature of capitalist spirituality unfolded through its various transformations.

In Chapters Two and Three we explore in detail two major formations of the spiritual from the mid-twentieth century: the impact of psychology upon religion and the development of the modern notion of ‘spirituality’, and the New Age privatisation of Asian wisdom traditions as forms of ‘eastern spirituality’. These processes influenced the shape of western religious thinking and practice in the first half of the twentieth century but, as we shall see, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that ‘spirituality’ came to signify a de-institutionalised and privatised religion as it does today.

Chapter Two examines the influence of psychology on the idea of spirituality. We argue that the discourse and institutions of psychology have played a major part in maintaining control in late capitalist societies in the West by creating a privatised and individualised conception of reality. Modern government requires a social mechanism to control populations, and psychology functions, in part, as the underlying philosophy of what it is to be a human for a capitalist system of social organisation. By examining the history of psychology we show how different psychologists have translated ‘the religious’ into an individualised realm in support of capitalism. The overriding cultural effect of the ideology of psychology is that it masks the social dimension of human existence and creates social isolation.

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The process of turning religion into a psychological reality is shown in the contemporary popularity of the idea of ‘private spirituality,’ which emerges as a product of capitalist psychology. Psychology controls individual consumers by giving them the illusion of unrestrained freedom. It offers the psychological product of ‘spirituality’ as an apparent cure for the isolation created by a materialistic, competitive and individualised social system. Paradoxically, such notions of spirituality only reinforce social isolation because they tend to be construed in terms of a privatised model of human reality. The psychological turn provided the intellectual platform for the corporate takeover of religion by facilitating the incorporation of religious traditions into the capitalist worldview.

In Chapter Three, we examine some of the Asian ‘wisdom’ traditions that are so frequently appealed to in contemporary literature on ‘spirituality’. Each tradition discussed represents only a small

sample of the Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist traditions as a whole, but to consider them all would be impossible in a short work such as this. This selectivity, however, is premised upon a consideration of what is left out in most New Age accounts of these traditions. We hope to establish that there is a great deal within the philosophical ideals and contemplative techniques of these three Asian traditions that offers a challenge, both ideologically and at the level of practice, to the values of a consumerist society. This is not of course in the modern sense of offering an explicit socio-political critique of capitalism (as in the case of, say, Marxism), but rather in each tradition's attempt to counter the human addiction to our (individual, ego-driven) selves as the centre of the universe. From this standpoint we are then in a position to contrast the orientation of such traditional 'Asian wisdom traditions' with the commodified forms in which they are found in the capitalist spirituality and popular New Age markets.

At a cultural level, the shift in interest from 'traditional religion' to 'private spirituality' has overwhelmingly been presented to us as *consumer-oriented*, that is as reflecting the concerns of the modern, 'liberated' individual to free themselves from the traditional constraints of religion, dogma and ecclesiastical forms of thought-control. This triumphalist celebration of modernity as 'enlightened' and

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'liberating' for the individual, however, is not always what it seems. Thus, as we hope to demonstrate in Chapter Four, with the deregulation of the markets in the 1980s and the fall of the Berlin Wall we are seeing the rise of a new phenomenon that builds upon the 1960s and 1970s 'consumerist' approach to religion. This is the emergence of capitalist spirituality, and it amounts to a *corporate-led* takeover of the cultural space carved out in popular culture by terms such as 'spirituality' and 'religion'.

The argument of this book then is that the term 'spirituality' is in the process of being appropriated by business culture to serve the interests of corporate capitalism and worship at the altar of neoliberal ideology. It reflects the takeover of 'the religions' by big business and has resulted in the utilisation of the wholesome and life-affirming connotations of the term 'spirituality' as a means of promoting a market-oriented value system. One can choose to see this in broadly conspiratorial tones as an attempted takeover bid by the leaders of the new world order of global capitalism, but, in our view, it is better understood as a loose network of business-oriented entrepreneurs exploiting a widespread cultural trend that is already in motion. Whatever one's interpretation, what we are seeing is a wholesale infiltration by the sensibilities, language and agenda of corporate business, of the cultural spheres traditionally inhabited by the religions.

This cultural shift in meanings is, of course, not going on uncontested. There are many movements, trends, discourses and individuals that utilise the contemporary language of 'spirituality' but that would reject the individualist and corporatist interpretations increasingly associated with the term once it is made apparent to them. There are others perhaps who are uneasy about terms such as 'spirituality' and the kind of 'vague do-good-ism' that it seems to convey, who would nevertheless be critical of the corporate takeover of religion that it often represents. Finally, there may be those

who do not consider themselves to be 'religious' or 'spiritual' in any sense of the term but who would wish to challenge the corporate takeover on social and political grounds. In writing this book we hope to offer something of a wake-up call to such different constituencies and others interested

**Introduction: The Rebranding of Religion** 29 in the link between 'the politics of spirituality' and questions of social

justice. As Philip Goodchild (2002: 248) argues,

The spheres of piety, liberty and right, the provinces of the institutions of religion, government and the judiciary respectively, have been increasingly appropriated by finance capital itself. Religions adapt to make themselves more appealing in a competitive market.

To conclude, the manner in which the corporate takeover of religion is taking place follows a two-stage process. First, since the Enlightenment and the birth of modern political liberalism, we have seen the privatisation of religion. This combined with the emergence of a modern capitalist system has allowed the contemporary notion of consumer-oriented and individualised spiritualities to emerge. Second, we are now seeing the corporatisation of spirituality, that is the tailoring of those individualised spiritualities to fit the needs of corporate business culture in its demand for an efficient, productive and *pacified* workforce. It is these processes that are bringing about the silent takeover of religion, and in this book we seek to challenge this takeover by rethinking the ethical and social dimensions of tradition. There is potentially more to what is being presented to us as 'spirituality' than the ideologies of individualism, corporatism and social conformism.