

Spiritual but Not Religious: The Influence of the Current Romantic Movement

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A significant number of people today identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” distancing themselves from continuing religious traditions of formation. Various explanations have been offered for this. This article claims that this phenomenon is the result of the influence of a new Romantic movement that began to emerge in the 1960s. Historians, sociologists, philosophers, and contemporary theologians give evidence for such a new movement, which is found in popular culture, and in post-modernism, neoconservatism, the new consumerism, and especially in the current spirituality movement. Romantic movements tend to disparage traditional religion and to affirm unorthodox, exotic, esoteric, mystical, and individualistic spiritualities; this is true of the current spirituality movement. The current spirituality movement also resembles Romantic movements in its ambiguity, and in its destructive as well as constructive tendencies.

Many commentators have noted the current cultural phenomenon of the large number of people, perhaps twenty percent of Americans, who are self-identified as “spiritual but not religious.” Some of these commentators have offered explanations for this phenomenon. Among these are Weber’s idea of the “routinization of charisma” in organized religion, which may have turned off many seekers; the regular emergence in the religious traditions of renewal movements of which the spirituality movement may be an example; the unprecedented contact and interchange among the world religions; the suspicion of institutions of all kinds and the resulting search for something more

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individual, private, and experiential; and the authoritarian structures and social constraints of religious institutions which have become hurtful and destructive.¹

Since this phenomenon seems to be limited to English and North American cultures, another possible explanation of it is linguistic. I refer here to the fact that the meaning of “spirit” (and thus “spirituality”) in English is much narrower than its equivalents in the Germanic and Romance languages, in which it refers to all the uniquely human capacities and cultural functions.² Tillich attributes this difference to the impact of the British empirical tradition which separated the cognitive functions of the mind from the functions of emotion and will, and identified “spirit” with the latter.³ Thus *Geist* became “ghost” and *esprit* became “sprite.” This may have led some to see a clear difference between religion and spirituality. This linguistic factor, however, has undoubtedly been enhanced by the explanation for the phenomenon of “spiritual but not religious” offered below.

In this essay I will propose that a major reason for this phenomenon, which has not been noted, is that the current spirituality movement which arose in the 1970s is largely the product of a new Romantic movement which emerged in the 1960s. The current Romantic movement has influenced all aspects of our cultural life; the spirituality movement is in large part a product of this. Romantic movements always tend to disparage traditional religion and to affirm unorthodox, exotic, individualistic spiritualities. Romantic movements are also ambiguous, with tendencies which are destructive as well as productive. This ambiguity also attaches to the current spirituality movement.

¹ Meredith Maguire, “Mapping Contemporary American Spirituality,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1997): 3-8; Douglas Burton-Christie, “Retrieval,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2003): vii; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3 (2003): 163-165; Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5-7; Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 81-82, 173-179; and Reid B. Locklin, *Spiritual but Not Religious? An Oar Stroke Closer to the Farther Shore* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 2-5.

² For a fuller elaboration of this point, see my essay “Some Problems in Contemporary Christian Spirituality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (2000): 270.

³ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 1:249-250, 3:21-25.

What are the marks of a Romantic movement? Philosopher William Thomas Jones has described Romanticism as a complex syndrome of “biases” in the direction of what he calls the dynamic, the disordered, the continuous, the soft-focused, the inner, and the other-worldly.⁴ Historian Craig Brinton portrays the Romantic temperament as “sensitive, emotional, preferring color to form, the exotic to the familiar, eager for novelty, for adventure, above all for the vicarious adventure of fantasy, reveling in disorder and uncertainty, insistent on the uniqueness of the individual to the point of making a virtue of eccentricity.” He states that Romanticism involves the “exaltation of intuition, spirit, sensibility, imagination, faith, the immeasurable, the infinite, the wordless.”⁵ Sociologist Colin Campbell, quoting Gauderfroy-Demombynes, states,

“Romanticism is a way of feeling, a state of mind in which *sensibilité* and imagination predominates over reason; it tends towards the new, towards individualism, revolt, escape, melancholy, and fantasy.” Other typical characteristics of this way of feeling would be: dissatisfaction with the contemporary world, a restless anxiety in the face of life, a preference for the strange and curious, a penchant for reverie and dreaming, a leaning to mysticism, and a celebration of the irrational.⁶

The existence of a new Romantic movement has been argued by historians, sociologists, theologians, philosophers, and interpreters of popular culture. The historian Theodore Roszak has argued extensively that we are in a new Romantic movement in his books *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) and *Where the Wasteland Ends* (1972). He explores the youth movement of the 1960s and interprets it as a new Romantic movement by comparing it with the first Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To support his thesis, Roszak offers an analysis of the themes of the first Romantic movement in the work of Blake, Wordsworth, and Goethe. Then he shows how these themes have been adopted by the youth movement,

⁴ W. T. Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome: Toward a New Method in Cultural Anthropology and History of Ideas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), chaps. 5-7.

⁵ Crane Brinton, “Romanticism,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7:206b, 209b.

⁶ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 181.

seen especially in its protest against the dominance of science and technology and the resulting rationalization, secularization, bureaucratization, and dehumanization of life.⁷ Although Roszak refers solely to the German and English versions of the first Romantic movement, a similar case could be made from the American version as exemplified in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists, who were deeply influenced by the European versions.⁸

Rozzak often appeals to Jung, especially in the latter's studies of hermeticism and alchemy. Philip Rieff offers an interpretation of romantic themes in Jung's writings, namely, feeling versus intellect, spontaneity versus restriction, the unconscious as savior, introversion, the creative disorder of the interior life, and especially fantasy, which Rieff describes as "the Jungian successor to Christian faith."⁹

Also, in an unpublished essay of 1971 entitled "Romanticism as a Religious Movement," historian Sydney Ahlstrom states,

Many observers have pointed to a pronounced romantic element in the new interests that mark the 1960's. A short unelaborated enumeration will suffice as a reminder: 1) the revival of Novalis' plea that youth must bring in the new day; 2) the surge of interest in Far Eastern religion that Herder and Friedrich Schlegel pioneered; 3) the commitment to history that Hegel personified and which Herbert Marcuse and the Marxist revival betoken; 4) the renewed interest in astrology, hermetic philosophy and the occult which Saint-Martin and Oettinger championed; 5) the interest in subjectivity, the subconscious, and openness to others associated with Rousseau's *Confessions* and dozens of romantic autobiographical expositions; 6) the search for the meaning and realization of an organic sense of community and a general enlivening of organic metaphors as an antidote to materialism, individualism, and mechanism; 7) a widespread attack on conventional morality which also reverberated in [Rousseau's] *La Nouvelle Heloise* and [Schlegel's] *Lucinda*; 8) a return of interest in Hermann Hesse who himself recapitulated many of these themes—not least a deep regard for Hölderlin; and 9) a new reverence for Nature.

⁷ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969); and Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

⁸ See Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 23-30.

⁹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 118.

Four British sociologists confirm the judgment of the historians. Bernice Martin states, "At the heart of the radical movement which will be the focus of my attention is the so-called 'counter-culture' of the late 1960's. My argument is that it served as a dramatic embodiment of certain crucial Romantic values which in the subsequent decades became intimately woven into the fabric of our culture."¹⁰ Christopher Booker affirms a similar thesis and focuses on fantasy, one of the marks of Romanticism emphasized by Brinton, Campbell, and Rieff. Booker analyzes the stages of what he calls the "cycle of fantasy," and concludes: "In these five stages or moods of fantasy we have, in fact, . . . uncovered [in] the pattern of innumerable films, novels, plays, and stories, the basic Romantic legend, in which the pursuit of some kind of defiance or violation of order winds to its inevitable destruction."¹¹ Frank Musgrove states, "Nineteenth-century Romanticism was strikingly like the contemporary counter culture in its explicit attack on technology, work, pollution, boundaries, authority, the unauthentic, rationality, and the family. . . . But perhaps the most striking and significant similarity between the Romantics and today's counter culture is this: the imagination of today's counter culture feeds on science fiction. The Romantics invented it."¹² Compare, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus* (1818) and the movies *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Spider Man*, among others.

In a 1977 volume on the Holocaust, there is a section entitled "The New Romanticism and Biblical Faith." In this section theologian Michael Ryan finds evidence of the new Romanticism in Charles Reich's book *The Greening of America* (1970) in which Consciousness I represents the old Romanticism, Consciousness II the technocratic managerial revolution, and the emerging Consciousness III which rejects Consciousness II and reaffirms Consciousness I, that is, the new Romanticism. He finds further evidence in historian William Irwin Thompson's book *At the Edge of History* (1971), in which Thompson criticizes industrial society and calls for a deeper understanding of human life and history, which can be found in the myths of Atlantis

¹⁰ Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 2.

¹¹ Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: A Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Collins, 1969), 73.

¹² Frank Musgrove, *Ecstasy and Holiness: Counter Culture and the Open Society* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1974), 65.

and of Native Americans; in the prophecies of the famous psychic Edgar Cayce; the poetry of the great English Romantic William Blake; and the science fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Arthur Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.¹³

In the same section of this volume, philosopher Edith Wyschogrod contrasts Romantic consciousness and biblical faith by describing Romanticism as a metaphysics of consciousness, and biblical faith as a metaphysics of event. She claims that the former expands the role given to individual consciousness with the goal of unlimited freedom and the tendency to identify the self with God, as in Hegel. This leads Romanticism to an apotheosis of the undetermined, of chaos, and finally to a valorization of death, which, she argues, was the contribution of Romanticism to Nazism.¹⁴ Theodore Roszak is also aware of this darker side of Romanticism. He warns that the new Romantic movement may lead to a “rampant, antinomian mania which . . . threatens to plunge us into a dark and savage age.” Here he refers to Peter Viereck’s book *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (1961), which he describes as a “thorough attempt to spell out the connections between Nazism and Romanticism.”¹⁵

Closely associated with these manifestations of the new Romantic movement is a new intensity of consumerism. In 1970 psychoanalyst Erich Fromm stated, “Man is in the process of becoming a *homo consumens*, a total consumer. . . . This vision of the total consumer is indeed a new image of man that is conquering the world.”¹⁶ Noting that American consumer debt now exceeds \$2 trillion, one commentator states, “U. S. shopping centers now outnumber high schools and attract 20 million shoppers a month. In as many as a dozen states, the biggest tourist attraction is not a historical site or a cultural attraction: It’s a mall. . . . The Nation’s largest temple to malldom [is] the 4.2

¹³ Michael D. Ryan, “The New Romanticism and Biblical Faith,” in Eva Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust: Papers given at the International Symposium on the Holocaust, held at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, New York City, June 3 to 6, 1974* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 290-292.

¹⁴ Edith Wyschogrod, “Romantic Consciousness and Biblical Faith,” in Fleischner, *Auschwitz*, 331-342.

¹⁵ Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 73.

¹⁶ Erich Fromm, “Problems of Surplus,” in *The Essential Fromm*, ed. Rainer Funk (New York: Continuum, 1995), 72.

million-square-foot Mall of America in Minnesota.”¹⁷ British sociologist Colin Campbell sees this consumerism as a manifestation of the current Romantic movement, even as the first Romantic movement facilitated the emergence of the consumerism which fueled the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He states that although consumption would seem to be at the opposite pole of life from Romanticism,

[t]here is one significant modern phenomenon which does indeed directly connect the two. This, of course, is advertising, for even the most cursory examination of the pages of glossy magazines and the contents of television commercials will serve to reveal how many advertisements are concerned with the topic of “romance”, or with images and copy which deal with scenes which are “remote from everyday experience”, “imaginative” or suggestive of “grandeur” or “passion”. [The phrases in quotation marks are from the definition of “romantic” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.] And it is not just romance in the narrow sense which features so prominently in conjunction with perfume, cigarettes, or lingerie advertisements—it is also that the pictures and stories used are typically “romantic” in the broader sense of being exotic, imaginative and idealized; whilst the very purpose of advertisements, of course, is to induce us to buy the products which are featured: in other words to consume.¹⁸

There is also a great deal of evidence of a new Romantic movement in American popular culture today.¹⁹ Picking up on Craig Brinton’s characterization of the Romantic longing “above all for the vicarious adventure of fantasy” (also mentioned by Rieff, Booker, and Campbell), I refer to the record-breaking popularity of such movie series as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *King Arthur*, and

¹⁷ Vicki Haddock, “Lessons in Human Buy-ology,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 December 2004, sec. D1. See also these important studies of the new consumerism: Juliet Schor, *Do Americans Shop Too Much?* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2000); Juliet Schor, *The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004); and Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt, *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic*, 1-2.

¹⁹ When I searched “new Romantic movement” on the Internet, in .07 seconds I received 217,000 items treating the new Romanticism in art, architecture, music, literature, criticism, and so forth.

Spider Man. Commenting on these, a movie critic concludes, "Perhaps more than ever before, Hollywood is an empire of fantasy." Another reviewer describes the devotees of Harry Potter as "obsessed, incurable die-hard romantics." Finally, a third reviewer summarizes the significance of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by stating, "They revive the art of Romantic wonder."²⁰

The influence of the current Romantic movement can also be seen in the contemporary neoconservative movement which informs the administration of George W. Bush. The mentor of the neoconservative theorists and their disciples is the political philosopher Leo Strauss who taught at the University of Chicago in the middle of the last century. Strauss's impact has been described as the largest academic movement in the last century, and he has been called the godfather of the Republican Party's Contract with America of 1994. Strauss's political thought shows the influence of the Romantic political philosophers Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and he praised Romanticism as the strongest German protest against liberal modernity. He was also influenced by the Romantic reactionaries Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, and Martin Heidegger. His thought is marked by several Romantic themes and tendencies: the esoteric character of his teaching, which has been described as kabbalistic; opposition to modernity; rule by a secret wise elite who are considered godlike; the state seen as sacred; a hierarchical ordering of society; antipathy to liberal democracy; abhorrence of egalitarianism; the importance of religion and moral law as the basis of society; and an emphasis on rootedness in the soil, and on militarism and war.²¹ In this connection it may be noted that the first Romantics hailed Napoleon as a world historical figure, one whom Hegel called a "world soul." I am suggesting that Strauss's political thought was influenced by the first Romantic movement and that its widespread influence today can be attributed, at least in part, to the current Romantic movement.

²⁰ See A. O. Scott, "A Hunger for Fantasy, an Empire to Feed It," *New York Times*, 16 June 2002, Arts and Leisure section, 1; Bruce McCall, "Not Scared of Harry Potter," *New Yorker*, 10 December 2001, 54; Alex Ross, "The Ring and the Rings," *New Yorker*, 22 and 29 December 2003, 162b.

²¹ See Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 2, 3, 41; Shadia Drury, *Alexandre Kojève: The Roots of Postmodern Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 155; Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss: Updated Edition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Professor Drury has stated that she agrees with my interpretation of Strauss.

It should be noted that postmodernism in literary and cultural theory, which emerged in the 1960s, can also be considered to be an aspect of the current Romantic movement. Postmodern authors often refer to figures in the first Romantic movement, such as Goethe, Blake, Rousseau, Burke, Emerson, and Wordsworth, as forerunners of postmodernism. This is not surprising, since both movements involve a strong critique of the Enlightenment and neoclassical traditions. A study of postmodernism states that Romanticism is one of the movements which “form the backbone of a counter-Enlightenment tradition and are important influences on some versions of postmodern theory.”²²

I also find the influence of the current Romantic movement in contemporary Christian theology. Especially among its younger practitioners, I find a suspicion of clarity, precision, analysis, and rationality, and a favoring of the Romantic themes of the vague, the complex, the irrational, the anarchic, the chaotic, the wild, the Dionysian, the exotic, the esoteric, the heretical, the ancient and primitive, the apophatic, the holistic, the mystical, and the divine darkness. For example, in 1980 the dean of an Episcopal seminary published an essay on theology and religious renewal that exemplifies the current Romantic movement. He states that renewal requires us “to move, at times, to the edge of chaos,” to have “a confrontation with the abyss.” “Felt and intuitive meaning borders on chaos, whereas thinking is several steps removed from chaos.” Theology and religion need “the willingness to get dirty together.” Also he calls us to embrace “the threat” and “the antistructural.” “We must intentionally move into the darkness, the surd, the unknown behind our systems.” He offers three illustrations of the darkness into which we must intentionally move: “our grim fear of our own sexuality”; the need in the liturgy for the archaic, the bizarre, and the vulgar; and “formation in the wilderness.”²³

Both Jones and Brinton mention a bias toward the disordered or a reveling in disorder as marks of a Romantic movement. An example

²² Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford Press, 1977), 29.

²³ Urban T. Holmes, “Theology and Religious Renewal,” *Anglican Theological Review* 62, no. 1 (1980): 3-19, at 16-19. See also James I. McCord, “Editorial: The Blurred Vision,” (*Theology Today* 28, no. 3 [1971]: 271-277), in which he refers to our “moving out of one age into another,” and to one reaction to this as the “romantic left” which, in its fears of the “promised land of technology,” represents a “flourishing romanticism.”

of this in recent theology is an increasing fascination with chaos theory in physics and a major revival of the idea of creation out of chaos in a number of books and articles. I will mention three of them. In his book *Chaos Theology: A Revised Creation Theology* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002), Sjoerd Bonting considers the implications of chaos theory for various topics in theology. In James Huchingson's book *Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God*, all of the Romantic themes appear. He states, "The chaos [that is, the *Pandemonium Tremendum*] is the *Ungrund*, the fundament and basis of the divine life, the ground and Groundlessness of God, eternal and uncaused, at once the answer to the cosmological question and the most profound mystery."²⁴ In Catherine Keller's book *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, again all the Romantic themes appear and many Romantic heroes are cited, such as Dionysius, Eckhart, Blake, Schelling, and the "Cloud" author. She states, "The tehomic deity [a reference to *tehom* or deep in Gen. 1:2] remains enmeshed in the vulnerabilities and potentialities of an indeterminate creativity. As *Tehom* it is that process; as deity it is born from and suckles that process."²⁵ The theological problem with these views, apart from lack of clarity, is pointed out by Paul Ricoeur, who interprets this approach as one of the four great myths of the origin of evil in which evil is identified with the chaos out of which the world is made. Thus evil is built into the order of things. It is not a matter of human responsibility, and it is irredeemable.²⁶ I believe that this fascination with chaos shows the influence of the current Romantic movement.²⁷

²⁴ James E. Huchingson, *Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 132.

²⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 226. See also Philip Hefner, "God and Chaos: The Demiurge versus the Ungrund," *Zygon* 19, no. 4 (1984): 469-485; and Stuart Chandler, "When the World Falls Apart: Method for Employing Chaos and Emptiness as Theological Constructs," *Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 4 (1992): 467-491.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1967), part 2, chap. 1.

²⁷ Some attempts have been made to employ chaos theory in explaining divine action in the world, but it is a minority view since the equations of chaos theory are deterministic. See Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Arthur R. Peacocke, eds., *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, and Berkeley, Calif.: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1995), and my review essay of this book in *Theology Today* 54, no. 1 (April 1997): 66-76.

For our purposes, however, I believe that the main evidence of the current Romantic movement is found in the current spirituality movement which emerged in the 1970s and has become a vast multimillion dollar industry involving thousands of full-time professional specialists, many new spiritual formation centers, a large number of new professorial chairs of spirituality in seminaries and other graduate schools, a large new publishing enterprise producing hundreds of new books on spirituality every year, and the creation of new sections on spirituality in almost all bookstores.²⁸ Two British scholars of religion have stated, "Spirituality is big business. . . . We now see the introduction of modes of 'spirituality' into educational curricula, bereavement and addiction counseling, 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."²⁹ A researcher and analyst of business trends has stated, "Spirituality is today's greatest megatrend."³⁰

Now there is, of course, some overlap between the spirituality movement and the continuing tradition of the churches' teaching about and formation in the Christian life. They shade into each other. In my judgment, an organization such as the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality represents primarily the continuing tradition of the churches' practice, whereas an organization such as Spiritual Directors International represents the spirituality movement.

I believe that the marks of the current spirituality movement include many of those of the first Romantic movement mentioned by Jones, Brinton, and Campbell. I will focus on a few of them: an emphasis on the interior life as distinct from the outer life of the body, the community, and history; a focus on individual and private life rather than public life; an emphasis on feeling rather than rationality; and finally, our main topic, a sharp distinction between religion which is disparaged and spirituality which is honored. Along with these go a fascination with the ancient, the primitive, the exotic, the esoteric, the mystical, the mysterious, the apophatic, and the heretical. All of these, I believe, characterize the current spirituality movement and the new

²⁸ See Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality," 163.

²⁹ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

³⁰ Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2010: The Rise of Conscious Capitalism* (Charlottesville, Va.: Hampton Roads, 2005), 6; see also chap. 1.

Romantic movement of which it is in large part a product.³¹ In his book *Spiritual, but Not Religious* (2001), Robert C. Fuller notes that a contemporary survey indicates that those self-identified as “spiritual but not religious” were “associated with higher levels of interest in mysticism, experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, and negative feelings toward both clergy and churches.”³²

Both the current spirituality and Romantic movements strongly emphasize the importance and centrality of interiority or the interior life. W. T. Jones has noted the centrality of interiority in the first Romantic movement.³³ One of the most important publications of the current spirituality movement is the twenty-five-volume series entitled *World Spirituality*. In the “Preface to the Series” in each of the volumes, the general editor, Ewert Cousins, states, “This series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions ‘the spirit.’ This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person.”³⁴ In a 1992 study, Michael Downey comments, “The common perception is still that spirituality is primarily concerned with the life of the soul, the inner life, one’s prayer life, one’s spiritual life, as a separate compartment of the Christian life. The tendency to equate the spiritual life with the interior life is particularly prevalent in our own day.”³⁵

Second, both the current Romantic and spirituality movements focus on individual and private life rather than communal and public life. In noting this emphasis in the first Romantic movement, historian Jack Forstman states that the early German Romantics were “overwhelmed and exhilarated by the awareness of individuality.”³⁶ This appears in the current Romantic and spirituality movements in a similar focus on individual private life rather than public life. Any suggestion that spirituality has anything to do with public issues is extremely rare.³⁷

³¹ See Thomas, “Some Problems in Contemporary Christian Spirituality.”

³² Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 6.

³³ See Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome*, 125-126.

³⁴ Ewert Cousins, ed., *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

³⁵ Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 105. I have criticized the concept of interiority in my essay “Interiority and Christian Spirituality,” *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 41-60.

³⁶ Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1970), xii.

³⁷ See my essay “Political Spirituality: Oxymoron or Redundancy?” *Journal of Religion and Society* 3 (2001): 1-12, <http://www.creighton.edu/JRS/>. Once, in a lecture on spirituality to a group of scholars, I mentioned that I usually inquired of directees if

A similar case can be made for the emphasis in the current Romantic and spirituality movements on feeling, passion, and sentiment rather than rationality. In Goethe's *Faust*, which Jacques Barzun describes as "the Bible of the [first] Romantic movement," the hero cries "Feeling is all." This has been strongly echoed in the current Romantic and spirituality movements in the focus on feeling, emotion, and sensitivity originally exemplified in the human potential movement and in the work of the National Training Laboratories and the Esalen Institute.

A new study brings together three themes of the current Romantic movement which have been discussed above: spirituality, consumerism, and neoconservatism. The authors argue that the spirituality movement has been taken over and further individualized, privatized, and commodified by what they call neoliberal (that is, economic neo-conservative) multinational, corporate capitalism in order to sell its worldview and its products. This has removed any concern in spirituality for community, social justice, or politics. Such privatization and commodification has been accomplished through contemporary humanistic psychology and the colonization of Asian religious traditions in New Age forms. In order to further the goals of neoliberal corporate capitalism, this individualized and privatized spirituality is now widely used in educational and professional institutions, including health care, counseling, business training, management theory, and marketing.³⁸

Both the Romantic and the Spirituality movements manifest a fascination with the ancient, the exotic, the esoteric, the mystical, and the heretical. This is represented in the first Romantic movement by Novalis's devotion to Plotinus and Boehme and his idealization of the Middle Ages, by Schopenhauer's adherence to Vedanta, and Goethe's commitment to Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. In the current Romantic movement, there is the newfound interest of Protestants in such figures and movements as the Desert Fathers, Celtic spirituality, and the medieval mystics. Then there is the widespread popularity of the new multivolume series *Classics of Western Spirituality*, which includes *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Pseudo-Dionysius, Jakob Boehme, and Emmanuel Swedenborg.

they knew the names of their municipal, state, and national representatives and how they had voted on recent important issues, which I consider to be an essential discipline of the Christian life. The response was incredulous laughter, thus confirming my point.

³⁸ See Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*.

This fascination is perfectly exemplified in the current widespread interest in the Kabbalah, the collection of texts of medieval Jewish mysticism with alleged sources in the second century. The Kabbalah arose in Provence in the thirteenth century and was influenced by Neoplatonist and Gnostic traditions. A recent newspaper article described the Kabbalah as “arcane, obscure, and inaccessible. . . . Its inaccessibility is what makes it attractive.”³⁹ The Kabbalah has been taken up in varying degrees by celebrities such as Madonna, Barbra Streisand, Courtney Love, Roseanne Barr, Britney Spears, Demi Moore, Paris Hilton, Winona Ryder, Elizabeth Taylor, and Mick Jagger. It is promoted by the Kabbalah Centre International which has twenty-three offices worldwide and claims 18,000 students in its classes, 90,000 members in the United States, and 90,000 visits to its website every month. The Kabbalah as ancient, exotic, esoteric, mystical, and heretical is a perfect example and vehicle of the current Romantic and spirituality movements. The 2001 Annual Meeting of Spiritual Directors International had workshops on the Kabbalah, as well as on the sacred labyrinth and the Enneagram, and on “Praying through the great elements of Earth/Air/Fire Water.”⁴⁰

Now I turn to our main topic: the contemporary cultural phenomenon of those who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious, and the related tendency to disparage religion and to honor spirituality. This was typical of the first Romantic movement, and is exemplified in the subtitle of Schleiermacher’s great Romantic work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. The term “Despisers” was a reference primarily to Schleiermacher’s friends Schlegel and Novalis, the leaders of the first German Romantic movement, who did in fact despise traditional organized religion and had turned toward Gnosticism and theosophy.⁴¹ Similarly, Goethe, the father of German Romanticism, early rejected what he called positive, that is traditional, religion. He was fascinated with the heretics and developed a personal religion based on Neoplatonism and modeled on Valentinian Gnosticism.⁴² Cyril O’Regan considers the main example

³⁹ Patricia Yollin, “New Interest in Jewish Mysticism,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 December 2003.

⁴⁰ For a more extended argument for the existence of a new Romantic movement, see my essay “On Doing Theology During a Romantic Movement,” in Richard Valantasis, ed., *The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 136-156.

⁴¹ See Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle*, chaps. 2, 3.

⁴² See *The Autobiography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (New York: Horizon Press, 1969), 379-382.

of Gnostic return in England to be the Romantic poet William Blake, who was deeply influenced by Jakob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg and departed from traditional Christianity.⁴³ This attitude is echoed in the current Romantic and spirituality movements.

Roszak holds that traditional Christianity is not the solution but rather part of the problem, and he finds the basis of both the old and the new Romanticism in what he calls “the old Gnosis” which includes the hermetic, magical, alchemical, astrological, and occult traditions; Islamic and Hindu mysticism; Kabbalah; Zen; I Ching; Tarot; Taoism; chakra yoga; Buddhist tantra; and ancient Gnosticism. This is taken to an extreme in Diarmuid Ó Murchú, a former Roman Catholic monk and a leader of the spirituality movement, who was the keynote speaker at the annual conference in 2002 of Spiritual Directors International, the largest professional group at the heart of the spirituality movement, with over four thousand members. According to Ó Murchú, spirituality emerged forty thousand years ago in the Paleolithic period as “a cosmological synthesis imbued with a highly developed holistic, intuitive and spiritual consciousness” devoted to the worship of the Great Mother Goddess. Religion, however, appeared only five thousand years ago and has been the source of all of our alienation and inhumanity. “Religion in its essential essence is about alienation from the Earth and the cosmos.” “Religion thrives on perpetuating that state of exile and alienation.” The end of religion is “a likely possibility and a highly desirable one.” Ó Murchú hails “the probable decline of formal religion and the revival of spirituality.”⁴⁴

In general in the current Romantic movement, and to some extent in the spirituality movement, traditional Christianity is often seen as a grand conspiracy against anything new, fascinating, and heterodox. This is exemplified, for example, in the wide popularity of Elaine Pagels’s books *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) and *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003); and especially in the 2003 runaway fiction best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, whose theme is the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, the birth of their child, and the desperate suppression of all this by some churches. A spokesperson for Doubleday has stated that it is “the fastest-selling adult book of all

⁴³ See Cyril O’Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Cyril O’Regan, *Deranging Narrative: Romanticism and Its Gnostic Limit* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Religion in Exile: A Spiritual Vision for the Homeward Bound* (Dublin: Gateway, 2000), viii, 14, 29, 65, 66.

time.” It has sold over sixty million copies and has been on the best-seller list for over two years. Furthermore, it has been succeeded by two copycat best-sellers: *The Rule of Four* and *The Historian*.

It should be noted that there is an important difference between the two Romantic movements in their attitude toward science. In its emphasis on disorder and uncertainty, the first Romantic movement attacked the Newtonian science celebrated by the Enlightenment. This was more the case in England than in Germany, where Goethe and Schopenhauer had some interest in and knowledge of science. In England, however, Blake and Wordsworth in particular were unremitting in their attack on Newtonian empirical science. In the current Romantic movement, however, the attitude toward science has been occasionally more affirmative. The main reason for this has been the emergence early in the last century of what has been called postmodern science, in particular relativity and quantum theory and later chaos theory. Relativity theory holds that there is no fixed space-time system as in Newtonian physics. The standard interpretation of quantum mechanics is that our knowledge of the most fundamental level of matter is strictly limited by the uncertainty principle, that events with no physical cause are pervasive in matter, and that nonlocality or action at a distance is also pervasive.

These developments in modern physics were quickly adopted by the new Romantic movement, since they seemed to support the main emphases of this movement. One of the first books was Fritjof Capra's book *The Tao of Physics* (1976), which argued that modern physics demonstrated the truth of Eastern mystical philosophy. This was followed by Gary Zukav's book *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979) with a similar argument. More recently we have Danah Zohar's books *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics* (1990) and (with Ian Merchall) *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics, and a New Social Vision* (1994). Most recently we have Diarmuid Ó Murchú's book *Quantum Theology: The Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (1997) which explores these ideas further. All these works are examples of the current Romantic movement and its spin-off in the spirituality movement.

Finally, it should be made clear that the new Romantic and spirituality movements are not limited to the counterculture of the 1970s but continue into the present. I have mentioned above the work of Roof (1999), Fuller (2000), and Locklin (2005) on the baby boomers, those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. John R. Mabry, a researcher

on Generation X (those born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s), states “Xers frequently equate ‘religion’ with hypocrisy, and prefer to speak of ‘spirituality.’” Furthermore, “Xers do have a myth: The Gnostic Myth.”⁴⁵

Now if it is the case that the phenomenon of “spiritual but not religious” is due in large part to the influence of the current Romantic movement, then what does this mean for the spirituality movement? I believe that we need to assess the spirituality movement, affirm what is valid in it, and correct in it what we believe to be subversive of the Christian life. In particular, we should focus on the aspects of the spirituality movement which are derived from the influence of the current Romantic movement: an emphasis on interiority rather than the outer life of the body, community, and history; on individual and private life rather than public life; on feeling rather than rationality; and finally on spirituality rather than religion. I believe that Romantic movements are usually correct in their criticism of the cultural situation but dubious in their extremes and in some of their assumptions. For example, I would judge that the first Romantic movement was correct in its critique of the one-sidedness of the ideals of the Enlightenment and neoclassical traditions and the mechanical attitude of the emerging natural sciences toward the natural world. The Romantics attempted at least to restore a measure of balance by emphasizing the fundamental place of feeling, emotion, intuition, fantasy, and imagination in human life. But, of course, they went to extremes, since extremity was their middle name.

The same applies to the current Romantic movement. I believe that it is valid in its critique of the dominance of scientism, technology, industrialization, and consumerism and the resulting overrationalization, bureaucratization, and dehumanizing of society. But, as we have seen, in its extremity it often calls for a focus on interiority to the exclusion of the body and communal life, on private life to the exclusion of public life, on feeling to the exclusion of a balanced rationality, and on exotic spiritualities to the exclusion of the essential features of traditional religion.

However, their grounding in the perennial philosophy tradition is the most significant problem in one side of both Romantic move-

⁴⁵ John R. Mabry, “The Gnostic Generation: Understanding and Ministering to Generation X,” *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International* 5, no. 2 (May 1999): 35-47.

ments, and the source of the main negative influence of the contemporary Romantic movement on the spirituality movement. The perennial philosophy is the religio-philosophical worldview exemplified by later Neoplatonism and Vedanta, and the philosophical foundations of Gnosticism, theosophy, and similar movements. I have noted above its influence on Novalis, Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Blake in the first Romantic movement. It has been propounded in the modern period by such philosophers as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, S. H. Nasr, and Huston Smith, among others. Roszak calls it the old Gnosis which is exemplified in the hermetic tradition and Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu mysticism, that is, Sufism, Kabbalah, and Vedanta. As we have seen, Cyril O'Regan argues that Gnosticism has returned in German and English Romanticism, and thus that Romanticism is always based in part on the Gnostic tradition.

The perennial philosophy has influenced one side of the current Romantic and spirituality movements. The tendency of this worldview is to understand individuality or personhood as ambiguous, unreal, or evil. For example, Huston Smith states that in this worldview persons "sense themselves to be not finally real—*anatta*, no-self."⁴⁶ Also in this worldview bodily life and the natural world are viewed with suspicion; human communal life and history are seen to lack any meaning; and human fulfillment is found only in escape from the body and the world, and in a reunion of the human spirit, which is divine, with the divine itself.⁴⁷ The literary critic Harold Bloom, who calls himself a Gnostic, illustrates these points in his statement that we in the United States are "an obsessed society wholly in the grip of a dominant Gnosticism" which teaches a "knowledge, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, and other selves."⁴⁸ These views are contested by the other side of the current Romantic and spirituality movements, as they were also contested in the first Romantic movement by such figures as Schleiermacher and Coleridge. Also they are obviously in conflict with the tradition of biblical religion which is the basis of the Christian life.

⁴⁶ Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 52.

⁴⁷ See my essay "Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy," *Theology Today* 43, no.2 (1986): 259-266.

⁴⁸ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 49.

Thus I am suggesting that the spirituality movement should balance its emphasis on interiority with an equal concern with the outer life of the body, the community, and history. It should harmonize its emphasis on private individual life with an equal commitment to the importance of the public life of work and politics. And it should equalize its concern for feeling with an emphasis on the life of reason and reflection. In sum, it should balance its commitment to spirituality with an equal commitment to the life of religion with its concern for tradition, communal life, and involvement in public life. I agree with Sandra M. Schneiders, who, while implying that they are basically identical, has argued that religion and spirituality are “two dimensions of a single enterprise which . . . are essential to each other and constitute, together, a single reality” and “partners in the search for God,” and that “religion is the optimal context for spirituality.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 164-165, 176.

