THE PERSONAL POLITICS OF SPIRITUALITY:
ON THE LIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY
SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
AMONG CANADIAN MILLENNIALS

by

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Abstract

In the last quarter century, a steadily increasing number of North Americans, when asked their religious affiliation, have self-identified as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Resultantly, a wealth of literature on the subject of contemporary spirituality has recently emerged. Some suggest, generally, that we are seeing the emergence of a “progressive spirituality” that is potentially transformative and socially conscious. Conversely, there are scholars who have taken a more critical stance toward this recent cultural development, positing that contemporary spirituality is a byproduct of the self-obsessed culture which saturates the west, or that spirituality, at its worst, is simply a rebranding of religion in order to support consumer culture and the ideology of capitalism. One problem with the majority of this literature is that scholars have tended to offer essentialist or reductionist accounts of spirituality, which rely primarily on a combination of theoretical and textual analysis, ignoring both the lived aspect of spirituality in contemporary society and its variation across generations. This thesis is an attempt to mitigate some of this controversy whilst contributing to this burgeoning scholarly field. I do so by shedding light on contemporary spirituality, as it exists in its lived form. Espousing a lived religion framework, and using the qualitative data I collected from conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty Canadian millennials who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” I assess the cogency of the dominant etic accounts of contemporary spirituality in the academic literature. I offer a critical analysis of their normative conclusions in light of the lived accounts of my research participants. Using four core ethics—the ethic of self-responsibility, the ethic of authenticity, the ethic of productivity, and the ethic of self-awareness—pertaining to the shared framework of self-spirituality as focal points of analysis, this thesis looks to flesh out the lived relationship between contemporary spirituality and social justice related attitudes and action among Canadian millennials.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the last quarter century, a steadily increasing number of North Americans, when asked their religious affiliation, have self-identified as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR).¹ The SBNR designation, despite its being everyday parlance, has perplexed and provoked scholars, laypeople and media alike prompting wide debate. Within the last three decades there has emerged a plethora of academic literature on “contemporary spirituality” or “SBNR spirituality”—referring to a “spirituality” that is purportedly distinct from “religion”—and what some have (controversially) called the “Spiritual but not Religious” movement (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). What this literature reveals, first and foremost, is that there is little consensus as to, (1) what SBNR means, and (2) what it means for society now that there are so many SBNRs. For instance, some (although certainly a minority) suggest, generally, that we are seeing the emergence of a “progressive spirituality” that is potentially transformative and socially conscious (Lynch 2007; Heelas 2008). Conversely, there are many scholars who have taken a more critical stance toward this recent cultural development, positing that contemporary spirituality is a byproduct of the self-obsessed culture which saturates the west (Lasch 1987; Starkey 1997; Bruce 2006; Webster 2012), or that spirituality, at its worst, is simply a rebranding of religion in order to support consumer culture and the ideology of late capitalism (Lau 2000; Carrette and King 2005; Martin 2014).

A significant problem with the majority of this literature is that scholars have tended to offer reductionist accounts of spirituality, which rely primarily on a combination of theoretical and textual analysis, ignoring both the lived aspect of spirituality in contemporary societies and its variation across

¹ A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 found that roughly one quarter of the Canadian population self-identify as SBNR.
generations. This thesis is an attempt to mitigate some of this controversy whilst contributing to this burgeoning scholarly field. I do so, first, by shedding light on contemporary spirituality, as it exists in its lived form. By espousing a lived religion framework, I treat as my focal point how “spirituality” is conceptualized and practiced by actual individuals who consider themselves SBNR, in contrast to how “spirituality” or “spiritual” persons is/are portrayed (and sold) in contemporary culture. More specifically, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty Canadian millennials who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” This provided rich qualitative data concerning the ways in which millennials perceive “spirituality” playing a role in their personal, social and political lives. Second, I draw heavily from the thought of philosopher Charles Taylor to outline a discursive framework—what I call Self-Spirituality—that I suggest structures and unites the accounts of my research participants. I use four core ethics of this shared framework—the ethic of self-responsibility, the ethic of authenticity, the ethic of productivity, and the ethic of self-awareness—as theoretical starting points to assess the cogency of the dominant etic accounts of contemporary spirituality in the academic literature, offering a critical analysis of both their methodological underpinnings as well as their normative conclusions in light of the lived accounts of my research participants. We might then say this work seeks to flesh out the personal dimensions of what Jeremy Carrette and Richard King have called “the link between the politics of spirituality and questions of social justice” (2005, 29).

Chapter Outline and Theoretical Overview

In the following chapter, I offer a brief and broad overview of the scholarly literature on the topic of SBNR and/or contemporary spirituality. Specifically, I outline some of the major scholarly exceptions include (but are not limited to) Altglas 2014; Mercadante; Heelas 2008; Bender 2003, 2010. This methodological tack, by providing insight into the ways in which articulations of “spirituality” vary across time and place, allowed me to better understand both the value, and the inherent limitations, of reductionist accounts of SBNR spirituality.
contributions to the academic discourse on SBNRs, as a means of introducing the reader to the dominant theories in the field. I attempt to illuminate the bases upon which some of its most heated controversies lie by means of a meta-analysis, as well as outline how I place my own work in relation these accounts.

In chapter three I present the theoretical and methodological frameworks I use to conduct this research. I summarize the “new paradigm” in which to study spirituality, as proffered by Bender and McRoberts (2012). I then present the Lived Religion framework that informs my research paradigm and summarize the methods of data analysis I apply. I describe my research process; what guided my research and how I completed the ethnographic component. I end the chapter on what I call a “reflexive moment,” my attempt at honouring the reflexive turn in the social sciences.

In chapter four I situate the accounts of my research participants, in all their diversity, in a common range of discourses that I group under the label “Self-Spirituality.” I begin by tracing the historical antecedents and illuminate the matrices of this discourse, shedding light on how its emergence is intimately tied to the development of what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the modern identity. I then lay out the argument that informs and guides my analysis throughout: that because the spirituality of my research participants is a self-spirituality then what is of utmost importance, when looking to evaluate its social and political implications, is examining, in detail, and with an eye on a complex set of factors, what my participants take to be their selves.

In chapter five I present my analysis of the lived accounts of my research participants. I begin by presenting the first of the four core ethics of self-spirituality: the ethic of self-responsibility. I outline its cultural history as well as the criticisms advanced against it. I respond to them by suggesting that although the ethic can support the ideology of individualism, it does not always do so. I use the account of Oscar, one of my research participants, to demonstrate how his taking responsibility for his suffering enables him to be more effective in realizing the world he one day hopes to inhabit. I posit that this
approach is illustrative of the millennial generation’s pragmatic idealism, that is, the belief that we must work within the world as it is, in order to create the world we desire.

Next, I discuss the ethic of authenticity. I shed light on its romantic roots, and its ubiquity in contemporary western culture. I argue that it isn’t always the case that the ethic of authenticity reinforces the status quo—at least not in all respects. I use the examples of Liam and Neil to demonstrate how the quest to discover, or recover, one’s “true self” can be transgressive of hegemonic norms while, at times, reinforcing others.

I then outline the historical roots of the ethic of productivity and the SBNR emphasis placed on self-work. I argue that although it can, and sometimes is, complicit with neoliberalism, when directed towards the appropriate ends, it can propel individuals to work for social justice. I also suggest that to take a critical view simply because the ethic adheres to the logic of capitalism, by naturalizing work, is to radically limit the possibilities available to individuals in present day society.

Finally, I discuss the ethic of self-awareness and the oft-heard dictum “know thyself.” I suggest that the self-inquiry of my research participants enables the possibility of questioning and thereby challenging the culturally conditioned beliefs and ways of being they have internalized. I argue that by taking a stance of “disengagement” towards their selves, my research participants could be viewed as engaged in an askesis, in order to transform themselves/their selves. Although I caution that not all self-inquiry is bound to lead to the creation of socially conscious citizens, I maintain that if it is informed by a deep ethical commitment to others it certainly can. I even further maintain that a socially just society is unrealizable without its citizens engaging in such programs.

In chapter six, I summarize the major claims of the preceding chapters as well as discuss some of their important corollaries. I conclude by briefly remarking on the implications they hold for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this section I offer an overview of the range of academic discourses on SBNR or contemporary spirituality. My aim here is not to evaluate these varying modes of inquiry, but rather to bring them into focus, such that we can more clearly see their limitations and strengths.

Courtney Bender (2010) writes, “spirituality is bedeviled not by a lack of definitions but by an endless proliferation of them” (5). Indeed, a look at the literature proves it. For instance, some scholars, challenging the emic distinction between “spirituality” and “religion” suggest that the former signifies a universal core, which religious communities draw upon (Berger 1979). Others who accept the distinction relate “spirituality” to an “ethically developed habitus” (Bender and McRoberts 2012, 21) that extends beyond institutional structures (Roof 1993; Stanczak and Miller 2004; Hodge 2012). “Spirituality” is also a term that some philosophers have used to refer to a realm beyond that which we can know empirically—what Immanuel Kant called the “noumenal” (Taylor 2007). Psychologist of religion T. D. Armstrong (1995) defines “spirituality” in terms of relationships: “the presence of a relationship with a Higher Power that affects the way in which one operates in the world” (3); D. Doyle (1992) reduces it to existential quests: “the search for existential meaning” (302); educator John P. Miller (2000) conflates it with “being more attentive to our inner life” (6). Zinnbauer and coauthors (1999) describe it as a “search for the sacred” (909); while Enzo Pace (2011) amends this by suggesting, “spirituality may be defined as the irreducible tendency to imagine and experience the sacred in ways other than those prescribed by a system of belief” (27). Finally, Gordon Lynch (2002) suggests it is most commonly used in contemporary

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Given the varying ways in which “spirituality” has seeped into a wide array of academic fields, I have limited the scope of this literature review to those accounts which take SBNR to be itself a topic of study. Thus I draw from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies.
culture as “a kind of signpost that indicates that people have a need to live with a sense of meaning, value and mystery” (105).

Carrette and King argue this multiplicity of definitions is due to an inherent ambiguity with which the term “spirituality” is associated (47). Nonetheless it is possible to identify some overlapping themes throughout the varied discussions of the subject. 5 For one, as Zinnbauer and coauthors note, the above accounts tend to view “spirituality” as an individual experience; or better yet, an experience had by an individual. They thereby generally endorse the distinction offered by sociologist Robert Wuthnow (1998) who suggests “spirituality” is a process of seeking meaning in life and experiencing the sacred in a variety of ways; in contrast to “religion,” which is generally understood as “a set of beliefs and practices connected to a specific organized religion” (Oh and Sarkisian 2011, 301). Indeed, at the heart of the SBNR discourse, both academic and popular, lies the opposition: organized religion versus personal spirituality. Robert C. Fuller (2001) elaborates the distinction, characterizing SBNRs as having forsaken formal religious organizations, whilst embracing an individualized spirituality that includes selecting from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. Moreover, they “typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development” (6). Fuller further suggests that the label SBNR implies a shift of focus from the public realm of religious institutions, creeds and rituals, to the private realm of personal experience (5).6

Most scholars would agree that the organized religion versus personal spirituality dichotomy reflects SBNR rhetoric, and in many ways, their reality. However these scholars would still claim this distinction needs further clarification and qualification. For instance, some scholars argue that the

5 It also reveals little about the ways in which its ambiguity is co-opted for a variety of (politically charged) reasons.

6 Anne C. Jacobs (2013) informs us that the English word “spirituality” is a translation of the Latin word spiritualis. She also writes, “Spirituality within the context of the Bible refers to an intrinsic part of the human being, which is in relationship with God and other people and which refers to an element of personality as well as energy and power” (3). She thus argues that this focus on the personal has its roots in the Christian tradition.
dichotomy of public/private as a means of distinguishing between “organized religion” and “personal spirituality” is misleading, for “spirituality” as they see it, is not in reality less public, but rather, through its infiltration of the private sphere, is actually just as public as “religion”—in the sense of it having public consequences and a logic of its own (Luckmann 1969; Houtman and Mascini 2002; Aupers and Houtman 2006). Therefore a core controversy in the field might be said to hinge on the question: what has spawned these “personal” spiritualities, and what of substance might they share, if anything?7

Most scholars acknowledge SBNRs’ wholesale rejection of what they call “organized” or “institutional” religion, as stemming from a larger cultural shift that emphasizes the primacy of the self (Taylor 1989, 2007). For instance, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2005), in attempting to flesh out the implicit distinction within the SBNR label, have suggested that we think of SBNRs as rejecting, what they deem “life-as” religion—where one lives one’s life-as a member of, say, a church or synagogue, constrained by a specific tradition or set of rules; in contrast to “subjective-life” spirituality—which has to do, rather, with states of consciousness, emotions and passions (3 my emphasis).8 Woodhead and Heelas argue this “spiritual turn” “is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences” (2).

Although most agree with Heelas and Woodhead that “spirituality” is related to one’s subjective-life, as stated earlier, many scholars contend that the notion of “life-as” religion—with its implied conformity—versus “subjective-life”—with its implied nonconformity—is an erroneous dichotomy that does not reflect reality accurately (Bruce 2000; Altglas 2014; Martin 2014; González 2015). Indeed, the problem

7 It is interesting to note that another dichotomy promulgated, especially among psychologists, has been that of substantive religion versus functional spirituality; connoting that “spirituality” is simply “whatever people do to attain a variety of goals, such as meaning in life, wholeness, interconnections with others, truth, and one’s own inner potential” while “religion” is “linked to institutions, formalized belief, and group practices” (Zinnbauer et al. 1999, 902).

8 Later refining this view, Heelas (2008) proposed the appellation “Spiritualities of Life”—meaning, spiritualities that consider life-itself, as opposed to the transcendent, to be sacred.
with this distinction, as its critics point out, is that it overlooks the uncanny uniformity exhibited within the spiritual milieu—a uniformity that bespeaks the existence of “life-as” roles within SBNR circles. As Zinnbauer and coauthors (1999) note, “… to see spirituality as a solely personal phenomenon is to overlook the cultural context in which this construct has emerged, and the fact that spirituality is not experienced or expressed in a social vacuum” (903).

There is some scholarly consensus that contemporary spirituality tends to operate through individual subjectivity; but there is little consensus with respect to the socio-political nature of its internal and substantive logic. In other words, scholars agree that contemporary spirituality is “personal” but disagree vehemently about what that might entail politically. Questions about the historical antecedents of this “turn inward,” toward the self, away from so-called “life-as” religion, as well as about the social and political implications of this turn are the chief source of debate among scholars, rather than the existence of the turn itself.

Bender (2010) notes, “the spiritual” in America is “deeply entangled in various religious and secular histories, social structures, and cultural practices” (182). With a wider theoretical sweep, philosopher Charles Taylor (1989; 1991a; 2007) postulates that contemporary spirituality is intricately tied to modernity. More specifically, Taylor has posited that the emergence of contemporary spirituality is the result of what he calls the “massive subjective turn of modern culture” (1991a, 26). This turn has a complex and multifaceted history. It was in many ways overdetermined. Like all cultural phenomena, the discourses and modes of being that inform contemporary spirituality have not arisen in a vacuum but are

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9 I use “spiritual milieu” to refer to the combined physical and social settings SBNRs inhabit. Conversely, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) use the term “holistic milieu” which they contrast with the “congregational domain.” They suggest that the two “constitute two largely separate and distinct worlds” (32). The reason I choose “spiritual milieu” instead is precisely due to its indeterminacy and broad scope. I do not wish to define it against anything, but rather, make sense of it on its own terms.

10 For instance, Peter Berger (1967) points out that we should not be surprised that “spirituality” has increased in popularity in a culture that values individualism and tends to reject tradition.
products of multiple and varied social and cultural forces that have developed over time. What scholars continue to disagree about is which intellectual, social, cultural and economic antecedents have played the most formative roles in shaping SBNR spirituality, as it exists today. Indeed, this remains a live issue. It is one that I repeatedly return to. Any critique of contemporary spirituality will require that one take a stance of some kind in these debates. However as they have been framed to date such disagreements have led to a polarization of views about the politics of spirituality. At one end of this polarized debate we have those who criticize what they call “spiritual individualism” (Oh and Sarkisian 2011, 300). They are concerned about a “spirituality” that deemphasizes community, political engagement, and ultimately leads away from social justice. At the opposing end of the debate are those who praise what they see as an “engaged spirituality” (303)—characterizing a “spirituality” that promotes social engagement, albeit in less than traditional forms.\(^\text{11}\) In what follows, I organize varying theories into these two opposing camps. However, before I do so, let me first identify the specific points of contention underlying these competing viewpoints.

As I stated earlier Taylor (1991a) argues the popularity of “spirituality” is the result of the “massive subjective turn of modern culture” (26). This turn he characterizes by a kind of “inwardness” or “interiorization” (2007, 540). Moreover, like many others (Thomas 2006; Heelas 2008; Jacobs 2013; Unger 2014) Taylor traces the high value placed on self-expression within the spiritual milieu to the Romantics and their “philosophy of nature as source … a force, an élan vital running through the world, which emerges in our own inner impulses” (1989, 373). This, he suggests, explains why SBNRs tend to

\(^{11}\) Interestingly, I suggest disciplinary boundaries have had a significant influence on determining how the social impact of “spirituality” has been assessed, revealing the inherent difficulties of conceptualizing the lived relationship between spirituality and social justice. I discuss this point in more depth in chapter 3.
emphasize the importance of emotion. He suggests the spiritual milieu—its encompassing a broad range of schools of thought and practice—is permeated by an “ethic of authenticity” coupled with a “principle of originality” that together purport that “[b]eing true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover” (1994, 31).

Many have taken a critical view of this, suggesting it leads to a shallow or superficial approach to life. For instance, Graham Ward (2006), a proponent of the spiritual individualism tag, argues that with the rise of SBNRs, “…a collection of religious people will emerge (are already emerging) who will be unable to tell the difference between orgasm, an adrenalin rush and an encounter with God” (185).

In contrast, Paul Heelas (2008) argues that what he calls “immanent spiritualities,” which sacralize subjectivity (e.g. being true to oneself, following one’s heart etc.) and emphasize the god within in lieu of the god without, serve and reflect core contemporary values (55-6). He sees at their core an ethic of subjectivity, evident “in the value attached to self-expression and fulfillment; to doing ‘what feels right’ … cultivating ‘emotional intelligence’ and respecting other people’s feelings” (80); however, at the same time he believes there lies within them a strong moral component. For instance, Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) observed within the spiritual milieu the valuing of moral sentiments like compassion (3). Similarly, Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead (2008) noticed an emphasis on the body, questions of self-worth and well-being, as well as an explicit valuing of relationships (265).

Philosopher Roger Gottlieb (2013) offers a slightly different narrative. He sees the eclecticism and religious hybridity exhibited within the spiritual milieu as the logical result of a combination of religious pluralism and globalization, in conjunction with the rise of science and rationality as the authoritative discourses in the West (71)—themselves products of the Enlightenment. A strong proponent

12 Arthur McCalla (2000) writes, “the Romantics transformed Enlightenment discourse on natural religion and shifted the focus of the philosophy of religion away from rational defenses of the content of revelation and to the identification of the distinctive character of religious experience” (368).
of engaged spirituality, Gottlieb suggests SBNR signifies a mature approach to religion, at odds with dogma, and in line with critical thought.\(^\text{13}\)

Conversely, philosopher David Webster (2011), in his not-so-subtly titled *Dispirited: How Contemporary Spirituality Makes us Stupid, Selfish and Unhappy* denigrates what he calls the “Mind, Body & Spirit” movement. Echoing Ward’s criticism, albeit with a different rationale, he argues contemporary spirituality is a product of postmodern thought that, if espoused, leads one to become “self-obsessed, narcissistic solipsists” and/or “idiots” (42) at odds with social justice.\(^\text{14}\) He writes, “The ethical challenge of faith demands that we strive to a model of character that does not let us off the hook when it matters. Whatever we think of this…it is clear that a ‘spiritual but not religious’ life makes no such demand” (18).\(^\text{15}\)

This criticism is not uncommon. The claim that contemporary spirituality is narcissistic and hedonistic—making up a core tenet of the spiritual individualism camp—has been advanced by scholars of religion, theologians, and religious leaders alike (e.g. Lasch 1980, 1987; Schneiders 2003). For example, Reverend Lillian Daniel (2013) argues that contemporary spirituality or “self-developed religion” (6), “fits too snugly with complacency” (Oppenheimer 2014, 1), and lacks depth (Daniel 2013, 6); while Martin E. Marty, an esteemed Protestant observer, dismisses “religionless spirituality” as “banal” and “solipsistic” (Schmidt 284). Mike Starkey (1997) extends this critique suggesting, “for all the

\(^{13}\) It also promulgates a third dichotomy that Zinnbauer et al. draw attention to: *negative religiousness versus positive spirituality*. They write, “spirituality is credited with embodying the loftier side of life and the highest in human potential, whereas religiousness is denigrated as mundane faith or as institutional hindrances to these potentials” (902).

\(^{14}\) Postmodernism, in its populist version, as Webster sees it, has shaped and informed contemporary spirituality by providing it with the assertion that “truth is relative,” or more specifically, that “truth is not only multiple…but that all attempts to offer an account of truth are of equal value” (2012, 29). Others who view contemporary spirituality as essentially linked to postmodernism include Zygmunt Bauman 1998; Zinnbauer et al. 1999; Anne C. Jacobs 2013; David Tacey 2004, among others.

\(^{15}\) These critiques, offered by philosophers, unsurprisingly, tend to privilege the intellectual currents that inform SBNR spirituality above all else.
use of vogue terms such as ‘deep’, ‘profound’, ‘inner’ and ‘mystery’, such a spirituality is appallingly shallow” (119).

Such criticisms tend to invoke what Heelas (2008) calls “the ‘reduction’ to consumption strategy.” This is a form of critique which essentially seeks to “show that the sacred has taken corrupt forms under the influence of modernity” (83). Adam Possamai (2003), for instance, has suggested that contemporary spirituality is simply “religion à la carte” (35), while Carrette and King patronizingly (2005) call it a “pick and mix” (128) approach to religion—denoting the ultimate expression of a religion at home in a consumer culture. The idea is that SBNRs shop through various religious markets for the resources they believe will satisfy them; as opposed to submitting to one single religious tradition and authority (Redden 2002). Resultantly, they are attacked for their “consumer self-indulgence” (Bauman 1998, 70), which these scholars suppose keeps them too inward looking to aid the local or global communities of which they are members.

The above critiques, valid in some respects, share a common methodological approach: they tend to assess the social efficacy of “spirituality” in comparison with that of “organized religion.” That is, they use what they consider real religion as a blueprint against which “spirituality” is measured. Thus they implicitly adhere to the same binary logic that SBNRs themselves endorse—and thereby further perpetuate the polarization of organized religion versus personal spirituality.16 Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the 1985 now-classic Habits of the Heart, in which Robert Bellah and coauthors, studying contemporary spirituality reported, “the overblown ideals of self-reliance and self-expression were seriously undermining the welfare of community, family and congregation” (269). These scholars argued that “spirituality” without “religion” failed to connect the individual with any particular

16 I am not here criticizing this conceptual binary, nor am I suggesting that it is entirely erroneous. Rather, I merely wish to draw attention to the fact that despite their otherwise opposing viewpoints, both critics and proponents of SBNR spirituality tend to assume that what goes by “religion” and what goes by “spirituality” are categorically distinct entities.
community, thus enabling the self to run amok without moral or political accountability (Fuller 159). Although this critique is indeed helpful in understanding some of the political implications of contemporary spirituality, as Bender and McRoberts note, it is associated with a political agenda of its own. Bender and McRoberts argue that in forcing a hard conceptual distinction between spirituality and religion, defenders of religion have been able to make “religion” (notoriously difficult to pin down), something “solid”—consequently rendering ‘spirituality’ religion’s “sloppy shadow” or “the crazy uncle upon whom the dysfunction of the entire family is projected” (20). Here we see how methodological commitments, informed by certain political leanings, can play an influential role in shaping the academic discourses on SBNRs.

Robert Forman (2004) heralds what he calls the Grassroots Spirituality Movement, which he attributes to “the rise of the feminine voice and sensibility” (115) and an increasing recognition of the importance of intuitive and embodied knowledge (125). Echoing New Age prophecies of the inevitability of an “evolving consciousness,” Forman views the Spirituality Movement as evidence of a progressive turn in history—where traditional “religion” is finally overcome by enlightened “spirituality.” Comprising a number of disparate characteristics—a focus on the personal, inner work, connectedness, intimacy, and being in relationship (46-7)—he suggests that SBNR spirituality reflects a panentheistic\(^{17}\) theology that “fits, like a key in a lock, with our democratic and egalitarian mindset.” (59).\(^{18}\)

David Tacey (2004) similarly praises what he calls the Spirituality Revolution. Interestingly, although he agrees with Webster that SBNR spirituality is largely the result of postmodernism since it challenges all meta-narratives (especially those to do with “religion”), unlike Webster he views this in a

\(^{17}\) A panentheistic notion of the divine “is bound up with the life of the cosmos. God is no separate entity, far removed from the cosmos, but deeply bound up with its fabric and life. The divine is that in which all things lives and move and have their being” (Lynch 2007, 48).

\(^{18}\) Whether Forman is on to something we shall see, but it is important to recognize that rather than evaluating “spirituality” on its own terms, he reproduces the same binary as Bellah and coauthors. That is, he defines spirituality in opposition to religion.
positive light. For Tacey, postmodernism challenges the hierarchy of institutional forms of religion, thereby equalizing all sources of the sacred. A strong proponent of engaged spirituality and taking a page from William James’s (1990 [1901]) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Tacey (2011) suggests, “Spirituality is the primary element and religion is secondary” (38).

Alternatively, Wade Clark Roof (1993; 1999) and Robert Wuthnow (1998; 2007) suggest that SBNR spirituality has its roots primarily in the rise and coming-of-age of the Baby Boomers in America. Roof (1999) suggests that as a result of such massive social and cultural changes—as well as globalization, an increase in transnational migration, cross cultural interaction, the rising influence of the media and visual imagery in contemporary societies, and an “expanding consumer-oriented culture targeting the self as an arena for marketing” (8)—there emerged a “popular spirituality,” which was characterized by “a qualitative shift from questioned belief to a more open, questing mood” (9). This shift, Roof argues, was facilitated by what he calls “an expanded spiritual marketplace” (10) that proliferated during the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s (Lynch 2007; Heelas 2008). This led to what Linda Mercadante (2014) calls a “syncretist or bricoleur tendency,” whereby a “perennial wisdom” was touted, that enabled spiritual practitioners to pull from various religious traditions both East and West in origin (70). Although he recognizes individualism at play in the spiritual milieu, Roof, endorsing engaged spirituality, argues that the emphasis on self-transformation often fosters concern for broader social change (Oh and Sarkisian 2011, 304).

The critiques outlined above tend to contrast the “spirituality of seeking” (Wuthnow 1998, 147) of SBNRs with one of tradition, whereby seeking is associated with free will and autonomy, while tradition remains associated with passive and rigid conformity to a specific tradition. Despite their areas

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19 Despite the anti-institutional rhetoric advanced by SBNRs, scholars have noted that the rise of spirituality has been accompanied by the establishment of numerous spiritual organizations and groups such as “New Age groups, twelve-step groups, yoga groups, meditation groups, and others” (Zinnbauer et al. 1999, 903).
of disagreement they occupy common ground in their appeal and conflation of the normative distinctions between spirituality/religion, individual/institutional, and private/public. Indeed, such contrasts are at play when scholars both praise and criticize SBNRs for their so-called “pick and mix” approach to religion. However, some scholars have argued such an impression of contemporary spirituality is misleading.

For example, some in the engaged spirituality camp view SBNR as the culmination of a long-standing tradition of Liberal religion in America—thus radically challenging the notion that SBNRs are expressing their individuality outside of the confines of tradition or history (Fuller 2001; Schmidt 2012).20 They argue that contemporary spirituality is a product of the Protestant Reformation’s encounter with Liberalism—the dominant political theory of Western Europe—further suggesting it was this nexus that set the stage for and spawned the many developments in America during the 19th and 20th centuries, which continue to inform the lived tradition of contemporary spirituality today (Albanese 2007).

In his 2007 book *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century* Gordon Lynch stresses the politically progressive nature of contemporary spirituality: “[it] offers a viable world view and ethos that grounds sympathy for liberal values” (14). He also suggests it has arisen “out of various initiatives to develop a spirituality that is not bound up with patriarchal beliefs and structures, and which can be a relevant and liberating resource for women” (25).

Although the accounts of Schmidt and Lynch present contemporary spirituality as relatively organized and uniform in nature, critical theorists might argue that their theories bespeak an unspoken privileging of the superstructure over the base. That is to say, these accounts dismiss too quickly the material conditions that enabled the flourishing of contemporary spirituality, as well as the various ways in which SBNR discourses naturalize certain economic realities and not others. The charge might run, 

20 It also challenges what Taylor (2007) calls the “subtraction story” of secularization (for an example of this see Steve Bruce’s (2002) *God Is Dead*).
then, that the (political) nature of this “turn inward,” toward the self, away from so-called “life-as” religion, is only adequately comprehensible by means of analyzing the social and economic developments that these accounts dismiss, if not ignore.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, for example, argue that since the birth of modern psychology, pioneered by William James, and formatively developed by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, among others, “there has been a slow process of ‘psychologizing’ human experience” (2005, 58). They posit that in applying his pragmatism to religion, James reduced “religion” to what it did for individuals engaged with/in it, thereby stimulating a shift in religious thought away from belief, toward the experience of believing. In other words, the rise of psychology as an authoritative discourse led to a synthesis of psychology and religion, whereby religion was “privatized” by being “relegated to the individual’s psyche” (14). This shift gave birth to modern self-help/therapy culture, whereby individuals seek spiritual (a.k.a. therapeutic) solutions to social problems, rather than civic ones (Bellah et al. 1985). Carrette and King thus link the rise of psychology as an authoritative discourse with the rise of what they call “capitalist spirituality” (6). They suggest that with the increase of neoliberal economic policies the modern individual self has become a site of disciplinary control. They write, “with the emergence of capitalist spirituality the freedom of the individual to express their inner nature through ‘spirituality’ becomes subordinated to the demands of corporate business culture and the needs of a flexible competitive economy” (45). Consequently, Carrette and King, along with many others (Bauman 1998; Lau 2000; Redden 2002; Jameson 1991; Possamai 2003) in the spiritual individualism camp argue contemporary spirituality is a byproduct of late-capitalism.

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21 They argue that Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers popularized it in what is often referred to as the Human Potential Movement (Carrette and King 2005, 71).

22 I admit that my project is itself a product of this intellectual lineage. Given my own pragmatic interests in the relationship between spirituality and social justice, one might argue that I am reducing “spirituality” to what it does. Taking heed of criticisms directed at psychological theories of religion I deliberately try to keep both micro- and the macro-levels of society in my sights.
Véronique Altglas (2014) refining this critique suggests that “spirituality” presents itself as a process through which individuals become active and autonomous agents of their own regulation. Ultimately, the realization of the self (and what kind of self is desired to be realized) is not “natural” but “reflects neoliberalism’s political and economic structures” (239). She lambasts those scholars who, in her opinion, “overestimate personal subjectivity, “choice,” and “freedom” in the making of spiritual bricolage, or in the study of “spirituality” (8). She argues the spiritual milieu is a site of blurred boundaries between the religious and the therapeutic (205) in which members of the “petite bourgeoisie” (282) use “spiritual” resources in order to increase their cultural competence and social capital through work on their “selves” (292). Such self-work, some scholars have argued, is directly tied to what William Davies (2015) has called the modern happiness industry, which places responsibility inordinately on the backs of individuals to maintain their physical, emotional and mental health as well as their material security (for similar critiques see Ehrenreich 2009; Lofton 2011; Aschoff 2015).

Craig Martin (2014) sums this up by arguing that the SBNR discourse is supported by specific ideological strands that naturalize neoliberal logics: quietism or accommodationism (Carrette and King 2005; González 2015), consumerism (Starkey 1997; Bruce 2000; Possamai 2003, 2005), promotion of productivity (Lau 2000), and anti-structuralism or individualism (Bellah et al. 1985; Houtman and Mascini 2002). Thus, in contrast to Forman and Tacey, Martin views “spirituality” not as a source of social transformation, but rather, following Marx, as a sedative for deep human unhappiness caused by economic relations inherent to modern capitalism.

23 Accommodationism, “sanctions existing political or economic structures by encouraging individuals to accept and accommodate themselves to such structures, perhaps by naturalizing the latter or presenting them as inevitable.” Consumerism is supported by SBNR discourse, in that it “sacralizes consumer choice while simultaneously obscuring what might motivate individual consumer choices.” Productivity is supported by SBNR discourse, in that “it encourages individuals to reflexively work on their ‘self’ in order to accommodate themselves to work or career and to increase their productivity”; and Individualism is supported by SBNR discourse, in that it “assigns responsibility to individuals rather than institutions or social structures” (Martin 88).
Paul Heelas (2008) has observed that there exists a “pronounced contrast” (84) within the academic literature on SBNRs. Despite there being proponents and pundits championing both sides of the debate, the voices who seek to criticize or disparage SBNR spirituality have been both louder and more forceful. From Robert Bellah and coauthors’ (1985) conflation of contemporary spirituality with American individualism in its worst form; to Kimberley Lau’s (2000) decrying the consumeristic ethos she views as the essence of what goes by “New Age spirituality”; to Steve Bruce’s (2002) characterization of individual religion/spirituality as “impotent”; to Jeremy Carrette and Richard King’s (2005) pronouncement that contemporary spirituality is “the psychological sedative for a culture that is in the process of rejecting values of community and social justice” (21); to Craig Martin’s (2014) deeming SBNR spirituality “the opiate of the bourgeoisie”—there is no shortage of criticism of contemporary spirituality within the academy (and beyond). This makes some sense given the ubiquity of “spirituality” in the marketplace today, as well as the burgeoning book industry associated with it.24 In Shape-Shifting Capital George González (2015) remarks on what he calls the “spiritual turn” in business management, and “Capitalism’s ‘coming out’ as a spiritual body” (7). He lists the vast array of newly emerging yet astonishingly large body of organizational literature bridging the divide between spirituality and business.25 It would seem what Ernest Chu (2007) calls “Spiritual Capitalism” is evidently becoming

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25 “Literature in the field includes such evocative titles as Awakening Corporate Soul—Four Paths to Unleash the Power of People at Work, Bringing your Soul to Work: An Everyday Practice... Seven Secrets of the Corporate Mystic, The Corporate Mystic: A Guide for Visionaries With Their Feet on the Ground, and Corporate Soul—The Monk within the Manager” (González 2015, 3).
more and more mainstream. In light of this fact there are good reasons for the increased academic attention to the political economic context out of which SBNR spirituality emerges.\textsuperscript{26}

Although I do not disagree outright with any of these criticisms, what I disagree with is their, generally speaking, reductionist tendencies, and their blanketing coverage of a phenomenon far too complex to be quickly caricatured. Moreover, such criticisms tend to privilege analysis of what Marxists call base over superstructure, thereby leaving little room to seriously reflect on individual agency or personal history; or, what I am calling the “personal politics” of contemporary spirituality. They also tend to equate contemporary spirituality with its representation in popular literature, films and other such popular cultural media. Contemporary spirituality as it is lived by individuals, has not received adequate consideration. While pop cultural psychologized or phenomenological accounts of contemporary spirituality have privileged its impact on the micro level, structuralist accounts have tended to focus entirely on the macro level, thereby dismissing or ignoring its importance in the everyday experiences of actual persons.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The accounts just outlined are not exhaustive of the etic discourses on SBNR or contemporary spirituality; however, they do highlight the most influential and significant methodological approaches and theories in the field today. These are the approaches, I argue, that any scholar seeking to contribute to this field of inquiry must necessarily grapple with. They touch on integral aspects of the SBNR discourse, and raise questions that are fundamental to discerning the political qualities of “spirituality” as both a discursive construct and a lived reality. It is especially important to understand the scholarship on the

\textsuperscript{26} Other criticisms include: “religion a la carte” (Possamai 2003), “pix and mix,” (Carrette and King 2005), to “do-it-yourself-religion” (Baerveldt 1996), “spiritual consumerism” (King 2008, 10), “spiritual tourism” (10), “consumer spirituality” (Lynch 2002, 105) and “capitalist spirituality” (Carrette and King 2005).
subject since “Contemporary understandings of religion, religious experience, and spirituality are not only ‘studied by’ historians and sociologists, they are also forged in ongoing interactions between groups of scholars and laypeople” (Bender 2010, 14). The truth of this is manifested in my examination of the emic accounts of my research participants.

I mentioned at the outset of this chapter that like all cultural phenomena, the discourses and modes of being that fall within the purview of contemporary spirituality have not arisen in a vacuum but are products of multiple and varied social and cultural forces that have developed over time, and that what scholars continue to disagree about is which intellectual, social, cultural and economic antecedents have played the most formative roles in shaping them. I also mentioned that this remains a live issue, one that I will inevitably have to take a stance on. However, I believe that today we face what Taylor calls “a quite new predicament” (2007, 513). I think that this calls for a different response than taking a position on either side of the debate outlined above. The reasoning motivating my position is twofold. First, because I acknowledge that what goes by the name of contemporary spirituality is intimately tied to the many and multifaceted developments that paved the way for what we (controversially) call modernity, and that they often developed diachronically as reactions to one another, this suggests that the range of discourses at large in the spiritual milieu are not likely to always exist in harmony (despite their ontological interdependence). Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, modernity was in many ways overdetermined. Second, given the massive subjective turn of modern culture it is reasonable to suppose that the discourses which are activated will be, although certainly influenced by structural constraints, also influenced by
positionality and biography.\textsuperscript{27} And that these are not reducible to the social structures within which individuals are positioned.\textsuperscript{28}

Therefore, throughout this thesis, I attempt to link the historical tributaries that inform my research participants’ accounts, the social contexts in which they exist, and the biographical particularities that play such a formative role in shaping their lived experiences. I seek to honour Durkheim’s insight that “religion” (or in this case “spirituality”) is “an eminently collective thing” (Durkheim 1971 [1915], 47), while at the same time allowing for what Michel De Certeau (1984) called “tactics,” referring to the ability of individuals “to make space for themselves and to express their self-determination” (Sheldrake 2012, 213).\textsuperscript{29}

Bender (2010) is right to say that the current debates surrounding SBNRs often “confound more than they illuminate” (5). Given the controversies about the meaning of “spirituality” we might well wonder, with Nancy Ammerman (2013), “Is ‘spirituality’ indeed a signifier that can mean whatever each person wants it to mean?” (265). In short, my answer is no, “spirituality” does not, in fact, mean anything anyone says it means. However, this is not to say that the experience of socio-political realities made possible by SBNR discourses are not widely variable. In what follows I take up the challenge issued by Bender and McRoberts: “we encourage scholars to risk more expansive and nuanced conceptualizations of spirituality… so as to better apprehend the phenomena that confront us” (21). Rather than seeking to buttress or back one side of the polarized debate, my analysis tries to take the best from many sides and to

\textsuperscript{27} Although it remains true that individual positionality and biography will be located within (and made possible by) certain social, political and economic structures, my point is that their meanings are not reducible to, nor can they be entirely explained by, those structures.

\textsuperscript{28} I therefore take a similar view to Steve Bruce and Marta Trzebietowska (2012), who suggest that the reasons why people become interested in spirituality “are likely to involve idiosyncratic features of an individual’s biography: family upbringing, chance encounters with personally impressive religious or spiritual people, accidents of career that close one door and open another, strains of personal relationships that lead someone to look for cosmic explanations for his or her fate, and the like” (7).

\textsuperscript{29} This task is implied in González’s rhetorical question, “Can we outline the imprint of ideology in capitalist “spirituality” and, at once, attempt to do justice to the biographically inflected phenomenology of practice?” (23).
problematize and refine their most extreme versions.
Chapter 3

Methodological Frameworks

When I first began my literature review on this topic, it struck me how little consensus there existed between scholars within and across disciplines with regard to what “spiritual but not religious” signified. Early on, I came to recognize that much of the contention could be boiled down to a matter of differing methodological commitments and assumptions. That is, it became clear to me that what one thought of “spirituality” as purportedly distinct from “religion,” was formatively shaped by, how one chose to study it, where one chose to study it from, and what one studied it for.30

In their paper Bender and McRoberts (2012) argue that a new paradigm is necessary in order to study “spirituality” (4). They criticize scholars who unthinkingly assume all articulations of “spirituality” necessarily signify the same thing; for in doing so they reify a concept that likely has no ontological basis in reality. Such scholars fail to recognize the varying articulations and manifestations of spirituality across place and time. Bender and McRoberts thus identified three focal points from which to study “spirituality”: 1) genealogical approaches, used to “believe the supposed self-evidence of conventional categories by tracing emergence, the variant usages, and the apparent naturalization of concepts” (6). 2) Paying attention to sites of “spirituality” and its contextual variations; thus offering localized, rather than sweeping accounts. And 3) Analyses of the interaction/interplay between academic and popular constructions of the “spiritual” (4).

This thesis is my attempt to exemplify and contribute to this new paradigm. I aim to do so, first, by reflecting upon the historical antecedents that I suggest are being activated or are at work in shaping

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30 Gordon Lynch (2007) jokes, “Writing about the new spirituality functions as a kind of religious and cultural Rorschach test, where what the researcher sees is often a projection of their own values, hopes and concerns” (7). This being said, I am certainly not suggesting that “spirituality” is inherently vacuous, or that methodological commitments make all the difference.
and informing my research participants’ articulations of “spirituality.” Although I do not assume each individual’s “spirituality” can be easily linked to a specific time and place, I acknowledge that nothing is ahistorical, thus I do my best to place their emic accounts in a specific context, and link them to specific intellectual and social currents, in order to best understand their implications. Much of my historical analysis is indebted to the thought of Charles Taylor, especially as it is expressed in his seminal works *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. These masterful works provide the backbone of my genealogical analysis, and shape much of my thought throughout.

One might say I am engaged in a kind of philosophical anthropology, seeking to uncover the conceptual traces of the past as they relate to the present. I believe doing so allows us to better understand the socio-political nature of contemporary spirituality, in its many manifestations. Accordingly, there are a number of theoretical and methodological assumptions which inform the analysis that follows that should be made explicit.

### 3.1 I Treat “Spirituality” as a Cultural Phenomenon

The first is that I treat “spirituality” as a cultural phenomenon rather than a specifically “religious” one.\(^{31}\) That is to say, I see little advantage in treating contemporary spirituality as something *sui generis*; or as an entity that has a strict categorical relationship with religion.\(^{32}\) Instead, following Bender (2010), I simply assume that, “spirituality, whatever it is and however it is defined, is entangled in social life, in history, and in our academic and nonacademic imaginations” (5). Thus my primary focus is to shed light on, and critically examine, what discourses informed my research participants’ articulations of “spirituality” and what (socio-political) realities they make possible. Accordingly, I did not assume

\(^{31}\) Given its transdisciplinary approach, its concern with the “everyday lives of users” (Johnson et al. 2004, 42), as well as its focus on social justice and the political dynamics of culture, I suggest cultural studies offers a critical framework for analyzing contemporary spirituality among the millennial generation in Canada.

\(^{32}\) Also, given the rampant and seemingly never-ending debate surrounding the question of how to define “religion,” I thought it best to, as much as possible, steer clear of this intellectual minefield.
from the outset that all articulations of “spirituality” signified the same thing. I took “spirituality” to be an emic term—one that had no a priori meaning. This being said, I suggest SBNR is of scholarly interest, in part because it allows us to better understand how individuals in contemporary society think about, and (re)construct “religion.” Following in the stead of Bender and Ammerman in this thesis I do not operate under the presumption that “spirituality” necessarily holds any categorical relation whatsoever to “religion,” but instead seek to illuminate the relationships that have developed within specific political, cultural and demographic settings between “spiritual” and “religious”—or “nonreligious”—identities, discourses and concepts.33

3.2 I Espouse a Lived Religion Framework

I utilize the methodological framework of Lived Religion (or, perhaps more accurately in this case: Lived Spirituality—or even better, Spirituality as lived).34 Lived Religion, pioneered by historians of religion Robert Orsi and David D. Hall, is a methodology “rooted less in sociology than in cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion” (Hall 1997, vii), for its focus lies in uncovering and examining individuals’ own accounts and everyday practices. McGuire defines Lived Religion as the study of “how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary persons (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives” (12). This emphasis on the lived is important, for it points to a direction not often taken in the critical study of religion: going to individuals where they stand (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2013, 177). In studying contemporary

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33 In so doing, I also hope to avoid the much heated, and in-vogue, meta-debate going on in the field of religious studies over the taxonomy and concepts we use to define “religion”—over what “religion” is. Although I recognize that many academics’ definitional concerns are grounded in deep political commitments and thus should not be viewed as inconsequential, I suggest, because scholars have largely ignored the ways in which “spirituality” and “religion” are articulated and applied on the ground, by everyday persons, this debate reflects one more way in which the academy has solidified its reputation as an ivory tower institution far removed and out of touch with the realities of most laypeople.

34 Given my agnosticism toward what “religion” means, I seek to emphasize the “lived” aspect—referring to how individuals themselves live their “spirituality.”
spirituality from this vantage point, I hope to shed light on how in its lived form, “spirituality” takes on many shapes, and thus cannot be understood comprehensively without taking into account the many socio-cultural, and even biographical factors informing its varying articulations.\(^{35}\)

I recognize that, ideally, my qualitative data, rather than being limited to semi-structured interviews, would be derived from ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and the like. As Bender notes, it remains true that “interview settings are not everyday contexts and are not perceived as such by either interviewers or respondents” and that, resultanty, “interviews provide accounts of religious practice that may indeed be remembered differently from the way it was practiced” (2003, 154).

I accept therefore that although I claim a lived religion framework, my data might not accurately reflect the everyday lives of my research participants. Nevertheless, I would argue that even ethnographic studies are partial in a certain sense, for unless the research participants are unaware of the researcher, their presence will inevitably influence them. Indeed, this is a dilemma inherent to social studies.

The question remains, however, as to the degree to which I have taken the subjective perspectives of my participants seriously without unreflectively or uncritically reproducing my own biases. I will admit that although I strove to capture the subjective realities and experiences of my participants as accurately as possible, I, like any cultural researcher, was/am not a neutral observer. The relevant debate regarding representation in the social sciences is often dichotomously couched as being between emic and etic, or insider and outsider, perspectives.\(^{36}\) Russell T. McCutcheon (1999) outlines the supposed distinction: “the emic (insider) perspective is an attempt “to produce as faithfully as possible – in a word, to describe – the informant’s own descriptions … The etic perspective is the observer’s subsequent

\(^{35}\) McGuire (2008) writes, “when we focus on religion-as-lived, we discover that religion—rather than being a single entity—is made up of diverse, complex, and ever changing mixtures of beliefs and practices, as well as relationships, experiences, and commitments” (187).

\(^{36}\) Hanh et al. note (2011) that the concepts of etic and emic were “coined more than fifty years ago by the linguist Kenneth Pike in his work associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics ” (145).
attempt to take the descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare – in a word redescribe – that information in terms of a system of their own making …” (17). In turn, although I espouse a lived religion framework, I recognize that the analysis proffered here is more etic than it is emic. This is because although I may attempt to reproduce the accounts of my participants as faithfully as possible, because I am engaged in a critical analysis of contemporary spirituality as a cultural phenomenon, I simultaneously reinterpret their accounts in light of a variety of factors that may, in fact, be concomitant whilst extraneous to their lived experiences. This being said, like James L. Olive (2014), I would challenge the view that a truly emic perspective could ever be attained.37 This is because “differences between emic and etic perspectives are always present due to the researcher’s own value system which ultimately guides the design, execution, and reporting of a study” (15). Even in ethnographic studies conducted by the most empathic and reflexive researchers neutrality remains an elusive ideal. Resultantly, many scholars have even begun to question the usefulness of the dichotomy.38 Offering an explanation for this, Merriam et al. (2001) write “in the course of a study, not only will the researcher experience moments of being both insider and outsider, but … these positions are relative to the cultural values and norms of both the researcher and the participants” (415-6). Adding, “there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two [emic and etic] states” (405). Similarly, Kim Knott (2010) writes, “the distinction between insider and outsider becomes irrelevant when we recognise that all those who participate, whether of the faith or not, contribute to the co-construction of the story” (269).

37 Olive writes, “Regardless of the methodology being employed, many researchers of social behavior reside within the tension between the two extremes. Given the inescapable subjectivity that every researcher brings to a study through his or her past experiences, ideas and perspectives, a solely emic perspective is impossible to achieve. Conversely, if a researcher takes a purely etic perspective or approach to a study, he or she risks the possibility of overlooking the hidden nuances, meanings and concepts within a culture that can only be gleaned through interviews and observations (2014, 13).

38 Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011) even goes so far as to say the insider-outsider debate is a “pseudo-problem” that “obscures more than it discloses” (30). See his “Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion.”
In sum, although I acknowledge that there exists a slight tension in assessing the dominant etic accounts of contemporary spirituality with my own, if we accept that a purely emic account of contemporary spirituality is an unattainable ideal, then it would seem that etic accounts which look to foreground the subjective perspectives of their research participants and take seriously their lived experiences—as I have attempted to do here—ought to be considered, at the very least, more representative of how spirituality is practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary persons in the context of their everyday lives than those which do not. Or, in other words, although I offer an “etic” account, because my analysis is grounded in the discursive accounts of my participants (as opposed to, say, those found in popular culture and mainstream media), I may justifiably claim to shed light on contemporary spirituality in its lived form.

3.2 I Espouse an Interpretivist Perspective

Along with applying a Lived Religion framework, I also espouse an Interpretivist perspective, which assumes that “the individual and society are inseparable; the relationship is a mutually interdependent one rather than a one-sided deterministic one” (O’Donoghue 2007, 16). In other words, such a framework allows for the acknowledgment of both individual agency and social structure in determining/influencing human action by placing subjective meanings and their interpretations at the heart of social life (Wray 2013, xxii). While this allows this work to contend with a core issue in the field of cultural studies—to what degree are we, as individuals in modern society, free?—it also justifies traversing disciplinary boundaries. Given this epistemological stance, I am as interested and concerned

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39 The sociological perspective often associated with this approach is Symbolic Interactionism (see George Herbert Mead’s (1934) Mind, Self and Society).
40 Robert Orsi (1997) writes that the scholar of Lived religion seeks to join “a broader debate among contemporary intellectuals about the nature and limits of autonomy within the disciplinary confines of culture” (14).
41 Indeed, contemporary “spirituality,” as a topic of study, illustrates just how questionable (and even arbitrary) the lines drawn to separate supposedly distinct disciplinary fields are. Robert Bellah et al. (1985) write,
with how individuals construct their own realities and life worlds, as I am with the social structures they are embedded within. Thus, I pay particular attention to the self-described life histories of my interviewees, for it is through a careful examination of personal narratives about spirituality and meaningful life events, that we can better grasp the nature/s of this phenomenon (Beaman and Beyer 2013, 130).

3.3 I Give Weight to Both Micro and Macro Perspectives

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, I believe *how* one studies “spirituality”—based on the disciplinary and methodological approaches one utilizes—has a significant impact on the conclusions one comes to. Indeed, the primary source of contention within the academic literature on SBNRs often, although not always, derives from a clash of fundamental disciplinary modes or perspectives. For instance, those studying “spirituality” from a psychological perspective have tended to see it, unsurprisingly, as a purely psychological phenomenon; and thus have praised or denigrated it for its psychological benefits/detriments. While on the other hand, those in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and cultural studies, have tended to treat it as a socio-historical/cultural phenomenon, largely ignoring (or at least devaluing) the impact it may have on/for the individual. Although there are some rare examples of true interdisciplinary research done on SBNRs (see for example Bender 2010) they are few and far between. I hope to fill the gap, as it were, by utilizing a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach. In sum, because I consider “spirituality” to be a cultural phenomenon, I recognize that it is simultaneously phenomenological, historical, psychological, and political in nature, and thus seek to understand it accordingly. I suggest that only by shifting between micro- and macro theoretical views of society—that is, examining the ways in which “spirituality” is

“The most important boundary that must be transcended is the recent and quite arbitrary boundary between the social sciences and the humanities” (300-301).
applied and experienced across varying perspectives, and levels of experience—can we understand its social impact/s. 42

3.4 I Explore a Localized Site of Spirituality: Canadian Millennials

In designing this research project, I took heed of Bender and McRoberts’s advice to identify and explore a localized site of “spirituality.” That localized site was a research sample of twenty Canadian millennials who self identify as SBNR. Let me first explain why I chose the Canadian context, and then why I limited my scope to millennials.

There is no denying that reasons of research convenience, and budgetary constraints led me to focus my research scope on the Canadian context, however, the purposes for doing so also extend beyond this. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the academic literature on SBNR or contemporary spirituality pertains to either an American (Schmidt 2012; Fuller 2001; Forman 2004; Bender 2010) or U.K. context (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: Heelas 2008; Bruce 2000). There has been little research done on how SBNR spirituality has manifested in Canada. In some ways, many of the current religious trends taking place in the West can be generalized to the Canadian context. 43 Take, for instance, the rising rate of religious “nones” in Canada (29 percent as of 2011)—many of whom self-identify as SBNR (Beaman and Beyer 2013, 129)—which the Pew Research Centre concludes is the result of “generational replacement” (2013). As well as the simultaneous rise in affiliation with minority religions—the result of, among other things, diverse population migrations over the past four decades or more. Moreover, the global spread of

42 Although I do not seek to make any sweeping generalizations about the spiritual milieu, or SBNRs per se, my goal is to illustrate the considerable diversity of people’s lived spirituality—“differences in the depth of experience, amount of effort and discipline in practice, and degree of connection or commitment to others” (McGuire 2008, 154)—which often have their roots in the biographical particularities of these individuals.

43 Due to the lack of substantive research done on SBNRs in Canada, much of the theoretical and sociological analysis of contemporary spirituality I draw from is derived from either a U.K. or American context.
American entertainment and popular culture, and its increasing dominance within Canada, has in many ways diminished any peculiarities that distinguished Canadians from their neighbours to the south.\footnote{\textit{Thus theologian Linda Mercadante (2014) has observed, “Whether in Canada, Mexico, or Scotland, I found lively SBNR communities which echoed themes very similar to those I heard in the United States. Other researchers discovered the same thing” (72).}}

However, I assumed that given Canada’s distinct history, as well as Canadians’ penchant for defining themselves in contrast with Americans, there may well be distinct cultural particularities that the existing research done on spirituality in Canada has not accounted for. For instance, about 20 percent of Canada’s current population was born in some other country (Pew Research Centre 2013) compared to only 13 percent in the United States. Thus, the racial and ethnic plurality is much higher in Canada than in the U.S (a factor, I suggest, that makes a significant difference). Indeed, Canadians tend to pride themselves on the multicultural nature of their country, publicly characterizing Canadian society as a peaceful mosaic of differing ethnicities and cultures (Young 2008, 85). Of course there are important critiques of this view of Canadian reality especially as it is experienced by racialized people and members of marginalized cultures and communities in Canada, including, notably indigenous peoples and their descendants. Nonetheless, the dominant account of cultural diversity in Canada stands in contrast to the ideology of the American melting pot. Moreover, Canada has its own distinct history with respect to religion—a history that informs the public discourses available to those seeking to construct “spirituality.” Thus, in narrowing my scope to Canadian millennials, I sought to identify whether cultural trends that seem to characterize American society today, can be aptly applied to the Canadian context, or whether or not some revisions are necessary. I also sought to capture, or even glimpse, the changing nature of “religion” in the minds and lives of Canadians, as we collectively undergo this dramatic shift in religious/cultural climate.\footnote{\textit{As Reginald Bibby (2009) asserts, “Four decades of trend-tracking reveal that religion in Canada is not what it used to be” (10).}}
As for my choice to narrow my research scope to millennials, early on in my literature review I became aware that scholars of spirituality had, in the past three decades or so, begun to study the “spirituality” of generations (see Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999; Lynch 2002). However, there had been little research done on how “spirituality” was being constructed among Millennials (those born after 1982).\(^{46}\) Also lacking in the literature were studies conducted on SBNRs in Canada, although there were a few (see for example Beaman and Beyer 2008). This seemed odd, given the rapid social changes that have occurred in the past two decades—when Millennials were coming of age—as well as the fact that one-quarter of Canadian Millennials purportedly consider themselves “Spiritual but not Religious” (National Post 2012); a statistic noted widely in Canadian media.\(^{47}\) It thus made sense to localize my research and focus on Canadian Millennials. Not only had little research been conducted on them, but given my own status as a millennial I figured I would have an advantage when it came to recruiting and interviewing participants.

**Research Process and Methods**

I began this project by reviewing all of the literature available to me on the broad and expansive topics “Spiritual but Not Religious” and “Contemporary Spirituality.” Although much of the literature I read came out of the fields of religious studies and cultural studies, I read a significant amount belonging to the fields of philosophy, sociology, health studies, medicine, psychology, education, history, literary criticism and theology. I also read a significant amount of what might be called popular spiritual texts.\(^{48}\) This, I surmised, would give me a more comprehensive understanding of how “spirituality” was being

\(^{46}\) An example is Linda Mercadante’s (2014) *Belief without Borders*, however, this study looked at SBNRs across generations and had very little on Millennials specifically. Moreover, given her theological background, her research interests focused on belief, thereby ignoring the “practice” aspect of her interviewees’ spiritual lives.

\(^{47}\) “All signs point to the ‘spiritual, not religious’ self-definition as becoming more of a reality of our time” (Ottawa Citizen 2013).

\(^{48}\) I tended to read only those that had some kind of following behind them; for instance, those that had been on a best-seller list, or had sold over a million copies worldwide. I did this in order to acquaint myself with how “spirituality” was being (re)presented in public/media-driven discourse.
presented in various discursive contexts, as well as provide insight into the interplay between scholarly and popular accounts of the “spiritual.”

I also felt it important to have a comprehensive understanding of how “spirituality” was being used in varying social contexts. Thus, I treated as “data” any other information I came across that I thought related to the SBNR phenomenon including internet sites, television programs, films, advertising, posters and so on. Also, at the outset of my Masters, I co-organized a non-academic conference, open to the public, entitled “Living Spiritually.” The goal was to bring together a diverse group of people in one place where they could share their thoughts and feelings about what it meant to be “spiritual but not religious.”\textsuperscript{49} This conference helped me gather and organize my initial impressions about “contemporary spirituality” as a cultural phenomenon, as well as opened my eyes to the diversity inherent to the spiritual milieu. Also, during the second term of my first year, I was a Teaching Assistant for a Fourth Year Religious Studies Honours Seminar. The course title and topic was “Spiritual but Not Religious.” The ideas provoked and shared in that weekly seminar were also incredibly informative, not because the students in the class were themselves SBNR, but because they generally weren’t. I was able to witness first-hand the disjunction that so often occurs between scholarly/academic accounts of “spirituality” and the lived realities of those they are supposed to represent.

3.5 The Online Survey

I began by devising an online survey that I estimated would take twenty-five minutes to complete. The criteria necessary to take the survey were that one had to self-identify as “Spiritual but Not Religious,” live in Canada, and presently be between the ages of 18-34. After receiving ethics approval,\textsuperscript{50} I was provided a random sample containing the emails of 1200 undergraduate students and 500 graduate students.

\textsuperscript{49} The website for this conference can be found at: http://entheoskingston.weebly.com/living-spiritually-conference.html

\textsuperscript{50} Proof of Research Ethics Approval is provided in the appendix.
students at Queen’s University.\textsuperscript{51} A recruitment email was sent from my email account to these 1700 emails. The email contained information regarding my research project, which I called “The Spirituality and Social Justice Project,” along with links directing them to the online survey as well as my research project website where they could find information about the interview portion of the project.\textsuperscript{52} However, the information provided in the email was by no means comprehensive. Despite the title of the project being displayed in the message title, there was little disclosed as to the specific goals of the research project. What was stated was that I, the researcher, was hoping to find out about how millennials in Canada who self-identified as “spiritual but not religious” a) conceptualized their spirituality, and b) saw it playing a role in their day-to-day lives. This being said, on the homepage of my research website, the goals of my research were far more explicit, as it explained in detail that I sought to identify the link between individuals’ spirituality and their commitments, or lack thereof, to various social justice issues.\textsuperscript{53}

This recruitment email was also sent out through a number of listservs, including the Queen’s Cultural Studies listserv and the Canadian Communication Association (CCA) list-serv. It was also sent to the Queen’s Religious Studies and Philosophy departments, who in turn, sent it out to an unknown number of students in those faculties. I also utilized my own personal networks by means of posting on my own accounts through social networking sites Facebook and Twitter. I sent personal messages and emails to friends asking them to spread the word about my research through their own personal networks. I also attempted to recruit participants by word of mouth, talking to people on and off campus about what

\textsuperscript{51} I had no say in which disciplines these students belonged to.

\textsuperscript{52} My research project website can be found at: http://thespiritualityandsocialjusticeproject.weebly.com

\textsuperscript{53} I recognize that this could have led to a selection bias. Certainly those SBNRs who felt an affinity with the idea of linking spirituality and social justice may have been more eager to participate in the research project than those who did not. Were I to claim generalizability of my findings to the entire spiritual milieu this would justifiably raise concerns, but given that my aim is simply to shed light on contemporary spirituality as it is lived by at least some individuals, I don’t believe it does.
I was doing, asking them if they knew of anyone who might be willing to participate in one way or another.

I ended up with 128 completed anonymous surveys. However, the survey was not itself the primary source of data for this project. Espousing a lived religion framework, the research methods I utilized were almost entirely qualitative in nature, thus although I do draw from the surveys at times—in the form of direct excerpts from answers to open-ended questions—most of what is presented here is the result of the in-depth interviews. Moreover, I recognize that the sample I pulled is hardly generalizable to the entire Canadian population therefore the quantitative statistics I might have drawn from the survey would not be useful for my purposes. The survey was helpful, however, in locating interview participants. Nearly all those whom I interviewed informed me that they decided to be interviewed only after having completed a survey.\(^\text{54}\)

### 3.6 Interviews

My primary source of data derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty individuals. Each interview lasted between one to two hours in length, with the majority lasting about one hour and thirty minutes. I conducted a total of twenty-two interviews, as I interviewed two individuals twice (on separate occasions). The interviews took place in a location of the interviewee’s choosing. Some were held at the Queen’s University library, others in local cafes, or at the participant’s place of residence, while some were conducted over Skype. I preferred to meet in person, however some interviews had to be done over the Internet because the interviewees lived elsewhere in the country.\(^\text{55}\) I produced a letter of information and consent form for the respondents to read over and sign prior to being

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\(^{54}\) I assume this is because they might have been skeptical about what the project was about prior to completing the survey, but then upon completing it had a better idea and were thus more comfortable contacting me for an interview.

\(^{55}\) All interviewees were recruited through the same methods as the survey participants, thus the same selection biases apply to them. I will discuss these limitations in section 3.7.
interviewed. The former gave them information about the purpose of the project, notified them of what types of questions they should expect to be asked, and informed them of their option to stop the interview at any point if they so wished, while the latter assured them that their real names would not be used in any presentation of the data. Thus all names used in this work are pseudonyms.

I devised an open-ended semi-structured interview format, which I used for each interview. The interview was structured in three parts: the first part consisted of asking the individual about their life history: asking them to recount formative experiences as they related to their “spirituality,” inquiring into their childhoods, family life, friendships, leisure and even (at times) their sexual lives. I did not seek to pry but rather only asked questions I felt the interviewee would be comfortable answering. On rare occasions did the interviewees request to move on from a topic. In fact, I was incredibly surprised with the candour of most of the participants. This part of the interview encouraged narrative responses, where I listened for the most part, allowing the respondent to think and reflect out loud without interruption. The second part of the interview, which usually began about forty-five minutes to an hour into it, centred on exploring what “spirituality” was to the individuals—in other words, how they conceptualized “spirituality.” How they distinguished “religion” from “spirituality,” what “spirituality” was and what it wasn’t, and what traditions, schools of thought, philosophies and/or principles they believed informed their “spirituality” were among the questions asked during this time. The third and final part of the interview centred on uncovering how “spirituality” appeared or was experienced in their everyday lives. I often asked the respondents to give me specific examples of “spiritual” experiences, or to recount times when and how “spirituality” played a role in their decision-making, if ever. I also asked what “spiritual” practices they engaged in, and where and when “spirituality” was most prevalent for them, and why.

Although this was the pre-structured format I began every interview with on many occasions the interviews developed into something much more exploratory, heuristic and improvised. Especially after
the respondent’s life history had been disclosed, if something was said of interest to me, I would ask
the participant to elaborate on it. Or if they felt compelled to speak about a specific topic or memory, I
would let them do so. I was as interested in what they wanted to talk about as I was in what I had
originally planned on asking them about. I did my best to maintain an atmosphere of congeniality and
warmth. Although there were times when I would probe my interviewees; for instance, if there were
something they had said that I had not quite understood. I was most amazed by what appeared to me to be
the honesty and openness of my participants. It was not uncommon, at points during the interview, for
tears to be shed. I discovered early on that when speaking to individuals about their spiritual lives, one is
often treading on hallowed ground thus one should tread lightly. I worked hard not to impose my own
views on them. I also made sure not to disclose any of my own history or opinions with/about the
category SBNR, attempting to remain as neutral an observer as possible. Still, I can never be entirely
sure of how much my presence affected their responses.56

3.7 Limitations

Let me say something about the selection biases and limitations that applied to this research
project. To begin, as a result of my limited personal resources I was not able to generate anything like a
sample that would be generalizable to the entire Canadian population. The majority of my recruitment
methods were done through email, social networking, and listservs, most of which are directly affiliated
with my home university, Queen’s University. Thus, although there were a few interviewees who do/did
not go to Queen’s, the majority do/did. Also, because I had no control over the sample of emails I

56 Having said this, I should mention that I was familiar to three of the participants prior to interviewing
them. These individuals might then have been aware, to some extent, of my own political leanings. I admit, how
much this impacted their oral accounts I cannot know.

57 I recognize that there are many factors that could have influenced my participants’ responses. For
instance, my facial expressions during the interview, what I was wearing, the atmosphere and location of the
interview, the ways in which I worded questions, and even my perceived racial, sexual, gender and social class.
There is little I could do to neutralize these influences, thus I simply did my best to take these into account when
analyzing the interview data.
received, I was not able to select the departments from which my interviewees and survey respondents came (I sent email requests to the departments of philosophy, religious studies and cultural studies at Queen’s). Although this may have played a distinctive role in shaping the survey responses—since they were anonymous I cannot know what these respondents study—I don’t believe it had a large impact on the interview data, since I, fortunately, interviewed individuals affiliated with a wide variety of faculties and disciplines. This is also one of the reasons that I do not utilize the survey data all that much.

Probably the largest selection bias in my recruitment methods pertains to levels of education, and ultimately, class. Although I attempted to spread the word as far as I could, I recognize that it is very unlikely that the recruitment emails or postings I sent reached individuals who had never attended a post-secondary institution. Indeed, the large email samples I received were those of Queen’s students, and the listservs I sent email postings through were either affiliated with a specific post-secondary institution or a number of them. Moreover, everyone I interviewed had either graduated from a post-secondary institution in Canada, or was currently enrolled in one. Thus, it should be stated the data presented here largely reflects those of an educated elite, who, for the most part, belong to a specific class-subset.58

It should be noted however that SBNRs are typically characterized as being highly educated (Bloch 1998; Possamai 2000; Mercadante 2014), and much of the literature that is critical of SBNRs has characterized them as not only belonging to an elite class, but more controversially, being either responsible or culpable for the perpetuation of class domination (Carrette and King 2005; Martin 2014).

58 Also there is little doubt that the majority of the surveys I received, and the majority of my interviewees provide what might be called “Westernized” or “Eurocentric” conceptions of “spirituality.” Indeed the SBNR discourse, a product of Western modernity is one that, most scholars agree, is wholly Western. Thus, First Nations Spirituality, or Indigenous Spiritualities, do not seem to fall within its purview. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that SBNRs do not draw on Indigenous or First Nations teachings or practices to construct their spirituality. Indeed, many do. This blurring of discursive and cultural boundaries complicates the study of contemporary spirituality considerably. What is important to remember is that although some of my research participants may engage with indigenous knowledge and/or spiritual teachings, none of them asserted anything like membership or self-identification with a specific tradition. In fact, it is precisely this bricolage approach to “religious” or “spiritual” teachings and resources that I suggest characterize SBNRs.
There are a number of implications that follow. The first is that because my research participants generally (although not in all cases) fit the “typical” SBNR characterization (educated and belonging to a specific class) found in the academic literature, I believe it justified to use their lived accounts to assess the cogency of the characterizations’ associated criticisms. That is, we can assume that the criticisms launched from within the academy are meant to apply to individuals that are “like them” (at least in these respects). Second, and perhaps more importantly, my primary aim is to problematize the etic accounts of contemporary spirituality that do not take into account the lived experiences of actual SBNRs. Therefore I am not offering a normative definition of spirituality as it is practiced among all Canadian millennials (which would require me to have a population-representative sample). Instead, I am simply evaluating existing accounts in light of what specific SBNRs actually say and do. In other words, because I am using individual accounts to illuminate where more sweeping and comprehensive theories have lacked nuance or failed to make what Heelas (2008) calls “aspectual distinctions” (83), I don’t believe the specific limitations and biases of my recruitment methods limit or bias my analysis in a relevantly problematic way.

3.8 Analysis

The method I utilized for the purposes of data analysis is best described as Grounded Theory with a critical bent. Given my interest in placing individual accounts at the centre, it seemed appropriate to build a theory from the bottom up, rather than from the top down.59 Thus my data gathering and analysis were inherently inductive. As I transcribed, and reread the interview transcriptions, I did my best to allow the themes to emerge organically—that is, heuristically, intuitively and iteratively—attempting not to

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59 Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan (1998) write, “A theory… may be said to be grounded to the extent that it is derived from and based on data themselves” (7-8).
project my own biases or assumptions onto my participants’ accounts.\textsuperscript{60} My method is most similar to a thematic analysis by means of an “immersion/crystallization” style, which involves the analyst’s total immersion in and reflection on the text materials, resulting in an intuitive crystallization of the data (O’Donoghue 59).

Of course, as I stated in an earlier section, I did not approach the interviews without any preconceptions. I had by that time completed a significant amount of the literature review on SBNRs, so I have little doubt that certain core notions and themes permeated my mind as I interviewed and analyzed. Indeed, we can never escape our assumptions entirely. My hope is that my constant and continuous appeal to direct interview citations throughout this work reasonably validates the conclusions I draw.

The “critical” component refers to my attempt to place my participants’ lived realities within a broader historical and cultural framework and structure. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (2007) write, “The problem of ideology is potentially the biggest test to the project of accommodating critical theory. In this sense, the degree to which grounded theory can be ‘critical’ depends on how well it becomes sensitive to this problem” (443). Thus, although my approach is firmly rooted in the methodology of Lived Religion, I seek to place my participants’ accounts in conversation with the wider structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of contemporary spirituality; I attempt to put into conversation, or at least contrast, these individuals’ own accounts, with accounts appealing to the explanatory force of certain social structures. Such an analysis is novel not only due to its interdisciplinarity but more importantly, because it puts in plain sight the kinds of tensions and contradictions that arise when we examine these two levels of experience/reality simultaneously.

\textsuperscript{60} Of course, objective neutrality is never truly attainable. (See section 3.3).
3.9 A Reflexive Moment

The 1970s marked what is now known as the “reflexive turn” within the social sciences. From that point on, no longer could the cultural researcher feign a position of utter neutrality with respect to those they studied. Instead, they had to recognize their own positionality and be reflexive—that is, acknowledge their own limitedness, as well as their own intimate relationship to the material/participants—throughout their research. Thus, at this point, I will reflect on my own history with respect to the SBNR category, disclosing how “I,” as the researcher, and as an individual with his own unique life history, place myself with respect to my topic of study.

My initial academic interests in SBNRs derived from my reactions to reading a number of scholarly works that expressed a very critical view of contemporary spirituality. At that point in time, I had had some, although not much, experience taking part in the spiritual milieu. Although I likely would not have called myself “spiritual but Not religious,” I had certainly engaged with, and at times even enjoyed, a number of popular texts, practices and materials that are often associated with the category. My reaction to the academic literature was one of discomfort. There seemed to me to be a lack of nuance in the characterizations proffered; a form of reductionism that, although likely accurate to some contexts, did not adequately sum up the category itself. This led me to consider what these critiques, valuable and fascinating in their own right, had missed. Thus, I approached this study sympathetic to the views and experiences of contemporary SBNRs, or at least sympathetic to some of them. In other words, having first-hand and sympathetic experience of the spiritual milieu gave me an insider-perspective that I felt many of the dominant etic accounts had not properly accounted for or respected. Some may suggest this

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61 As Ann Gray (2003) reminds us, “We ourselves bring to our research in terms of our lived experience, certainly, but also our politics and our intellectual frameworks. It is important to make these explicit” (63).
62 Here I am thinking of those texts and practices that would otherwise fall under the purview of labels: “Mind, Body, Spirit”, “New Age”, “Holistic spirituality”, “Inner life spirituality.” I would argue these labels are metonymies for the broader category “spiritual but not religious” or “contemporary spirituality.”
makes me biased, and indeed, that would be true. However, I am also firmly rooted in the tradition of Cultural Studies, with its “fundamental social and political aspirations” (Ang 2005, 478). Therefore, despite my sympathies, my primary concern in conducting this research is to offer a critical reflection on a contemporary cultural phenomenon, contemporary spirituality. As will be clear, I bring my own politics to this work—a fact that made this research, at times, both academically as well as personally challenging. Nevertheless, I do not believe such biases detract from my ability to provide an analysis that is grounded in the data I received. But in the end, I leave it up to the reader to decide whether or not the theory proffered jibes with their own intuitions, experiences and reasoning.
Chapter 4

Self-Spirituality

4.1 Introducing Self-Spirituality: A Shared Framework

Like why should I have to go through Jesus? God is in me.
   - Charlene

Spirituality is getting in touch with yourself.
   - Jane

It was always about: the universe is inside you. You are everything. Everything is about your subjective presence.
   - Maddie

Cause you are source. You are God energy.
   - Oscar

Although my research participants exhibit profound diversity in their life experiences and personal identities (including but not limited to age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and class) they are nevertheless shaped by the shared social and cultural contexts in which they live. As Bellah and coauthors note “Cultures are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants” (1985, 27). To partake in a culture is to engage with its history, its ideals, and its ways of being. My interviewees, despite their differences, are living in the wake of formative developments that have had an enormous impact on the ways in which they, and we, understand their/our relation to the world around them/us. These developments have been integral to shaping the current period, modernity. But there is another, less general way, in which these individuals are related to one another. This has to do with the existence of a shared or common discursive framework, however broad, at play in varying degrees within their
accounts. This framework I call, in line with Paul Heelas (1996), “self-spirituality,” for, as we shall see, SBNR spirituality, begins and ends with the self. In this section I outline the contours of the framework of self-spirituality, and introduce the core ethics informing it.

If there exists one common thread, which ties my research participants into some semblance of a coherent whole, we might say it is their insistence on the authority of the self. As the above quotations are meant to illustrate, my participants seemed to be in unanimous agreement about what their “spirituality” orbits around, and where they look for guidance—that being, the self within. Paul Heelas deems this a “self-ethic,” the basic idea of which “is that what lies within – experienced by way of ‘intuition’, ‘alignment’ or an ‘inner voice’ – serves to inform judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life. The ‘individual’ serves as his or her own source of guidance” (23). Thus Natalie can assert, “Spirituality is something you believe in, whereas I feel like religion is imposed upon you.” While Maddie professes, “organized religion seems like you’re creating boundaries for yourself, you’re looking for something that you’re not able to find internally.” Even David, who believes in a “higher being” and an “afterlife” can be said to share this view, for it is ultimately through his self—that is, through a process of self-determination—that his beliefs are justified.

It is important to understand the basic structure of this self-ethic, so prevalent within the spiritual milieu (and beyond). For one, as a result of this turn inward, SBNRs tend to value, above all else, their own (self’s) accumulated experiences. Thus Liam tells me, “God wasn’t something that could be taught about, it was something you had to go experience. And that fits for me.” Heelas informs us, “Truth, not surprisingly for those who see themselves as spiritual beings, must—at least, first-and-foremost—come by way of one’s own experience” (21). Spiritual authority (if one can use those terms) is reinforced, if at

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63 An anonymous survey I received asserts, “For some people, religion and spirituality are interconnected, but for me spirituality is completely separate from organized religion. Spirituality allows each individual to follow what is best for them.”
all, by the ability of their subjective experiences to cohere with the beliefs they hold, and by the ways
in which they create narratives out of the disparate, yet formative, events of their lives. Moreover, it is
because, as Linda Mercadante has written, “they make the self the source” (183) of ethical (in the broad
sense—concerning how to live well) authority that they view “religion”—what they tend to equate with
specific traditions (particularly monotheistic in nature)—as, if not a hindrance, then at least secondary to
what they find within, to their spiritual growth. Laurie, a twenty-six year old SBNR interviewee currently
in teacher’s college explains:

I don’t know a lot about religion. I’ll be honest, I don’t really understand religion, but for me, that
means that I can dabble in different faiths. I can read different types of books. I can explore
different meditation groups. I am not committed to one conception of a higher power—one
conception of God. And I’m allowed to be flexible, and I’m allowed to explore different things,
or pray in a different way…. I’m kind of free to explore spirituality in any way that I want. I’m
not set in one way, and I don’t think I’m right, and I’m not convinced that I’m being right. I’m
just kind of open…. And I’m kind of allowed to follow my heart in any way that it directs me.

“Follow your heart” is a phrase I heard often. It speaks to the importance my research participants
generally place on their feelings, and emotional life. How one feels about a situation—what one’s heart is
telling them—is where the buck stops.64

The first corollary of this is the existence of what we might call an ethic of self-responsibility
among my participants. This is exemplified by Liam who asserts, “for me, spirituality is an individual
task” and Jane, a Master’s student who tells me, “I think about it in terms of the ways in which
institutions and corporations, sort of, diminish our spirituality.” The reasoning informing this ethic goes
something like: if what guides an individual’s day-to-day decisions is the cumulative total of their
personal experiences—unique to them—then no one, nor any institution, is as fit to govern their beliefs,
thoughts and actions as they are. This logic of self-reliance was often extended to all facets of one’s life,

64 Although, of course, this is not to suggest that intellect plays no role in their decision-making
processes—the metaphorical “heart” is often meant to encompass the whole being of the person: mind, body and
spirit (although for some these three seemingly distinct spheres are harder to differentiate than they tend to suppose).
resulting in my participants’ belief that they ought to take responsibility for themselves—intellectually, emotionally and otherwise.

Tied to this ethic was that which philosopher Charles Taylor calls an ethic of authenticity. Thus Charlene, a thirty-one-year-old self-proclaimed “healer” and reiki practitioner rejected the Christianity of her childhood because at church she “just felt like a judgmental hypocritical environment, that wasn’t allowing me to be free to be who I am.” This emphasis on authenticity—on being “who one truly is”—is ubiquitous within the spiritual milieu (Bloch 1998). Maddie tells us, “I think it’s about … not wanting to be confined to a box, or confined to someone else’s construction of what I should be.” Thus, to be authentic, seems to imply, abiding by a part of oneself that is not externally enforced, that exists prior to, or at least separate from, cultural and social norms. These norms are equated with what many of my participants call the “ego.” Contemporary spirituality is then—at least as my research participants conceptualize it—what Heelas (1996) calls “detraditionalized.”

The third ethic I observed hinged on the idea that the self is not a static entity, but rather, one that is dynamic and in continual movement. For this reason, it was generally believed that one ought to engage in a constant process of work upon oneself, with the ultimate aim of achieving spiritual “growth” and/or “development.” I deem this the ethic of productivity. Spiritual resources, teachings or practices were couched in this way. Samara, a freelance artist, tells me “for me, concretely, self-work takes the form of journaling.” For this SBNR, and many others I interviewed, spirituality involves work, self-work.

Finally, for the majority of my research participants—whose spirituality begins and ends with the self—to garner self-knowledge, or self-awareness, is part and parcel of what it means to be SBNR. For

65 This is, of course, not to imply that SBNRs are any more authentic, that is nonconformist, than the “religious” persons they distinguish themselves from. Although they may indeed view themselves as self-directing, authorial agents, as I explain more fully later, SBNRs are not wholly free of the grips of ideology (just like the rest of us). However, what I hope to make clear is the ideological strands found among SBNRs allow for a wider array of political possibilities than have been granted by critics.
instance, an essential feature of Maddie’s spirituality, she says, is garnering more self-awareness. While Jane asserts, “I think it is to know yourself. That is the deepest spiritual practice.” Thus the aim of coming to know oneself, tied to an ethic of self-awareness, was essential to the framework of self-spirituality.

Let me make clear that I am not claiming self-spirituality sharply contrasts from contemporary forms of “religious” and “secular” culture. But simply that self-spirituality and the ethics informing it provide a helpful schematic lens for bringing into focus certain trends that inform the accounts of my research participants, and which likely originate to some extent in the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they are situated. It is a near truism that nothing comes from nowhere—and indeed, contemporary spirituality, is no different. As Charles Taylor suggests, “It is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical” (2007, 28). The discourses utilized by my research participants, despite their common belief to the contrary, are not entirely self-cultivated. As I hope to show, they have roots spanning back millennia; and they belong to discourses that have, in many ways, shaped what we now consider the contemporary west—and as Taylor puts it, the “modern identity.” “Contemporary spirituality” is a scholarly concept I invoke to aid me in my task of better understanding what modern individuals who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” share in common. However I recognize that these individuals draw from a similar array of resources (“religious,” “secular” or otherwise) as other modern individuals do to make sense of their lives. It is one of the essential characteristics of the SBNR discourse that there is no explicit specific tradition, or group of traditions, with which the individual SBNR must associate. This certainly complicates things, and it is for this reason that I believe we ought not assume a priori that what constitutes contemporary spirituality is in some sense ontologically distinct from other cultural forms (including so-called “religious” ones). In turn, although my discussion throughout this thesis places the first-person accounts of my research participants as central to my
analysis, I attempt to identify the discourses and power structures that give their accounts meaning in
order to provoke a wider debate about the dominant social and moral imaginaries alive in the
contemporary west. However, in order to get a grasp on where we are today, we must trace how it is we
arrived here.

4.2 A Genealogy of Self-Spirituality

*Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.* (Ralph Waldo Emerson 2000 [1888], 133)

Philosopher Anne C. Jacobs traces the roots of what Heelas (1996) deems “self-spirituality” (2) to the Renaissance, “where nature (man), instead of God, became the measure of all things” (Jacobs 2013, 5). She views the intellectual developments which took place during that period, as informing the ethos of divine immanence, in contrast to that of transcendence, which is characteristic of the spiritual milieu. Not only this but the Renaissance was formative in laying the groundwork for the social imaginary of today (Taylor 2007). Indeed, something many of us so easily take for granted, civilization (as it is commonly understood today) was only made possible by the Renaissance preoccupation with “civility” (99). No doubt a bourgeois notion from its inception, the quest for mass civility led to a re-conception of the self as the kind of thing which could (and should) be remade for the sake of the polis (100).

The next large development was the Reformation. Jacobs informs us, “It has been said that the Renaissance rediscovered the Greeks, whereas the Reformation rediscovered the Bible” (6). Indeed, reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged the religious authority of the Pope by

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66 Jacobs writes, “The Renaissance represented another step in the separation between spirituality and religion. Secular humanism, and the differentiation between nature and grace, exalted human reason and experience (natural revelation) as the measure of all things instead of God and special revelation. Human beings and, more specifically, human reason as well as nature were now seen as functioning apart from religion. They became entities of their own and therefore spirituality could become much more of a human construct, free from religion with its specifics and its focus on the sinful nature of man. God became less of an omnipotent, omnipresent entity and spirituality was practiced more from a human starting point” (5).
emphasizing “a more personal, devotional and therefore more spiritual approach to religion” (6). It is the prioritizing of faith that Arthur Versluis (2014) has called the Protestant Principle. Reformation scholars also adamantly propounded the individually accessible divine authority of the Bible over what they saw as the rigid system imposed by the Catholic Church.\(^67\) They essentially rejected any imposed authority deriving from human selves other than their own. The difference of course, lies in the fact that the Reformation scholars grounded divine authority in the bible, whereas, SBNRs reject the authority of the bible outright, instead placing authority in their own human experience.\(^68\) At the same time the Reformation scholars endorsed what Taylor calls the “affirmation of ordinary life.” That is, in rejecting “a special order of priesthood in favour of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers” (Taylor 1989, 217) the Reformers paved the way for the modern notion that ordinary life, was not simply profane, but could now be sacred. What mattered, then, was not what one did, so much as how one did it. Of course, all of this was perfectly aligned with the Renaissance conception of a self that should at all times remain self-responsible, disciplined, controlled, and moral.\(^69\)

No discussion of the history of modernity would be complete without some reference to the Enlightenment. And no discussion of the Enlightenment would be complete without mention of René

\(^{67}\) Let me here briefly reflect upon the significance of the Reformation as it relates to my purposes here. The SBNRs I interviewed and surveyed nearly always rejected a notion of “religion” that they equated with “traditions,” “institutions,” “hierarchy” and so forth. For instance, Ruth, a nineteen-year-old engineering student, told me “Being in religion implies that you follow a certain structure”; Liam asserted, “for me, spirituality is an individual task”; while Jane, a Master’s student, told me “I think about it in terms of the ways in which institutions and corporations, sort of, diminish our spirituality.” As already stated, SBNRs put utter authority on their self, rejecting any and all explicitly external norms—most especially if they were perceived as being “religious” in nature. Even those like Natalie who continued to engage with an institution tended to equate “religion” with the Church while “spirituality” was considered something more personal and meaningful. Therefore my participants reject a specific kind of “religion” – one which looks an awful lot like the Catholic “religion” the Reformers rejected centuries prior. Moreover, “spirituality”—which these SBNRs assert with confidence is distinct from “religion”—has undeniable resemblances to American Protestantism. On the Christian, namely Protestant, roots of contemporary spirituality, see Woodhead (2011), Schmidt (2012), Fuller (2001), Klassen (2011).

\(^{68}\) Thus Jacobs notes, as a result of the Reformation, “Spirituality could thus be practiced outside the strict confines of institutionalised religion, acquiring a much more personal note” (6).

\(^{69}\) As Taylor humorously puts it, “God Loveth Adverbs” (1989, 211).
Descartes. Descartes stressed radical reflexivity, and also believed that the search for proof of God’s existence began by going inward (143). Of course, for him God’s existence was to be proven by means of an appeal to subjective experience (i.e. ideas), via reflection on the logic of his idea of God. Indeed, this approach led him to infer the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. But as history has shown, his “inwardness of self-sufficiency, of autonomous powers of ordering by reason, also prepared the ground for modern unbelief” (158).

Following in his stead, Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant exalted reason and its supposed ability to liberate man from the dogma and superstition they associated with (a specific conception of) religion (Yates 2011, 211). Thus during the Enlightenment, what began in the Renaissance was further developed: “Human beings [became] the centre point of all moral reasoning and questions of truth, not special revelation” (Jacobs 7). At the same time, the scientific method became the authoritative epistemological discourse. So-called “secularism” began to sweep across Western Europe, as Liberalism—which propounded the separation of “church” and “state”—was established as the defining political theory of the West. We should thus not forget how the Liberal agenda is premised upon the implicit assumption that what preoccupies the church—namely, religion—is categorically distinct from what preoccupies the state—namely, politics.

Traces of the enlightenment inflect SBNR discourses at every turn. One can imagine this anonymous SBNR re-adapting Kant for the contemporary era: “I think blind subscription to any particular group, product, religion, spiritual guide, flavour of ice cream or what

70 Enlightenment thinkers generally believed that “disengaged rationality,” pioneered by Descartes, would enable individuals to free themselves from superstition and faulty moral principles by enabling them to conceive of the universal good. Taylor explains: “[d]isengaged rationality seems to separate us from our own narrow, egoistic standpoint and make us capable of grasping the whole picture” (1989, 331). This was what Kant had in mind in formulating his categorical imperative. (Of course, both Locke and Kant were, by all accounts, pious Christians who did not view themselves as challenging religion per se. They merely saw themselves as offering an enlightened (namely, reasoned) view of religion that was more aligned with the true nature of God and the truth of Human nature).

71 Indeed, this is no insignificant fact. In this climate, Deism—the belief “God is best understood as the Grand Architect or rational designer of the universe” (Fuller 19)—rose in popularity.
else have you, without the care and maintenance of an open, critical mind can do more harm than
good.” Indeed, to not think for oneself is to violate a modern law.\textsuperscript{72}

Nevertheless, unlike the Enlightenment thinkers, whose hubris derived from their steadfast belief
in the emancipatory nature of reason, my research participants do not tend to be strict rationalists. This is
because there is likely no era more influential in shaping and informing the SBNR discourse than the
Romantic period. At the same time, we should keep in mind that “Romanticism has shaped just about
everyone’s views of personal fulfillment in our civilization” (Taylor 1989, 505). Initially a reaction to the
Enlightenment’s exaltation of reason, Romanticism emphasized “feelings and experience, \textit{a focus on the
self}, a return to nature … a nostalgic return to old practices, religions, pantheism as well as mythologies”
(Wright 1996, 141 my emphasis).\textsuperscript{73} Echoing attitudes of this period, Maddie exclaims, “I don’t like the
idea of organized religion. I love nature, I love feeling connected to people and things.” An anonymous
SBNR, when asked when they feel most spiritual answers: “When out walking alone either in the country
or through a forest or park.” Leslie, a drama student, unbeknownst to her, seems to channel her spiritual
ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson—the nineteenth century Transcendentalist who was deeply inspired by
the Romantics (and Plato)—when she claims, “I think spirituality is a sort of energy inside you that sort
of drives your life and is individual to you. It’s inside you, as well as being something outside that you
can’t control, and it’s bigger than you.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} Significantly, “religion” is unhesitatingly associated with private belief. Thus we can see how the notion
of “religion” that the enlightenment both reified and rejected was undeniably parochial, as Talad Asad (1993) has
convincingly argued.

\textsuperscript{73} Pantheism can be described as the belief that “God was to be perceived as immanent in everything, and
especially in nature. God was not seen as personal but as being everywhere. Many of the romantics believed in a
kind of ‘life force’, which is close to the concept of deism, also rejecting a personally knowable God” (Veith 1994,
36). A significant number of SBNRs I spoke to echoed a similar belief.

\textsuperscript{74} And when she adds, “theatre is my religion,” we are reminded that similar to the Renaissance, the
Romantic period, “emphasized the importance of art and music” (Schaeffer 1990, 27). Similarly Nancy Ammerman
(2013) in conducting research on SBNR discourses observed “Works of art, music, nature, and other objects of
beauty, for instance, were “spiritual” when they evoked awe, when they asked a person to stop, step out of the
Individuality, as a virtue, was propounded by the late-Romantics, both in their poetry and philosophy. It is in the Romantic era that we find the roots of the ethic of authenticity. For from the point of view of the Romantic, to conform to explicit codes of conduct that conflict with one’s “intuition” is worse than death. Hence Nick’s claim that “the most unspiritual thing is … superficiality”, Liam’s confession, “I feel terrible pretending to be something that I’m not,” and David’s nail-hitting proclamation, “you have to be authentic!”

Romantic notions also deeply influenced the development of what Catherine Albanese (2007) calls metaphysical religion. Most notably, during the eighteenth century, Unitarians, Universalists and Transcendentalists—spinoffs of early American Protestantism—who were deeply influenced by the Romantics—propagated, what Albanese calls, “self-culture,” as they followed “a spiritual logic,” that had its intellectual roots in antiquity, “from outer to inner” (161). This was a logic that, as we have seen, had been percolating for quite some time. These new religious movements gave birth to a number of offshoots such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, and other nineteenth century “metaphysical religions” that have shaped the SBNR discourses of today.

Among other things, they were precursors to the contemporary New Age movement, which came of age during the 1960s and 70s counter culture and is closely associated with the Baby Boomer ordinary business of life, stretch the mind and imagination” (269). New avenues to explore the “sacred,” the “transcendent” or the “mystical” are part and parcel of the Romantic (and neo-romantic) spirits.

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” (cited in Thomas 2006, 399).

Moreover, it was the Romantics who heralded a new understanding of art as having deep spiritual significance (Taylor 1989, 425), and in turn, raised the role of the artist to that of prophet (423).

For instance, Albanese reminds us that “spiritualism belonged to American vernacular culture, with its blend of … Swedenborgism, mesmeric explanation, universalism, Transcendentalist themes of nature and intuition, and the rest of the metaphysical synthesis then available, it was there to stay. It would wax and wane as a mass movement, but its vision of reality, both ultimate and intimate, would move on, infusing not only a continuing spiritualist movement but also Theosophy, Christian Science … New Thought, and in our own time—the New Age movement” (2007, 222).
generation—the generation that raised millennials. Indeed, New Age ideas and practices, which, even in the movement’s heyday were interminably difficult to pin down, let alone map out (Heelas 1996, 117), have since seeped into contemporary western consciousness. Put another way, directly following the counter-culture—“the New Age was stepping aside for a new and exoteric spiritual America” (Albanese 2007, 514)—one that has only become ever more diffuse and eclectic. It is for this reason that Taylor suggests we are today living in a “spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (2007, 300). Indeed, the spiritual options made available to individuals by means of this long march toward a basic inwardness are boundless and unprecedented.

One would be remiss not to mention the importance of the rise of psychology and what Bellah and coauthors call “therapeutic culture” in shaping self-spirituality. However, to do so, we must turn back towards Jacobs’s critique of the Reformation, which she argues, “catalyzed the economic revolutions of the time.”

Max Weber (1930) in his The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism noted a peculiar connection between religion (specifically American puritanism) and the birth of modern civilization (Pals 2006, 160). Weber posited the “Protestant ethic,” as he called it, which eventually produced and fuelled modern capitalistic enterprise (163). Here the resemblances between American Protestantism—with its emphasis on the “personal”—and contemporary spirituality, become clear and significant. For, much like

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78 Jean Twenge (2006) identifies a rising preoccupation with the self—what she calls “self-focus” (48)—with the hippie Me Generation, but argues that Millennials took this to a whole new level: “Generation Me had no need to reincarnate ourselves; we were born into a world that already celebrated the individual. The self-focus that blossomed in the 1970s became mundane and commonplace over the next two decades, and GenMe accepts it like a fish accepts water” (49).

79 The attempts to segregate a New Age community can never fully persuade. New age beliefs, by definition, merge into general American beliefs and values, and the generalization is especially cogent for the philosophical side of the movement…. From a far different perspective, the distinct repertoire of beliefs and practices that acquired the New Age label tumbled over boundaries—as had the beliefs and practices of an earlier New Thought—to become more or less public property. In the early twenty-first century, arguably, a renewed and far more encompassing metaphysical spirituality was abroad in the land” (Albanese 511).

80 It is for this reason that the old methodological assumptions and tools utilized by scholars of religion are in drastic need of revision and refinement.
the puritans stressed the importance of an ethic of self-responsibility, and an ethic of productivity, so too do the SBNRs I interviewed. This resemblance is, of course, not coincidental. Furthermore, it was the puritans who solidified the affirmation of ordinary life that dominates contemporary consciousness. That is to say, the puritans, in rejecting the “special order of priesthood,” espoused the belief that in order to take one’s proper place in God’s order, humans must operate within the world with a certain spirit. In essence, they believed “we must enjoy things while remaining detached from them” (Taylor 1989, 222). It was this basic approach that Weber called the puritan’s “innerworldly asceticism” (222). Of most importance is that the route to God’s favour in the minds of the puritans was transformed from being substantive (as it was in Catholicism), to procedural in nature. This procedural account of the good life for the Puritans entailed a life of self-reform through a rigorous practice of diligence, hard work, and moral purity. In turn, the Renaissance quest for civility was only pushed further along by the spread of Protestantism (2007, 111).

In the late nineteenth century, the well-known American scholar William James, sought to map out the route to “Saintliness,” what he viewed as the essential task of religion. James—whom Fuller calls the first SBNR (13)—was one of the founding fathers of American psychology and the philosophical school of thought known as pragmatism. In his seminal book The Varieties of Religious Experience, which anticipated the “subjective turn” of modern culture, he posited that there is an “experiential core to religion that underlies all of the various creeds and rituals associated with religious organizations” (56). Thus in applying his pragmatism to religion, and reducing it to what it did for individuals engaged with/in it, James stimulated a shift in academic (and eventually popular) religious thought away from belief, toward the experience of believing. This pragmatic approach to “religion” or “spirituality” is one of the

81 This notion is closely related to “Perennialism”—popularized by Aldous Huxley’s (1945) The Perennial Philosophy. It was often that I heard from SBNR’s that, underlying all religious traditions, lies the same “spiritual” source. As an SBNR sums it up, “all paths lead up the same mountain.”
defining characteristics of the SBNR spirituality my research participants espouse. On this view, spiritual practices—meditation, yoga, reflection, and journaling—are seen as instrumentally valuable, allowing individuals to attain their desired ends. In sum, James did more than contribute to establishing pragmatism as the reigning philosophy of North America; he set the stage for a mass cultural synthesis of the religious and the therapeutic (Altglas 2014, 205).

Psychoanalysis, originating with Sigmund Freud, although fundamentally critical of organized religion, has helped shape the SBNR discourse because it relegated “religion” to the individual psyche. Thus Freud might be said to have finished the long march toward inwardness begun in the Renaissance, significantly advanced by Descartes, and later theologized by the Puritans. Following Freud, Abraham Maslow, pioneered the Human Potential Movement, which promulgated post-psychoanalytic therapies that were meant to help “people to find their true self and grow” (Altglas 2014, 205). At the same time, as Peter B. Clarke (2006) informs us, during the 20th century in America, as a result of a basic “restlessness” that permeated the country—in part the result of an economic boom, and its corresponding cultural and social transformations—“therapy assumed increased relevance” (117). In this therapeutic culture, “spiritual” development and “self” development began to take on increasingly similar connotations. Thus, an anonymous SBNR can write with assurance, “Spirituality is important to discover for oneself. Everyone may take different looks on it and believe different things. The most important part

82 Freud proffered a “functionalist reductionist” theory of religion, which reduced “religion” to mere illusions, which serve to alleviate an individual’s psychological distress (Pals 2006, 77).

83 My participants would likely share psychologist Abraham Maslow’s belief that there is a potential antagonism between the private realm of religious experience and the public realm of formal religious practice. Maslow (1970) wrote, “when people lose or forget the subjectively religious experience, and redefine religion as a set of habits, behaviors, dogmas, forms … at the extreme [this causes spirituality to become] entirely legalistic and bureaucratic, conventional, empty, and in the true meaning of the word, antireligious” (cited in Fuller 2001, 139).

84 “Maslow’s work has also been instrumental in connecting religion and therapy. Maslow celebrated religious experience as a source of self-realization—an exclusively personal and private religion that one can discover beyond the rituals, myths, ceremonials, and dogmas of so-called organized religions” (Altglas 2014, 205).
is becoming a *better you*. As will soon become clear, “spirituality” for those I interviewed, with their emphasis on the primacy of the self, and their view of spiritual practices or activities as “resources” or “tools” is largely—like James’s theology—pragmatic, and profoundly informed by a psychological mode of inquiry. Indeed, the discourse of self-awareness tends to be couched in psychological terms, however, as we have seen, its roots stem at least as far back as the Renaissance.

The economic and structural changes that occurred throughout the twentieth century, along with their implications for this study, will come to focus in the next chapter. For now, what is important to note is that all of this paved the way for what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) call “subjective wellbeing culture,” the “most widespread cultural expression” (83) in the west today. It is an expression which can be characterized by the significant value it ascribes to “being treated as a uniquely valuable person, finding out about oneself, expressing oneself, discovering one’s own way of becoming all that one can (reasonably) be” (81). There is little doubt that subjective wellbeing culture owes much to Romantic thought. Heelas and Woodhead propose that the rising popularity of what they call “subjective-life” spirituality, is largely the result of a wider cultural trend towards valuing “self-expression,” “personal fulfillment” and “subjective well-being” (79) taking place in the West. Thus we might take note that what I have called “self-spirituality” is generally at home in contemporary mainstream cultural currents.

Importantly, the second wave of feminism emerged during the 1970s, at precisely the same time as the New Age movement was catching speed (and the Baby Boomers were coming of age). New Age introduced these previously marginal, quixotic, and fringe metaphysical traditions to the masses, through an “eclectic mix of world religious traditions, pop psychology, quantum physics, and occult practices”

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85 Of course, it is not clear from this statement whether “becoming a better you” has an ethical dimension to it or not (and indeed this is a question I take up later).

86 Indeed, among SBNR millennials, psychology is *the* authoritative discourse. Of course, this is not limited to SBNRs. As Mercadante notes, “most young people [today] don’t even recognize how ‘psychologized’ their way of thinking about the world is” (167).
(Lofton 52). However Albanese astutely reminds us that “the designation ‘New age religion’ is somewhat misleading” for it “minimizes connections to an earlier America” and at the same time infers a coherence that the diffuse, erratic, and fluid nature its participants’ realities most certainly escapes” (355). Nevertheless, the New Age movement and the counter culture from which it emerged was largely inspired by currents of Romantic thought—namely, Rousseau’s philosophy of Nature as source. Thus the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s, sometimes referred to as the Hippie movement, was, in essence, a revival of romanticism. However it was peculiar in that it championed the progressive concerns with sexuality, gender and racial equity and equality.

In this climate, what Rita Gross (1996) calls the “feminist awakening” sprouted and flourished. In time, feminist writers such as Mary Daly, Starhawk, and Carol P. Christ, among others, began to observe “the way in which patriarchal language (e.g. God as a male ruler) played an ideological role in validating social structures in which men were dominant and women were marginalized and even demonized” (Lynch 2007, 25). Importantly, they traced this to the way in which such symbol systems were predicated on the basis of dualisms such “as soul/body, spirit/flesh, rationality/emotion,

87 Indeed, the hippie generation was reviving a long heard charge against modernity that had been pioneered by the Romantics: that the disciplined self, concerned only with instrumental rational control which emerged out of the Enlightenment was responsible for taking the resonance out of life. Thus those who took part in the counter culture painted society in the 1950s “as conformist, crushing individuality, and creativity, as too concerned with production and concrete results, as repressing feeling and spontaneity, as exalting the mechanical over the organic” (Taylor 2007, 476). The New Age movement took off the way it did because it channeled this post-romantic spirit (and because the cultural and economic conditions were well suited to its flourishing).

88 Taylor notes the prominent moral developments of the period: the first was the radicalization of “the rehabilitation of sensuality as good in itself.” The second, “the radicalization of [the affirmation of women’s desire] affirming the equality of the sexes, and in particular articulating a new ideal in which men and women come together as partners, freed of their gender roles.” The third was “a widespread sense of Dionysian, even transgressive” sex as liberating.” While the fourth was “a new conception of one’s sexuality as an essential part of one’s identity, which not only gave an additional meaning to sexual liberation, but also became the basis of gay liberation, and the emancipation of a whole host of previously condemned forms of sexual life” (Taylor 2007, 502). Significant social contributors include (but are not limited to) the mass emergence of women in the work-force and what Taylor calls the “contraceptive revolution” (502), among others.

89 Gross chalks this up to three developments: “religious women began to examine their own religions critically, feminist spiritualities were developed, and feminist scholars began to emerge” (1996, 39).
divine/nature” (26)—which they tended to associate with Descartes. Thus we cannot separate the rise of New Age from the spread of feminism—their diachronic relationship was undoubtedly mutualistic in nature (Tumber 2002).

These developments are important because they remind us of the most prominent criticism advanced at “religious” traditions from the feminist corner: that “Male monotheism is one of the last, but most pervasive and powerful results of an emerging patriarchy and one of its most potent tools for sustaining its power” (Gross 176). It is no surprise then why I heard repeatedly during my interviews that the reason my participants self-identified as “spiritual” rather than “religious,” was because “religion” was associated either with patriarchy (like it was for Oscar), heteronormativity (like it was for Liam, Neil and Charlene), or simply offered strict gender norms that they weren’t comfortable with (this was the case for Leslie and Jasmine).

Finally, it should not be forgotten that with the advent the New Age movement, also came the rise of postmodernism, which French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984 [1979]) reduces to an “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (xxiv). In some ways, it perfectly aligned itself with the New Age ethos. Webster (2012) posits that “it is via the notion of ‘truth’ that New Age, Mind Body and Spirit-led accounts of spirituality and postmodernism largely intersect and coincide” (29). Indeed, the postmodernists, inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, undermined the modernist known of Truth (with a

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90 Important works that came out at this time were Mary Daly’s (1968) The Church and the Second Sex, Starhawk’s (1979) The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, and Carol P. Christ’s (1979) Womanspiritual Rising (co-edited with Judith Plaskow).

91 This, I believe, goes some way to answering the question as to why self-spirituality seems to appeal more to women than to men (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Bruce and Trzebiatowska 2012). Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have called this the “gender puzzle.”

92 In Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality (1981) Peggy Reeves Sanday writes, “almost always in male-dominated societies the godhead is defined in exclusively masculine terms” (6).

93 “The only values that are deemed important in postmodernism are thus “tolerance” and “freedom,” a guarding against imposing any (particularly religious) values on others” (Wright 2000, 22), which is in itself a contradiction, as it absolutises these two values. The focus of postmodern spirituality is much more on personal subjective experience (Jacobs 2013, 10).
capital “T”), positing that all claims to truth were reflective of a specific perspective, and thereby, in a sense, subjective.\textsuperscript{94} This philosophical framework, in tandem with pragmatism, laid the groundwork for the rising authority of the self as the only means to real knowledge—for, “truth” was no longer Truth, but instead became “my truth” (or what works for me). Thus the voice within, originating with Rousseau, became detached from Nature as source. Jacobs calls postmodernism “the dominant Western worldview” (9).\textsuperscript{95} Any modern individual (especially those who have received a post-secondary education) has had to, in some sense, reckon with the arguments advanced from the postmodernist camp.\textsuperscript{96} There is little doubt that the framework of self-spirituality has been significantly shaped by what David Harvey (1989) calls “the postmodern condition.” For postmodernism’s “incredulity to meta-narratives” is deeply embedded within both SBNR, and contemporary western, social and cultural imaginaries.

4.3 The Argument

The brief historical picture outlined above was meant to illuminate what I take to be the background structure of the spirituality of my research participants. This picture and the arguments offered for it in the academic literature is consistent with my view that the spirituality of the SBNRs in my study does not come from nowhere. Rather, it is the product of historical developments of thought, and social changes that have both shaped and been shaped by those intellectual developments. Indeed, the

\textsuperscript{94} Nietzsche (2010 [1873]) contended, “truth” is merely, “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms… truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions” (768).

\textsuperscript{95} Jacobs writes, “The development of postmodernism can be explained by mainly two factors. The first is that it is a logical conclusion of the philosophical development, which started during the Enlightenment…. Romanticism, Darwinism, and Existentialism helped to bring the Enlightenment to its logical conclusion, namely relativism. It follows that there is no entity that is the final cause and thus no ultimate right and wrong…. Another … [is that] the postmodern movement as a reaction against modernism can be referred to as being similar to Romanticism in many of its basic tenets, as Romanticism was to a large extent a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism” (9). Although I tend to think the latter played a more formative role, I recognize that they developed diachronically and that therefore their impacts are not mutually exclusive.

\textsuperscript{96} Even those who have never come up against these arguments are likely to have experience of the postmodern condition, tied to technological and economic changes which occurred in the post-war era and have only been exacerbated since. For more on the postmodern condition see David Harvey’s (1989) \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change}. 
discourses from which SBNRs draw, are deeply embedded in the history the West, and as such, cannot be assessed without an apt historical consciousness.

Of course, this is not to imply that SBNR spirituality can be reduced to these genealogical origins. Despite the clear connections that may exist, the spirituality of my research participants and those of their historical antecedents are far from identical. Moreover, these developments have spawned a plethora of complimentary, conflicting and contradictory ways of being that circulate throughout the accounts of my participants. For this reason, it might be best to think of them as tributaries, individually sufficient, but not necessary, to informing contemporary spirituality as lived. As I hope to show then self-spirituality does indeed reveal itself as a coherent cultural category (or at least can be said to be one given the right classificatory system); however, even within its delimited contours, we shall find diverging ideological strands, inconsistent logics, and deep differentiation between persons.

Therefore the argument I would here like to put forth—an argument that relies upon (at least partial) acceptance of the narrative I have just outlined—is that because the spirituality of my research participants is, first and foremost, a self-spirituality, then what is of utmost importance when looking to evaluate its social and political implications is examining in detail, and with an eye on a complex set of factors, the selves in question. That is to say, any attempt to identify the social and political dimensions of their “spirituality” would seem to necessarily demand a thorough examination of the content that lies within. We shall be interested therefore in what Taylor has commandingly called, the sources of the self.

In what follows I examine a variety of accounts of selves, all of which self-identify as SBNR, attempting to tease out sources of socialization, ethical understandings and ways of being, in order to assess the cogency of the dominant etic accounts. I use the four ethics I outlined earlier as theoretical starting points to assess the social and political implications of my research participants’ lived spirituality. In doing so, I aim to illustrate how although we can identify general themes, or principles that present
themselves across the majority, if not all, of my participants’ accounts, the way in which said principles are applied range considerably. In turn, I will offer a more nuanced account of what has been rendered in a reductionist way. As best I can, I shall attempt to identify appropriate intellectual, social and cultural tributaries—those that I’ve previously outlined and others of significance—as well as pay close attention to the structural (mainly economic) contexts these individuals find themselves within, for, as I said earlier, I operate under full awareness that the individual is primarily social in nature.
Chapter 5

Analysis

5.1 Self-Reliance and the Ethic of Self-Responsibility

We live in a capitalist meritocracy. This meritocracy encourages people to be self-sufficient—masters of their own fate. (David Brooks, New York Times, 2015)

In one way or another, for each of the individuals I interviewed, their spirituality involves taking responsibility for themselves. Whether it be their own happiness, success, past trauma and pain, or simply their attitudes, they tend to place responsibility on their own shoulders. As Maddie puts it, “organized religion seems like you’re creating boundaries for yourself, you’re looking for something that you’re not able to find internally.” Thus, for SBNRs like her, “religion” is seen as a kind of crutch—a form of negative dependency that keeps the individual from being truly independent, free and self-reliant.

The view that self-reliance is a virtue is, as Bellah and coauthors (1985) have pointed out, a part of the Euroamerican cultural tradition. Indeed, Emerson (2000 [1888]) wrote a famous essay entitled, “Self Reliance” exalting the individual who stands by her own conscience in contrast to she who follows the dictates of society (56). And this theme was taken to its extreme by Henry David Thoreau (1854), a friend of Emerson, in his classic Walden. These representative figures can be said to have been carrying on a tradition of self-responsibility that has come to define the American imaginary. Nevertheless, certain core tenets originated in the Renaissance, solidified during the Reformation, and were also heavily shaped by the Enlightenment. Recall that with the advent of civil society individuals were called to reshape themselves in order to serve the polis. It was this move towards remaking society by means of remaking individuals that Taylor, following Foucault, suggests gave rise to the “disciplinary society” (2007, 90).
Elites of the time took it upon themselves to develop “rational moral self-control; and also … taste, manners, refinement” (101). Thence came the seeds of civilization, as we know it.

Much later, what Weber called the Puritan’s inner asceticism demanded he/she acquire personal discipline, and commit themselves to take responsibility for their lives (and souls). Thus emerged a plethora of “spiritual disciplines of self-examination” (539). “Saintliness,” as William James called it, was cultivated through hard work, not merely God’s grace (1989, 229).

Yet further back, it was enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Locke who propounded an ethic of self-responsibility with respect to one’s moral and intellectual beliefs—as Taylor reminds us, the tradition they established demands that we “think it out for ourselves” (167). What we might think of as an “ethics of belief” (496). Indeed, it was Kant who propounded what we might call a “radical definition of freedom” (364) whereby the individual is only conceived as free, or autonomous, if they are free of all external (and internal) influences. Indeed, this view leans hard on our powers of disengaged reason, so central to the Enlightenment project.

This general orientation, toward autonomy and individual freedom, is found frequently among SBNRs. Daniel, an undergraduate student, states, “One of my main personal philosophies is that like, if you want to be happy you have to work for it.” While Jane asserts that “you constantly have to be accountable for yourself.” Spirituality therefore seems to imply an obligation to take responsibility.

What should we make of this? In what ways might this ethic of self-responsibility hurt or harm individuals, or society as a whole? How can we get a grip on the ways in which this ethic does or does not lead to increased social justice? In order to answer these questions, I suggest we begin by taking up what other scholars have already said about the matter.

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Craig Martin has argued that the ethic of self-responsibility promulgated in the spiritual milieu is tied to an ideology of individualism that “assigns responsibility to individuals rather than institutions or social structures” (88), thereby perpetuating the status quo. Altglas similarly argues that this “emphasis on individual responsibility seems to dissolve the possibility of collective action or political alternative” (278). Adding, “social issues are increasingly believed to find their resolution in the transformation of the self” (202). Such critiques are powerful and persuasive, for they reflect an acute awareness of the current reign of neoliberal economic policies that, in the 1980s, began to sweep across the world like wildfire.

Carrette and King argue that in the current economic climate, what goes by “spirituality”—and even much of what goes by “religion”—is subsumed by an “overriding economic agenda” (4). One which “puts profit 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” (7). They suggest that neoliberalism has been successful in doing this by manufacturing consent (a notion credited to Noam Chomsky), and encouraging complicity, by means of propagating specific ideological strands that naturalize the neoliberal order (9). One such strand is the

97 Expanding on this Altglas writes, “Religion has become an important locus for the psychologization of social life. It is a field of expansion and diversification of therapeutic discourses and practices, where norms about the self are expressed, developed, and reinforced. Undoubtedly, therapy culture was able to make inroads into the religious field because of the religious origins of modern Euroamerican narratives about the self. In other words, certain modern Protestant interpretations of salvation as a personal spiritual journey may have been determinants in the formation of ideas about personhood and the meaning of life, which have become pervasive in the therapy culture” (236).

98 Neoliberalism is often associated with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan’s free market policies. For an excellent overview of its history see David Harvey’s (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

99 Robert W. McChesney (1999) elucidates: “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 each represent the immediate interests of extremely wealthy investors and less than one thousand large corporations” (8).
ethic of self-responsibility, so entrenched in the “rugged individualism” (11) at large among SBNRs, which encourages a “tacit or overt acceptance of the inevitability of social injustice rather than a wish to overcome it” (21). It would certainly seem an individual who is willing to take responsibility for themselves, their own livelihood, and their family’s wellbeing, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in, is unlikely to upset the economic system by drawing attention to its internal contradictions. Thus, for Carrette, King, Martin and Altglas the ethic of self-responsibility is radically at odds with social justice because it enforces the myth that if “individuals are suffering, it is their own fault” (9).

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On the face of it, this critique would seem to sum things up quite well. For instance, take Oscar. Oscar emigrated with his mother and brother from South America to Canada when he was eleven years old. They left a comfortable middle-class life for a much lower station in Canada. They moved into a small apartment with his socialist grandparents. Oscar recounts the hardship he faced in attempting to integrate himself into Canadian society. He struggled to communicate his ideas in a foreign language, and wrestled with the sense of “otherness” he constantly felt within. He was bullied in school, and soon found himself rebelling against any authority imposed on him. Jealous of his materially privileged peers he began to steal, and cheat in school. He tells me that during this period he became depressed. Oscar was eventually encouraged by his mother—whom he had always been very close to—to try yoga as a means of remedying some of the bodily aches and pains he had been feeling at the time. At the yoga class he attended, he was introduced to “spirituality without religion.” Growing up in South America, Oscar had been raised catholic, and had attended a catholic school. He had always felt uncomfortable with what he viewed as a patriarchal conception of God. He immediately took to the class: “I liked the way spirituality

100 Altglas writes, “the “spiritual” fully converges with the wide range of existing therapeutic methods, in their aim of enabling individuals to be in charge of their professional success, their family life, their health, and so forth” (277 my emphasis).
was taught in that sense of a wholeness, of this universalness—not necessarily a single deity.” His mother then introduced him to the book *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne—a text touting “the law of attraction”—that he says, “hit me like a fucking brick wall.” He further fed his budding fascination with the mystical and occult by reading books by Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, and other well-known New Age authors. He tells me this literature helped him understand one of the reasons why he had suffered so much: “I had all these weird limiting beliefs. Not only that came when I was just a child: people communicating insecurity, or scarcity. I would absorb, and internalize it.” He describes his feelings during that period:

> And some of this stuff, it really felt out there at that time, but it was just like, I kind of wanted it to be that way. You know what I mean? It sounded better. I just liked this idea better. More than anything it gave me hope, right? Because before it was just like, well, if you’re set the way you are and you are predisposed to do all these things and this is only as far as you can ever get based on these predispositions, and the way that the world is, then you are kind of fucked over. But with Deepak Chopra, you learn there are more possibilities.

There is little doubt that Oscar found himself enticed by the law of attraction, at least in part, because it gave him the ability to cope with his undesirable economic situation. He tells me that he came to learn that he no longer had to accept that “life sucks, and that you’re just supposed to take it up the ass when it comes to you, and you know, hope for the best.” He also came to understand that his past pain—the “otherness” he always felt, and his feelings of low-self esteem—were the result of his “limiting beliefs.” Thus, in order to change his life around, he had to learn to think differently.  

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101 The “law of attraction” is essentially the idea that by focusing on positive or negative thoughts a person brings positive or negative experiences into their life. Kathryn Lofton (2011) writes of *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne, “[it] draws upon Carl Jung, New Testament sources, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Luther King Jr., and Buddha for epigrammatic invocation…. Although it poses itself as an “ancient secret,” eternal and unchanging, *The Secret* references the writings of Genevieve Behrend (1881-1950), Robert Collier (1885-1950), Charles Fillmore (1854-1948), as well as books such as Christian D. Larson’s *The Hidden Secret* (1907). All of these authors belong within U.S. religious history under the rubric of New Thought” (42).

102 One can hear echoes of New Thought, and more recently, prosperity gurus like Norman Vincent Peale’s (1952) *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) and Napoleon Hill’s (1937) *Think and Grow Rich*. 
These “understandings” seem to be responsible for diverting Oscar’s attention away from the structural inequities that contributed to his pain. That is, they seem to steer him away from the class-based inequality he was a victim of as a child, as well as the structural barriers stifling his ability to prosper. We might even say, his consumption of “spiritual” teachings viz. Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, and others, serve the ideological function of giving him hope in a heartless world, as Marx put it.

However, I would argue there is more to the story. For one, we ought to consider how Oscar’s “limiting beliefs” derive, in part, from being a foreigner in a Eurocentric Anglo-American, and white-hegemonic culture. As educator Parker J. Palmer puts it, “The beliefs that we have deep down about our nature and about those lesser and greater than ourselves are forms of ideology” (2000, 133). The sense of “otherness” Oscar experienced upon arrival in Canada is no doubt one that many who belong to marginalized or oppressed migrant groups can identify with. For instance, the struggle to feel worthy in a place where one is a cultural outsider is an experience Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]) wrote extensively on. In *Black Skin, White Masks* he examined the ways in which the black man in a colonial culture, is subjugated, because he is forced to see himself through his colonial master’s eyes.103 Given the parallels that exist, I would argue Oscar’s experience—despite the difference in era—is not all that dissimilar to Fanon’s. And that resultanty, his taking responsibility for himself, should not be seen as simply accommodating himself to a hegemonic capitalist culture, but rather, as an act of resistance against it. That is to say, I believe we can read Oscar’s attitude as an expression of resistance insofar as it is an effort not only to survive but to thrive in a culture that would otherwise beat him down. For in being able “to overcome [his] insecurity” he takes a stand against a culture that enforced his racial “otherness” and that, he tells me, made him at times consider suicide. His spirituality, from this perspective, is therefore empowering—at least in this respect.

103 Taylor (1991b) illuminates the idea informing Fanon’s critique: “The projecting of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that it is interiorized.” (50).
Of course, from another perspective Oscar’s taking responsibility for his suffering can be viewed as self-flagellation for a crime he didn’t commit, as it were. His spirituality, which frames his pain in psychological terms, *seems* to be relatively quietist and accommodationist in nature, for its primary focus lies not on society, but on the self. This, some might argue, is an inaccurate political analysis of his situation. His “limiting beliefs” are not the result of his own doing, but rather, the result of factors beyond his control. Indeed, we might congratulate Oscar for overcoming the odds against him, but it would be unfair, wrong even, to expect all like him to follow in his footsteps. The pernicious consequence of conceiving of his experiences as normative is that those who, unlike Oscar, are not able to overcome their “limiting beliefs” are then to be blamed for their weakness, or their so-called lack of trying.

Nevertheless, I would contend that although Oscar’s taking responsibility for his own suffering would, in an ideal world, be viewed as politically quietist, given the world as it is, it is a necessary and useful tactic for overcoming social injustice.\(^{104}\) This becomes clear when we recall that prior to his introduction to spirituality he firmly believed that “you’re just supposed to take it up the ass when it comes to you, and you know, hope for the best.” He held this belief despite the fact that he understood his marginalization, both social and economic, was the result of a specific cultural hegemony, tied to certain social structures. It remains an (unfortunate) fact that this political analysis, despite its accuracy, did not actually enable him to overcome his limiting beliefs, and that Oscar’s coming to accept them *as his own* (in the sense of taking responsibility for them—not accepting them deterministically) does. This is evidenced by the fact that it was only upon learning that in making a change within himself he could bring about change in the wider world—via spirituality—that he gained “hope.”

\(^{104}\) Nevertheless, I acknowledge that although it may be necessary, it is likely not sufficient to bring about systemic change. Individual actions can only get us so far; eventually what is required is a social uptake of one’s efforts. For more on the importance of both individual and collective action see G.A. Cohen’s (1997) “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice.”
To clarify, Oscar’s understanding that his marginalization, both social and economic, was largely the result of a specific cultural hegemony, tied to certain social structures, is politically accurate. However, this understanding alone was not sufficient to motivate him to take action to correct these perceived wrongs. Instead, his taking responsibility for the “limiting beliefs” he found within himself, that is, accepting that he played some part in their reification, gave him a sense of agency that his previous understanding did not (in his case) make possible.

It remains true that on a Marxist account the working class person who suffers false consciousness of believing in, say, meritocracy and the inevitable rewards of hard work, is a person who needs to change his beliefs by means of a genealogical self-analysis (intimately tied to a collective) that includes recognizing that they are not self-generated and actually reflect the interests of the dominant classes. Indeed, it is this self-analysis, from a Marxist perspective, that makes the worker’s distancing from his formerly held beliefs possible. On this view, Oscar’s capitulation to the system, rather than resisting cultural hegemony, preserves it. However, my argument is that the Marxist overestimates Oscar’s ability to derive sufficient inspiration to counter the forces working within and against him from a genealogical analysis of this kind. Oscar makes clear that what gave him hope was “learning” that because these beliefs were in some sense, self-generated, they were, resultantly, in his power to change, and ultimately overcome. Although it may be argued that this only aids to enforce the social structures which caused his marginalization in the first place, my reply would be that this individual emancipation, although accommodationist in some ways, is very much activist in others.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{105} One important difference between the Marxist process of coming to identify and challenge one’s false consciousness and the SBNR process exemplified by Oscar’s account (as presented here) regards how Oscar’s self-analysis is, in some ways, solipsistic. That is, rather than viewing himself as one individual among many with shared economic and social interests, working collectively to fight oppressive regimes—how working class consciousness is achieved according to Marx—instead, Oscar’s project is very much solo in nature.
It is activist in the sense that Oscar’s taking responsibility for his suffering becomes the catalyst for further action. That is, thinking differently—overcoming his “limiting beliefs”—allows him to be more effective in attaining the ends he has chosen.\footnote{It is worth nothing that Oscar’s sense of individual empowerment reflects the basic millennial approach to changing the world. As Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais (2011) in \textit{Millennial Momentum} note, millennials believe that true change comes about through “individual initiative and grassroots action” rather than “through the top-down approaches that many Boomers prefer” (231). Indeed, we should not forget that SBNRs—and millennials generally—are pragmatically minded (226).} Ends which include: “striving towards … equal rights for men and women,” “making the world better,” and “bringing more compassion to the world.” Not only this but Oscar’s sense of responsibility, for his feelings, his actions, and his life, have led him to become incredibly active in his community. He has worked for two not-for-profits, and been involved in a local food co-operative that seeks to distribute excess corporate food products to soup kitchens in his community.\footnote{One might ask: does Oscar consider what is producing the need for soup kitchens? And does he recognize that there are systemic reasons for their increasing need? In response, my guess is that (although this is mere speculation), yes, he likely does. But really, these protestations miss the point. The fact is that at the moment they are needed, and Oscar is there with a helping hand.} Although he never graduated from High School, Oscar completed a degree in culinary management at a local college. When asked whether he dreams of being a successful and wealthy chef he answers, “I want to be more grassroots. I want to be closer to people. I want to make a difference. That won’t make a difference for somebody who is starving… this can make a difference for somebody who is in need.” It would seem that the professional aid he receives from taking responsibility for himself is both individually and socially beneficial.\footnote{In this light, we might agree with Irene Lara and Elise Facio (2014) when they argue “spirituality is [or at least can be a way of understanding someone’s (or a community’s) position in the world by trying to make sense of unfair economic and gender inequality, and to do something about it” (4).}

We might view Oscar’s philosophy of social change as a kind of pragmatic idealism. He undoubtedly strives for large lofty goals, yet recognizes that change begins with a single (individual) step. Some might argue that his individualized approach fosters an accommodationist outlook, yet nothing in his actions bespeaks the belief that the status quo needs preserving. His example is illustrative, I believe,
of the conflicts that arise when contrasting acting for social change, and theorizing about it. Indeed, Oscar’s spirituality asks of him to change himself in order to change the world. We might condemn it on this basis. Or, we might recognize that it is a necessary step towards realizing a world that no longer requires this kind of approach. Like many of us, Oscar is forced to adapt to the world as it is, rather than as he wishes it to be. For only by learning to navigate the former shall he, or any of us, ever catch a glimpse of the latter.\footnote{It therefore isn’t accurate to suggest that, for Oscar, social issues are believed to find their resolution in the transformation of the self. Instead, it is believed that in order to bring about social change one ought to overcome the internal blockades (or “limiting beliefs”) paralyzing one from taking action. Once those are dealt with, the individual is better able to work for social justice. Transformation of the self, therefore, is a means to an end, not an end in itself.}

Of course, Oscar, like many others—especially those who draw significantly from the cultural strands informed by what has been loosely deemed “New Age”—espouses the belief that global change must begin with the individual.\footnote{Speaking of how he views a world of social justice coming about Oscar states, “when they align themselves with who they truly are… they create great change.”} This, I believe, is one of the most common characteristics of self-spirituality among my research participants.\footnote{It merits noting that there exist quite clear similarities between this view and that proffered by Buddhist philosophy. The overlap of these two frameworks I believe is a fertile area for future research.} There is no doubt such an approach can be both ineffective and, in some cases, even damaging. And that SBNR spirituality is severely limited when it comes to realizing certain goals of social justice. For instance, it is possible to view Oscar as offering what have pejoratively been labeled “bandaid solutions” to systemic problems, where rather than treating the sources of injustice, one merely treats the symptoms (e.g. feeding the hungry instead of addressing the causes of poverty which created their hunger). Yet I would argue that so long as there exist symptoms of injustice or inequality, especially if they are blatant, addressing them is neither accommodationist nor palliative, but rather, necessary and humane.\footnote{Of course, some argue that we ought to distinguish between charity and social justice. They might then say those who feed the hungry are engaged in acts of charity, while those who work to fight poverty are working for social justice. Although I believe, theoretically speaking, there are good reasons for distinguishing the two, in...}
world where individuals don’t starve), but until then, feeding the mouths of the desperate is a good thing to do, and it is pure arrogance for an onlooker to call this a bandaid solution.

In sum, I would argue that Oscar’s example teaches an important lesson: that taking responsibility for one’s life—that is, placing the burden of action on oneself in order to bring about change, in the current climate, is more often than not necessary to stir action. Especially if one is committed to work that is activist, social justice-oriented, or even simply progressive in nature. Nevertheless, it is true that this may, in some instances, lead SBNRs to “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” (Carrette and King 5). As we saw with Oscar, while his accepting responsibility for his “limiting beliefs” inspired him to take individual action to help his community, it also, in some respects, deflected attention away from the very social structures that caused them. This fact forces us to acknowledge the contradictions inherent to working for social change, where progress is never linear, compromise is required, and necessary evils are justified for the achievement of more noble and weighty aims. In any case, my research has revealed that Oscar’s community work, local and relatively small-scale is, in fact, one among many examples of independent-minded SBNRs seeking to make change within the world—one self-reliant self at a time.

5.2 Be True to Yourself and the Ethic of Authenticity

_Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind…. No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature._ (Ralph Waldo Emerson 2000 [1888], 135)

practice, things are much more complicated. Is it not an aim of social justice to make sure the hungry are fed? Or to make sure the cold are clothed? At what point does charity become social justice work? And vice versa? Those who work on the front lines, aiding the victims of social injustice and oppression, surely view themselves not simply as charity-givers but also social justice activists. To place these labels without thorough investigation of the reality of their situations is to fetishize the concepts while degrading the lived experiences.
Self-reliance, as Emerson touted it, had much to do with living according to one’s own standards, rather than merely conforming to the dictates of society. Among my research participants this principle was integral to how they practice their spirituality. For instance, Charles tells me “because I think anytime you’re being true to yourself those are true vibrations for any human beings. I think there’s goodness in all human beings. Then you can have more of a connection with someone. And when they’re not being authentic, when they’re not being true to themselves, that’s when they’re stuck in their image, their ego, something that isn’t you.” Similarly, Jasmine tells me “When I think of religion, it’s very obviously … tainted and very limiting; placing limitations on life and life experiences, whereas spirituality to me is a bit more about exploration and freedom, and just being who you are.” The ethic of authenticity was a common impetus for rejecting what my interviewees viewed as the conformist nature of “religion.” For example, Maddie and Natalie both reject “religion” on the basis that they see it as anathema to free and critical thought. David criticizes the racial segregation he witnessed at the church of his childhood, rebelling against this cultural norm. Oscar tells me how he always felt an affinity with the “female energy” because he did not have a good relationship with the men in his life growing up, and as a result, had trouble accepting (or as he would say “resonating with”) the notion of “God as a father” he was taught as a child. Thus, the ethic of authenticity—the significant value placed on “being true to oneself”—is writ large within the spiritual milieu.\footnote{It might be noted that these examples illustrate that “authenticity” is always defined in contrast to some external or prescribed norm. It follows from this that these individuals’ sense of self is, in part, determined by, if only in contrast to said norms. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge that we are, always and everywhere, socially determined. However, the important takeaway, I believe, is that, in a just world, we ought to be able to choose the norms we wish to identify with, and those we do not.}

Heelas and Woodhead argue that the ethic of authenticity, in tandem with a “principle of originality” is embedded within contemporary western culture today.\footnote{Together these principles purport that “[being] true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover” (Taylor 1994, 31).} In agreement, Taylor suggests
Western societies generally exhibit a “culture of ‘authenticity’ ” (2007, 299). I have already spoken of the Romantic currents informing this ethos. It would seem that the ethic of authenticity in contemporary society is a kind of moral law.\footnote{One need only consider the disapproval one must muster in order earn the labels “fake,” “inauthentic,” or “not real.” These are among the worst insults one can throw at another in certain pockets of our culture. The celebrities our culture adores are those who are seen as “original” while the “imitators” and “posers” are scoffed at with disdain.}

Sointu and Woodhead remark “the idea of authenticity assumes both the uniqueness of each self, and the importance of a self-determining freedom that allows unrestricted access to the wisdom within and to its expression” (264). Where did this ethic come from? To answer that, we must return to the thinker from whom the Romantic Movement sprung: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Indeed, it was Rousseau’s emphasis on the “voice within”—inter alia his conception of conscience as an “inner guide” (Taylor 1989, 357)—that laid the groundwork for the ethic of authenticity. To begin, Rousseau evoked the “Augustinian notion that humans are capable of two loves, of two basic orientations of the will” (356), whilst shedding the Christian idea of original sin. He argued Nature was fundamentally good, and that what humans must do is listen for the voice of nature that emanates from within them (357-8).\footnote{That is, of course, unless they were women. According to Rousseau, women ought to listen for the voice of nature in their husbands and then pretend that it is their own spontaneous feeling (see Rousseau’s (1763) Emile). I thank Jacqueline Davies for pointing this out to me.} In turn, he proposed a view of radical self-reliance and subjectivism with respect to determining the Good—this because, for Rousseau, “the inner voice of my true sentiments define what is the good” (362).\footnote{What is important to remember is that Rousseau becomes the point of origin of “a great deal of contemporary culture, of the philosophies of self-exploration, as well as of the creeds which make self-determining freedom the key to virtue” (Taylor 2007, 362-3). He also points the way towards a radical humanism, which reinvigorates the importance of the emotions in moral life (201).}

In this section I reflect on the social and political implications of the ethic of authenticity. The pertinent question, I believe, is what does it mean precisely to “be true to oneself” in today’s day and age? What realities does it make possible and what does it make impossible? In order to answer this question, we must remind ourselves of what SBNRs’ tend to equate with their selves—that being, their “inner
states”; by way of their thoughts, intuitions and, most especially, their feelings. Resultantly, what informs those thoughts, intuitions and feelings, which arise unbidden, and are therefore interpreted as reflective of one’s “true” self (as opposed to one’s false self, one supposes), shall be of utmost importance. That is, I wish to suggest that the political dimensions of the ethics of authenticity are intimately tied to the sources of one’s self.

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Some scholars have argued the ethic of authenticity is simply a byproduct of “self-centered consumer culture” (Daniel 11), which discourages the individual to be civic-minded and encourages them to lose themselves in private pursuits and pleasures (Bellah et al. 1985). These scholars worry this ethic ultimately leads to narcissism, and does nothing to combat the rabid consumerism propagated in advanced industrial societies. The preoccupation with whether an idea is authentically one’s own, rather than choiceworthy in itself acts as a kind of bulwark against ideological resistance. It works according to the logic of consumer culture, where whatever is chosen is good, rather than promoting what is good to be chosen. Altglas writes, “It is therefore clear to me that, when … students explain that they adhere to the teaching because the teaching ‘felt right’, ‘resonates with their heart’, or because they ‘felt home’,” it is less a “self-validation of belief” than an “implicit recognition … of values and norms they have already” (253). She argues that these individuals, socially situated in a capitalist society, hold pro-crude capitalist/anti-social justice values that are only further reified and normalized upon their entrance into the spiritual milieu.

There is tremendous evidence that the ethic of authenticity can, and does, reinforce the norms and values of consumer culture, by means of naturalizing them. Many of the SBNRs I interviewed seemed

118 No doubt a “false self” will be perceived as an internalization of an external ideology, that is, someone else’s ideas. I suggested in the previous section that Oscar’s “weird limiting beliefs” were viewed this way. Of course, what individuals take to be their “true self” will also have external origins. What matters then is whether or not the individual autonomously chooses to identify with them or not.
thoroughly unaware of how their intuitions or feelings might reflect their own (or their class’s) self-interest—shaped by their social context—in one way or another. An example of this was the case of Charlene.

Charlene rejected church from a young age because the people there were “hypocritical” and “it wasn’t allowing me to be free to be who I am.” At the same time, she admits that at the time she was interested in doing things that weren’t approved of by the church—namely, drinking alcohol and being sexually active. After she graduated university, she worked a number of different jobs. She tells me, “I love contract work! Because then you’re free again.” She ended up teaching English overseas for a number of years, where she learned about Reiki. Asked why she didn’t stay there for good she tells me, “It wasn’t sustainable because it’s not my passion. I love teaching. I love talking to people. I love helping people. But I don’t love grammar. And I don’t love studying for English classes.” When asked if she would ever go back to the church she replies, “it just doesn’t really resonate with me. I think it’s partly because of my childhood experiences, but anything that has too strict of a language I don’t really like.”

It is not difficult to see how many of Charlene’s choices are in many ways fundamentally governed by her self-interest—formatively shaped by her social context—and thus seemingly lacking an objective framework that could demand self-sacrifice of some kind. Her choice to leave the church was largely the result of it conflicting with her desires to drink alcohol and be sexually active (among other things)—what she chalks up to being “free.” Her love of contract work—a staple of neoliberal times—is enabled by the fact that her middle-class background provides her with sufficient support to feel “free” rather than insecure and chronically anxious with mere temporary work. As is her ability to choose from a panoply of career options, ultimately opting for that which she is passionate about, or loves, as opposed to that which will simply pay the bills. And finally, her reason for not returning to church is revealing, since it puts in clear sight how what is viewed as being at odds with the “true self” ultimately reflects “whatever
conflicts with the individual’s self-interest.” With these details in mind, it would seem the above critiques are spot on.

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However, I would argue, it isn’t always the case that the ethic of authenticity reinforces the status quo—at least not in all respects. Let us return to the case of Charlene. In further illuminating why she rejected the church of her youth she tells me,

I don’t like labels. I don’t think it matters what gender the person is, I’m going to be attracted to whomever I’m attracted to. And that’s not accepted in a traditional Anglican church. So yeah, it would have been part of the package for sure; part of the reason why I felt judged. Not that I was open about it but it would have been internalized. Kind of like shame; like, if they knew that I am also with girls they would probably not like that.

Thus part of the reason why Charlene refuses to go back to the church of her youth, and part of why it doesn’t “resonate” with her, is because the norms of female sexuality and propriety propounded there engendered within her, from a young age, a feeling of shame. In turn, Charlene’s asserting her sexual desires and her desire for bodily pleasure that alcohol represents may arise, in part, out of self-interest, but it may also reflect a post-romantic and feminist challenge to heteronormative (and conservative) gender and sexual norms.\(^\text{119}\) Importantly, these gendered norms Charlene views as reflecting a “religious” worldview that severely stifles what she considers to be her authentic self—equated, in this instance, with her sexual preferences. Thus she tells me, “I just felt like a judgmental hypocritical environment, that wasn’t allowing me to be free to be who I am.” Thus we can see how the ethic of authenticity played a strong role in her decision to challenge the habitus—inform by heteronormative and traditional female codes of conduct—in which she was raised. Furthermore, we can see how it is supported, if not informed, by feminist critiques that peg male monotheistic religions as

\(^{119}\) This brings to mind Lynch’s assertion that contemporary spirituality has developed “out of various initiatives to develop a spirituality that is not bound up with patriarchal beliefs and structures, and which can be a relevant and liberating resource for women” (2007, 25).
patriarchal and guilty of debasing the status of women in society. Accordingly, whether or not one believes that her specific means of resisting these norms is individually or politically empowering, I suggest that it would be wrong to reduce these desires of Charlene’s to mere selfishness.

For some SBNRs, acknowledging and abiding by the “true self”—which is viewed as existing prior to one’s existence— Involves a long (and at times arduous) process of self-work. Such self-work, is often couched in terms of “acceptance”—that is, acceptance of who one “truly is”—but paradoxically involves actively working to achieve it. We might think of such work as analogous to that of a sculptor, whose job it is to chip away at the stone, with the end of bringing to light the sculpture that, although hidden, exists deep underneath its many (culturally conditioned) layers.

Consider Liam, who suffered greatly from the shame he felt regarding his sexual orientation, as well as his parent’s divorce. For Liam, “being true to himself” has everything to do with what he calls “self-honesty.” This notion seems to entail some combination of being honest with oneself, and being honest about oneself. Thus in his case it involves his coming to accept his homosexuality, whilst simultaneously avoiding hiding this fact from others. He told me that accepting and embracing his sexuality was something, as a young person, he had tremendous trouble doing. For him, self-honesty also

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120 What I mean by this is it remains open to debate whether or not Charlene’s seeking to challenge “traditional” or “religious” sexual norms by means of pursuing and indulging her sexual desires is actually empowering her. Without taking too strong a stance on the issue, I might suggest that, given the ways in which sex, and more specifically, women’s sexuality, has, in the wake of the 60s and 70s been commercialized and commodified, one wonders whether the rejection of “traditional” or “religious” sexual mores is really counterhegemonic, or in fact, entirely mainstream. And if so, one wonders whether second-wave feminists who fought during the counter culture for the rights and freedoms of women to express and experience the full scope of their sexuality would condone the ways in which industry and popular culture have embraced and exploited those very rights and freedoms for their own financial gain; at times, to the detriment of (generally young) women.

121 Although I recognize that even if one accepts the existence of a basic human nature that exists a priori, the materials one has to work with, to shape one’s self-identity—to shape that nature—are provided prior to the process of self-construction, by the social and historical forces that preceded one’s material existence. The point is not that SBNRs’ “true self” actually exists a priori (whether or not it does we simply cannot know) but, more pertinently, that they perceive it as such.

122 On an interesting article attempting to link the rising divorce rate with the emergence of SBNR’s see Jiexia Elisa Zhai et al. (2008) “Spiritual but not Religious: The Impact of Parental Divorce on the Religious and Spiritual Identities of Young Adults in the United States.”
entails learning to “let people in,” in the sense of, allowing people to get to know him, as he really is.

Rather than, putting on an act, or “pretending.” For Liam, as it was for Charlene, the road to authenticity is paved with potholes, put there by a heteronormative culture. At least with respect to sexual norms, rather than protective of the status quo, his spirituality is transgressive of it.¹²³

Similarly, Neil, a PhD student at a Canadian university, shared that due to his homosexuality, he barely spoke any words in High School, “I was just very quiet. I kept to myself. I barely spoke anything. I barely spoke any words because I knew that people could hear that I was gay…. Like my vocabulary went down to “yeah,” “uh” like one word sentences…. Almost like a total shutdown.” In reflecting on his high school experience he reveals, “there were other gay people in high school but we were so afraid we never talked to each other—there were systems there that kept us apart. Like, in our own selves, like “Oh, don’t talk to them, then they’ll know you’re gay”.” Shortly after this period, Neil developed a terrible substance abuse problem that eventually forced him into a treatment program. Since then he has attended Alcoholics Anonymous periodically. In university, Neil was able to come out publicly, but only in certain social contexts. He recounts his emotions during that time:

I remember feeling really divided. So I worked at the GAP, which was like ‘Gay and Proud’ right? And then I was at St. Paul’s, and then I was in AA. So I had these three identities, which just did not intersect. You know? I could be gay at the Gap, I could be Christian at St. Paul’s, and I could be an alcoholic in AA. But those never overlapped. I never let those overlap, and I remember feeling really divided.

It is through AA that Neil sought to reconcile these “divided” aspects of himself. Not only is he looking to give expression to those parts of himself he so fervently hid, but he also aims to integrate them with those left remaining. This is an example of what is meant by becoming “whole”—a term so often

¹²³ Once again, the relevant debate is not whether or not Liam’s homosexuality is, or is not, reflective of his authentic self, that is, whether or not it was caused by nature rather than nurture. Of relevance is simply that rather than asking Liam to conform to the heteronormative culture in which he finds himself, the ethic of authenticity asks him to challenge it. Much like in the case of Oscar, Liam’s spirituality involves working on healing the wounds inflicted upon his psyche as a result of the habitus he was raised in.
heard within SBNR circles. It beckons towards an ideal of harmony that actually contains traces of Rousseau. Indeed, Rousseau held the view that when we re-connect with Nature (our true self), humans would transcend the duality within them and in turn, their self-love would lead them to act benevolently, for their own self-interest would be tied to that of their fellows. Whether this comparison is anachronistic I discuss below, but given the heteronormative culture embodied in western popular culture and media, not to mention the rampant homophobia alive in a host of social circles in North America and abroad, Liam’s, Neil’s and even Charlene’s quest to be true to their selves are decidedly valiant. Like Oscar’s aim of finding “worthiness” in a culture that seems reluctant to give him any, their determination not to deny their sexual identity in order to garner society’s approval is in many ways deeply emancipatory. Not only do these cases reveal the complexities surrounding the politics of recognition in contemporary society, but they also remind us of the poignancy of Sointu and Woodhead’s critique of reductionist accounts of contemporary spirituality: that they demonstrate a “failure to acknowledge that the meaning and significance of such selfhood varies in different contexts of embodied and gendered [and sexualized] subjectivity” (273).

Finally, to return briefly to the question of whether Neil’s quest for wholeness ties his self-interest to that of his fellows, as Rousseau postulated it would, I do believe that his actions support this possible

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124 On the history of heteronormativity and the creation of the “homosexual” as a socially constructed identity see Michel Foucault’s (1978) The History of Sexuality, Volume 1.

125 Of course, not all individuals’ preoccupations with authenticity are equally admirable. Discernment is everything here. For instance, to view human sexuality, and individual preferences as existing on a similar plane is to make a mistake. For, one cannot, most agree, change one’s sexual preferences, however, one can indeed, change one’s preferences—at least for the most part. Thus, in striving to “be who one is” what becomes of utmost importance, is what one identifies as oneself, and what one doesn’t. I would argue those SBNR’s who view their preferences—say, for shopping, expensive travel, and imported jewelry—as “who they are” and thus refuse to compromise to even the slightest degree for the sake of others, are undeniably at odds with a social justice ethic.

126 Taylor (1991b) sheds light on the context in which these debates are played out: “… we can see why the culture of authenticity has come to give precedence to two modes of living together … (1) on the social level, the crucial principle is that of fairness, which demands equal chances for everyone to develop their own identity, which include … the universal recognition of difference, in gender, racial, cultural, or to do with sexual orientation; and (2) in the intimate sphere, the identity-forming love relationship has a crucial importance” (50).
interpretation.\textsuperscript{127} He told me that he has been attending AA now for nearly a year straight and that he loves it because “it’s all of us coming together and helping each other as equals.” Adding, “the end is always to be more helpful to people, and to get rid of those character defects that block you from being in society.” Since his introduction to AA, Neil has completed a Masters—his thesis being about the possibility of a Queer ethics—and has been heavily involved in various social justice projects including: an anti-poverty organization in his home city, and an initiative that aims to spread awareness about LGBTQ rights. Neil’s case illustrates, I believe, that the ethics of authenticity, although it can certainly be complicit with the status quo, can also be transgressive of it.\textsuperscript{128}

### 5.3 Self-Work and the Ethic of Productivity

*He that has not a mastery over his inclinations, he that knows not how to resist the importunity of present pleasure or pain, for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principle of virtue and industry, and is in danger never to be good for anything.* (John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 35).

Jane, a Cultural Studies Masters student tells me, her spirituality is “demanding in that you always feel accountable…. You don’t really get any holidays from spirituality.” Samara, a freelance artist, tells me “for me, concretely, self-work takes the form of journaling. Of like, serious journaling.” Charlene tells me that spirituality means, “always wanting to grow and expand and be a better version of myself.” For these three SBNRs, and many others I interviewed, spirituality involves work, self-work. One must seek experiences and insights, through practices, or by other means, for the final end of becoming a better

\textsuperscript{127} Wanda Krause (2013) offers a one such interpretation, “Independence is a virtue insofar as we strengthen ourselves, our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual parts, to become whole and functional. When we are whole and functional we are better equipped to choose where we want to be and discern whether where we will be is good for the good of all” (29).

\textsuperscript{128} An example of this trade off would be how these individuals’ endorsement of the ethic of authenticity—being true to yourself—reinforces the individualism that underlies it. Although I lack the space to discuss this here, it is important to note that there was a clear individualism informing the framework of self-spirituality. Nevertheless, I do not support the view that individualism necessarily leads to selfishness, narcissism and/or the degradation of community.
person. Of course, of interest to us is what a “better person” looks like. Before taking up how my research participants “worked” on their selves, in various ways, let us examine how scholars have previously framed this notion of self-work.

In Michel Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish* he outlined his now-famous critique of the disciplinary methods of modern society—what he called, “panopticonism.” Foucault’s critique, insightful as it was disturbing, outlined the ways in which individuals in modern societies come to internalize culturally coded norms, and thereby become their own disciplinarians. It was Foucault who gave life to the notion of the disciplinary society, or what more recently has been called the police state. Altglas, drawing from Foucault, argues, “operating on subjectivity, the neoliberal state has become dependent upon knowledge of the self. Hence the central role of psychology, which makes selfhood intelligible and provides techniques to shape individual capacities and specificities for the good functioning of education, the family, the workplace, law and order, and so forth” (272). The idea is that SBNRs’ preoccupation with their selves—especially its continual development—is tied intimately to the current economic climate. And the work they voluntarily take-up on themselves, in order to “better” themselves, reflects a quest to increase their social capital in an increasingly competitive world. Resultantly, the self-work demanded by contemporary spirituality is complicit in reinforcing, and even perpetuating, neoliberal policies, by means of aiding individuals to accommodate themselves to the ever-increasing economic insecurity they are forced to experience (or what Weber tersely called the “Iron Cage”). Linking this to the ethic of self-responsibility, Altglas argues SBNRs’ range of self-work: “converge[s] on a central theme: individuals’ adaptation to their environment as the *sine qua non* for their self-realization. Post-psychoanalytic therapies consider that solutions to life’s problems lie in the change of individuals’ attitudes, thereby

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129 Similarly, Roger S. Gottlieb argues that “spirituality” has to do primarily with the cultivation of “‘spiritual virtues’: mindfulness or awareness, acceptance and equanimity, gratitude and generosity, compassion, and loving connection to other people, nature and God” (8).
making them responsible for their destiny” (206). In other words, contemporary spirituality “entails a “self-discipline” through which individuals are encouraged to become the active and autonomous agents of their regulation” (254). She adds, “the desire of so-called spiritual seekers to become self-sufficient, resilient, and flexible is not elaborated through their ‘self-authority’. The project of self-realization that they believe they undertake freely does not demonstrate reflexivity or individual appropriations of one’s identity, but their conformity to social imperatives for them to be adaptable, to control their emotions, and to cultivate moral dispositions” (277)—all tied to neoliberal policies.

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Despite the enticing force of this critique, I would like to suggest things are not yet so clear. That is, I would argue that although SBNR self-work may in some ways accommodate individuals to late capitalism, there are other pertinent dimensions of it that Altglas’s critique ignores. For instance, when Altglas implicitly condemns the ways in which SBNRs’ seek to be “adaptable, to control their emotions, and to cultivate moral dispositions” (277), we should, I believe, place this critique in historical context and then consider other perspectives. My claim is that if aiming for noble ends, these should be viewed as admirable qualities to possess.

I outlined earlier how the gradual emergence of the modern identity was tied to the Renaissance aspiration for mass “civility.” In fact, the latter relied upon the former. As Taylor notes, “the ideal of civility, with its core image of taming raw nature … involves what we might call a stance of reconstruction towards ourselves” (2007, 112). Thus the ability to “disengage” or “objectify” oneself becomes essential to the task of working on oneself. Of course, one of the reasons for this aspiration was economic in nature. It was widely accepted that a society replete with individuals who exhibited self-discipline, a strong work ethic, and a certain fastidiousness in their daily affairs would do better economically (103). However, there were other reasons as well. For instance, it was also understood that
“a normal ‘civilized’ country is one which can ensure continuing domestic peace” (101). Thus civility also required of its citizens “the development of rational moral self-control; and also, crucially taste, manners, refinement; in short, sound education and polite manners” (101). The way in which this is believed to have occurred was through what Norbert Elias (1978 [1937]) deemed the “civilizing process,” which involved “our taking … distance from a whole range of powerful emotions: rage and the fascination with violence” (Taylor 2007, 141).

All of this was, of course, elitist in nature, as the entire ideal of civility was premised upon it being opposed to “savage” or “primitive” societies. But my point is that much of our modern moral order is indebted to this process. For in the midst of decrying the disciplinary features of modern societies we soon forget that “Our ancestors permitted themselves excesses of rage, they more frankly gloried in violence, they flocked to scenes of cruel punishment, inflicted on humans and animals; all things that tend to horrify us today” (Taylor 2007, 141). Through the civilizing process, individuals sought not only to refrain from certain behaviours, but also to cultivate a sense of disgust or distaste towards that which was deemed “uncivilized,” within themselves, in order to show proper respect for others. All of this explains why within the public sphere when tragedies such as 9/11, Columbine or more recently the Paris attacks occur, they are met with unanimous public outrage. These acts of violence are considered a violation of modern civility.

Although we might like to tell ourselves otherwise, these horrific acts are not by any means abnormal for the human species. In The Better Angels of Our Nature the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) sheds light on the horrific acts that were once both commonplace and blasé to our earlier

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130 Not to mention, it was financed by the “incivility” of a transatlantic slave economy (see Paul Gilroy’s (1993) The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness).

131 As Taylor aptly puts it, “Civilization is in a sense a matter of feeling shame in the appropriate places” (2007, 142).

132 Of course, this not to imply that there are not uncivil acts perpetrated regularly by developed countries at home and abroad, but simply that norms of civility have become deeply engrained in public discourse in the West.
ancestors. He writes, “human history is a cavalcade of bloodshed” (482) bluntly illuminating that “most of us [humans] … are wired for violence” (483). It would seem that, despite our attempts to deny it, we have tendencies within us (more so in men than women) that propel us to harm others. Of course, it does not follow from this that our hurting others is inevitable or determined. But it does ask us to seriously consider how we have come so far in a relatively short period of time. That is to say, what has enabled us not to engage in the cruelty our ancestors of only a few centuries prior gladly indulged in?

Pinker suggests that two of the most important factors militating against our violent inclinations have been the rise in self-control and self-discipline (169). Indeed, given that we are “wired for violence”, as Pinker puts it, it is astounding to reflect on the progress we have made. Especially when Taylor reminds us, “We now live with and partly by, notions of human rights which are incomparably more demanding than in previous civilizations” (2007, 658). In turn, what we consider “normal” moral behaviour, especially in the developed world, raises the bar to an unprecedented degree in human history. Thus what Taylor calls the modern moral order—enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948, and endorsed by forty-eight countries—was largely made possible by the rise of the disciplinary society. More than this, many metrics of social justice have only been made possible because of the quest for civility. Indeed, Locke, one of the founding fathers of Liberalism, who buttressed his political theory on the view that individuals came together to form society in order to dedicate themselves to “growth and prosperity, rather than war and plunder … accepting a morality of mutual respect and an ethic of self-improvement” (Taylor 2007, 129) relied upon the notion of a self that could ultimately remake itself by means of disengagement from certain “uncivilized” proclivities. Moreover, the

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133 See Pinker’s 2002 *The Blank Slate* (Chapter titled “Gender”) for the gender differences he suggests are innate and universal.
134 Indeed, Pinker adamantly agrees (his book outlines how throughout human history violence of all kinds has steadily declined, while the moral standards by which we assess violence have gradually become more stringent).
liberal harm principle, articulated by John Stuart Mill, demands that citizens exhibit a considerable amount of self-discipline. Rather than strike another who offends us (no matter how much we would like to), we must force ourselves to refrain. We do this both for their sake, but also for the sake of civility. Even pundits who criticize liberalism cannot deny that living in a society where the fear of being killed, raped, or maimed is (for many of us at least) not an everyday occurrence, is a sign of moral progress. It would seem then that to condemn self-work because it asks of individuals to “be adaptable, to control their emotions, and to cultivate moral dispositions”, as Altglas puts it, is to discount the fact that this may be (at least somewhat) necessary for individuals to do in order to ensure that the better angels of our nature, as opposed to our inner demons, are given priority.

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I have thus far tried to draw attention to how the disciplinary society has, at least some, upsides. Of course, there is more the story. For one thing, the quest for civilization has often involved colonialism and imperialism, thus was itself a producer of violence, plunder and terror in innumerable ways. Moreover the civilizing process, grounded on rational disengagement, also led to a repression of or detachment from certain bodily functions and desires (often sexual in nature) (Taylor 2007, 137). It was this aspect of the modern self that the Romantics railed against. Thus I certainly take Altglas’s point that given their history, as well as the rise of neoliberalism in recent times, the disciplinary aspects of society may not serve the true interests of the people (or people living elsewhere), and instead, may stultify them. This is the question I now want to address.

Altglas argues that what goes by self-work in the spiritual milieu can often be reduced to “a continuous re-skilling of individuals who are often freelancers in competitive and unregulated markets of cultural and symbolic resources” (300) She adds, “To survive in such avant-garde and unregulated
milieus, individuals need to constantly renew their skills and reinvent themselves—hence the significance of an endless “work” to actualize oneself” (291).

In turn, let us consider Jasmine. She informs me that after finishing her undergraduate degree she, on a whim, moved from Eastern Canada to Western Canada to work, despite the fact that she knew barely anyone there. Fortunately, Jasmine found stable work and thrived for a year or so. Some time passed and she grew weary of the winters out West and, as she had done before, up and left. When asked how she justified giving up stable work in one place for another where she had no job security whatsoever, she replied, “I appear to always have this, like, self-defeating thing about my life because I do things like that. But I just … refuse to let capitalism scare me.” Of course, her explanation makes no mention of the fact that, like Charlene, her class background enables her to make such a move. Moreover, given Altglas’s analysis, we might say her current interest in yoga—an interest she took as far as getting her yoga teacher certification—has much to do with how it enables her to be more “self-managed and autonomous.” Still, I think there is more to say on the matter.

From one vantage point, it seems clear that Jasmine’s bricolage follows a specific logic: one that, from her perspective allows her to grow spiritually—whilst, from another, we might view as helping her to develop her social, cultural and emotional capital. Still, we should take into account important facets of Jasmine’s life history that inform her life trajectory today: since she was a child, Jasmine always felt uncomfortable with culturally enforced gender norms. Specifically, she felt frustrated with the ways in which her prescribed gender (female) limited her socially and spatially. In fact, it was in part the result of her alienation from hegemonic gender norms that she became interested in spirituality. This ultimately

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135 I prefer to think of the SBNRs I spoke to as *bricoleurs* engaged in *bricolage*. Altglas explains, “*Bricolage* … conveys the idea that this practice is amateurish or not serious—the verb *bricoler* in some contexts can be translated as “fiddling” (2). In doing so, I do not seek to “juxtapose spirituality to religion and identify the former by way of what it lacks in comparison to the latter” (Bender and McRoberts 2012, 2), but rather to make sense of it on its own terms. The use of “bricolage” as a descriptor is not meant to demean or provoke, but is, I would argue, an accurate reflection of what SBNRs believe themselves to be doing.
led her to do schooling in Women’s Studies and to do work with vulnerable and at-risk women. About these experiences she tells me, “I’ve always said this, especially about my experiences in terms of like my education in women/gender studies and my work in the shelters and stuff, its like once you kind of widen your eyes, you can’t close them. Once you see further, in my experience, its impossible to unsee or unlearn what you have, so that’s why I say … like it’s all experience.” Thus her first hand experiences working with women in shelters, which she considers sacrosanct, inform her identity today. It is for this reason that she tells me, “when I think about social justice work, like on a high level, it just makes sense to me. Not in the sense, “oh, I think really clearly about a certain subject matter,” but just as a human, I think it just makes sense.” Here we see how the ethic of authenticity in sacralizing that which she identifies with her true self—her interests in social justice—motivates her to work with vulnerable and at-risk women. Like Oscar and Neil, she has been engaged in various kinds of work with not-for-profits. And like them, her individual empowerment enables her to be more efficient and productive in her work—work that was incredibly demanding, she says, because

When you do any kind of work in a non-profit organization, there’s no security person, like there’s no budget person … you have to do absolutely everything yourself … there’s no secretary to order your office supplies for you. If you’re out of paper, you’ve got to go get it…. So I was the person doing all the outreach support and advocacy, so everything from like, working with their provincially mandated social workers, to working with probation officers and writing pre-sentence reports, any type of advocacy work for whatever the clients needs were at that time, that’s what I was doing.

With all of this in mind, I would argue the fact that yoga aids Jasmine in performing the inordinate number of daily tasks her work trying to help those who need it most throws at her is no thing to criticize. Of course, one might still argue that her spiritual self-work, which enables her to cope with her job, simply aids in accommodating the oppressive and alienating system in which she finds herself, making her more productive in the process. However, to take this view would be to radically limit the possibilities available to individuals in present day society. For on this line of thought, any attempt to
“cope” with the daily rigors of neoliberal life—that is, any attempt to “feel good”—must inevitably be seen as accommodationist, and therefore, anti-social justice. It is an enclosed hermeneutic by which nothing beyond the most revolutionary of stances is deemed worthy of praise or recognition. Needless to say, Jasmine’s bricolage, from this perspective, is ultimately politically quietist. Yet I would argue, given that the ethic of productivity, embedded in her self-work, which enables her to have a chance at completing all of the tasks her not-for-profit, socially beneficial work, demands her to finish, it is ultimately something we should admire, and support. That is because although she seeks to work within the current system, she does so in order to change it. For as she attests, “[Free Market Capitalism is] just completely inconsistent with everything that I think… it’s completely inconsistent with everything else that I think most people are trying to do with their lives. And I mean … it’s completely spiritually disconnected with human beings. It’s not a sustainable system.”

Of course, Jasmine’s critique of capitalism alone does not dismantle it, and the positive work she does with vulnerable women does not necessitate that the rates of violence against women and women’s poverty will decrease. This might lead one to suggest that nothing that she does can be expected to bring about social justice. However this view, I believe, is informed by a specific (and overly narrow) conception of social justice because it restricts “social justice” to the political-economic sphere. I prefer to think of social justice more broadly, aligning my view with Brian Barry (2005) when he claims, “Social justice is about the treatment of inequalities of all kinds” (10 my emphasis). Thus what is essential is that those concerned with social justice are interested in remedying inequalities and inequities of all types, in all spheres of life. In turn, social justice work, as I see it, can come in many forms. And this includes aiding to remedy the undue suffering those inequalities and inequities have already caused.136 Therefore

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136 This view of social justice is therefore fundamentally leftist. Peter Singer (1999), paraphrasing how Henry Spira, an animal rights activist, describes the “Left” writes that the Left is “on the side of the weak, not the powerful; of the oppressed, not the oppressor; of the ridden, not the rider. And he [Spira] talks of the vast quantity of
those who help empower the victims of inequality and inequity, like Jasmine, are, through their efforts, working towards realizing a socially just world.\textsuperscript{137} Because without individuals like them, the current victims of social injustice might never have the opportunity to survive, let alone thrive. This is an unfortunate truth about our current situation. Yet it remains a truth nonetheless. Consequently, for Jasmine, one must play the game to change the game, as it were.\textsuperscript{138}

Another example is that of David, a PhD student who rejected his catholic faith as a result of the “hypocrisy” he witnessed around him. David tells me that he engages in “self-reflection” each night, what he calls his “meditation.” When asked why he does this he tells me, “if you can self-reflect about yourself, that means you are helping yourself, and by helping yourself you can help others.” Now, we might see David’s spirituality as aiding him to advance himself within his academic field. His self-work might indeed help him to become a more productive researcher, a more engaging lecturer, and a better networker at academic conferences. His nightly meditation might help him to release the stress he feels—the product of tightening university budgets and the shrinking job market for young academics. On the other hand, his self-work may help him to, as he puts it, “help others.” It may, for instance, allow him to

\begin{quote}
pain and suffering that exists in our universe, and of his desire to do something to reduce it.” Singer then adds, “That, I think, is what the left is all about” (8).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{137} I would argue that social injustice is not only undesirable because it gives rise to inequitable and unequal social relations, but also (and perhaps more importantly) because those relations cause undue suffering to individuals and communities. Consequently I believe those who work to relieve that suffering, ought, at the very least, be viewed as working to realize a world where individuals do not experience the pain of marginalization and oppression—in other words, a socially just world. Nevertheless, it remains true that the realization of a socially just world requires individuals to also aim their efforts at eliminating the systemic and legal causes of social injustice. One could criticize Jasmine for not doing enough of this, but as I have said, I think both jobs are needed and necessary.

\textsuperscript{138} It is important to recognize the ways in which SBNR self-work has its roots in the Puritan theology of work and ordinary life. In the same way puritans believed in the idea of a “calling,” so too do many of my research participants believe that they are meant for a specific kind of labour. Of course, the source of the calling is significantly different—early Christians believed one’s calling was determined by God while SBNRs tend to view it as either innate, given by the universe, or discovered through experience—however, the end is similar: to serve the social order. That is, all share a conception of a successful society whereby individuals who are capable of personal discipline and controlling themselves take responsibility for their own lives (Taylor 1989, 229).
write that academic article that will affect policy. He tells me, “with my PhD, I’m hoping … like right now I’m studying racial identity in comic books … so by talking about something as important as racial identity in comic books … it is also making the topic of racial identity more open…. I’m hoping that my work can slowly help develop some areas, as opposed to some big thing that suddenly changes everything.” Thus David, despite his ostensible accommodation to the system, is not bent on retaining the status quo—at least with respect to racial inequality. He stresses how much “fear and insecurity” are the cause of “conflicts in the world.” He says, “racism, homophobia, it all takes roots in fear. It is a fear that’s having something that is unknown to you.” For David, spirituality is about self-inquiry, and self-management—it reflects his continual attempt to face the fear and insecurity in himself. If we recall Pinker’s thesis—that we are wired for violence—this endorsement of self-management (especially as it pertains to young men), which entails becoming aware of, and learning to cope with, one’s fears, may be a key factor in reducing conflict in the world. It remains true that David does not seek to overhaul every structure responsible for racial or social injustice, but neither is he entirely complicit with them.

In evaluating Atlglas’s claim that the self-work demanded by contemporary spirituality is complicit in reinforcing, and even perpetuating, hegemonic norms let us consider Maddie. Maddie is a law student whose spirituality revolves around relieving herself of the shame she feels from her past trauma, as well as retaining a connection to her late mother. From one perspective, the self-work Maddie engages in through counseling, and yoga, probably do enable her to become a good, perhaps even more productive citizen in a late capitalist society.

However the story is much more complicated. For one, it also helped her take care of her mother when she was dying of cancer. Some might argue, although this initiative reflects her commitment to take care of those she loves, the pressure on her to do this work it is the result of the dismantling of the welfare state, whereby more and more of the “caring work” within the family becomes the responsibility of the
women in the household and in the community. From this perspective Maddie’s case puts in stark view the sometimes-equivocal relationship self-work can have to social justice. That is, how it can contradictorily work both for and against it simultaneously. Still, one wonders whether the above assessment creates a binary where there need not be one. For it is entirely plausible that Maddie might accept that given the world as it is she has to be her mother’s caretaker, while at the same time harbour plans to work towards bringing about a world where women are not a priori expected to do this. Indeed, Maddie assures me that her self-work also plays a large role in helping her follow in her late mother’s footsteps as, “such a strong woman … an advocate for everybody.” Although I am speculating at this point, I do so in order to draw attention to how pragmatically accepting and working within the current system(s) need not lead one to passively accept it for eternity.

Moreover, although it is true that Maddie accepted her role as “caregiver” she credits her spiritual practice, yoga, with giving her an opportunity to spend time nurturing herself. She tells me, “this is an hour of my week just for me.” Thus we can see how for Maddie, her spiritual practice allows her to cope with what scholars have called the “key dilemma” facing women in the West today: the dilemma between “living for oneself” and “living for others” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 54-84). Sointu and Woodhead (2008) argue women today often face “incompatible sets of demands” whereby “they are expected to tend to the bodily and emotional needs of others,” while at the same time, having to enter the workplace (189). This being one of the primary difficulties of the female role in the contemporary west, the self-focus of Maddie’s spirituality allows her to construct an autonomous form of selfhood (191), that ultimately provides her relief from the ideal of unrelenting love and self-sacrifice embodied in contemporary codes of femininity.139 For Maddie, then, spirituality signifies a move inward, as opposed

139 Richard Dyer (1997) argues that these are based, in part, on the figure of Mary Magdalene (189). On a fascinating critique of how the ideal embodied in Mary Magdalene has informed contemporary ideals of femininity, as well as racial tropes, see Dyer’s White.
to outward, as it encourages her to take care of *herself*, whilst she takes care of *others*.\(^{140}\) She is encouraged to ask, “Am I being true to what *I* actually want? Am I paying attention to *myself*?”, as she puts it; instead of becoming a martyr. Furthermore, while it may be the case that in pushing herself to be “more compassionate” and “more mindful” of her “thoughts, feelings, and sensations” and her “personal reactions to the space around [her]” we could view this as a form of (gendered) self-discipline; we could also see this as a form of self-sacrifice that is ultimately altruistic in nature. An effort that, although not revolutionary, is indeed necessary to bring about a socially just society.

Finally, consider Jane, a thirty-year-old Masters student, who came from a background of “a lot of abuse and violence and poverty.” For Jane, spirituality has everything to do with “healing.” Healing the wounds inflicted on her as a result of her traumatic childhood. A self-proclaimed seeker, she has dabbled with Buddhist meditation, yoga, various liberal churches, and New Age workshops and retreats. More than most, Jane sees spirituality as hard work. It involves a monitoring of her internal experiences, both mental and bodily, in order to become more empathic, kind and loving. When reflecting upon where she has come from and where she is today, Jane has trouble believing it. She tells me she never imagined she would find a way to escape the poverty of her youth. There is little doubt that the therapeutic self-work she has consistently done, has helped her to succeed. Thus, perhaps we might see Jane’s case as offering support to Altglas’s claim that “exotic religious resources also contribute to social stratification by helping those involved in collaborative work, service, and caring occupations to develop particular attitudes which, in turn, can be converted into career advancement or material comfort” (306)?

In one sense, yes, Jane has drawn from various religious resources in order to increase her productivity and social standing since she worked for a number of years as a social worker. Social work is

\(^{140}\) Heelas and Woodhead write, “Whatever route they take, it is likely that those who enter subjective wellbeing culture and the holistic milieu will be seeking not only to continue or deepen a responsibility of care for others, but also to devote more attention to their own wellbeing” (2005, 103).
a profession that demands collaborative work, service, and caring, thus Jane’s spirituality, which helped her to do her job, could be viewed as supporting Altglas’s theory. However, I would argue that this would be a shallow reading of her situation. For one thing, Jane became a social worker because she was committed to helping those who have experienced “institutional violence.” However, during her tenure, she tells me she became “depressed” because of the way in which her job forced her to confront “how systematically large these very injustices are.” We might then say the aid her spirituality provided in allowing her to be “good functioning” while facing such terrifying realities enabled her to remain loyal to her commitment to help others.\footnote{Of course, some might argue that in helping those experiencing systemic injustice she is aiding them to accommodate themselves to a capitalist system, however, in response to such a criticism, we might simply ask: what, aside from an all out revolution, is not accommodationist?} The ethic of self-love inherent to Jane’s spirituality encouraged her to devote attention to her own wellbeing while at the same time attending to that of others. We might think of this as a quest for “emotional capital” (306), as Altglas puts it, but I suggest that to do so would be to do it a grave injustice. Moreover, in the helping professions, where Jane found herself, qualities like empathy, care and love, are not only prerequisites, but, in fact, incredibly powerful aids. She tells me, “I started realizing that the only thing I was doing personally was any one-to-one interaction I might have … I mean, other than these sort of systemic things that I could help people with so they could just keep being a part of this shitty system, was to actually just be kind to people—that was the only thing that was remotely effective in my mind.”

This lived example, I believe, forces us to reconsider not only how SBNR self-work is framed, but also, more generally, how what is considered politically efficacious by academics, tends to be limited to large structural shifts that escape the lived realities of everyday persons. Indeed, the economic injustices alive in the west today are absurd in scale, however, as Jasmine and Jane remark, the individuals, on the front line, who witness its consequences—often marred on the faces and bodies of its
victims—cannot solely keep their minds on a utopian future, but must deal with the urgencies of the present. If spirituality provides a means by which individuals can cope with the atrocities that face them in their everyday lives—say, at the shelter, or in the office—before we judge the social and political nature of their self-work, we, as scholars, must make sure to remember that not everyone is working towards the same goals. As Jane informs us, “spirituality is healing”—but not simply healing one’s own wounds, made by the capitalist machine, but, “If you’re talking about the land, animals, human beings, I think that is social justice: healing and repairing.”

5.4 Know Thyself and the Ethic of Self-Awareness

If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion. (Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy, 161)

For the majority of my research participants—whose spirituality begins and ends with the self—to garner self-knowledge, or self-awareness, is part and parcel of what it means to be SBNR. An essential feature of Maddie’s spirituality, she says, is garnering more self-awareness. An anonymous SBNR writes, “I view spirituality as being connected to and aware of myself…. But I think … for spirituality, there needs to be self-awareness.” While Jane asserts, “I think it is to know yourself. That is the deepest spiritual practice.” Given that the ethic of self-responsibility and the ethic of authenticity prevail within the spiritual milieu, one can easily understand why “becoming aware of oneself” or “knowing oneself”

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142 This view is echoed by Michel De Certeau (1984) in The Practice of Everyday Life in which he challenged the view of a culturally deterministic universe. He conceded that in a capitalist society, there indeed exists what he called “strategies”—those spaces imposed by the dominant order (e.g. the State, Institutions, Businesses) that are defined and delimited by the reigning modes of production—which are themselves inescapable. Nevertheless, for De Certeau, this does not require that all “consumption” be identical or that all materials be interpreted (consumed) in the same ways. Thus his interests lay not so much in the products consumed—for he recognized that in a hegemonic state all products would be easily appropriated—but rather the ways in which these products were used (xv). He wrote, “users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv). For De Certeau, pure autonomy in a capitalist society (or any other for that matter) was not possible. However, it was these “acts of consumption”—invisible to the logic of vulgar structuralist or Marxist theories, but which were nevertheless politically significant—that he deemed “tactics” (xiv).
takes on such significance for these SBNRs. For how can one possibly take responsibility for themselves, or be true to themselves, if they do not know who, or what, they are\textsuperscript{143} Before we consider how it is SBNRs tend to garner such self-knowledge, and what methods they utilize to do so, let us first look at the historical precedents to such a task.

I argued earlier that the “inwardness” that defines the modern identity can be traced at least as far back as Descartes.\textsuperscript{144} It was following his “radical reflexivity” that the “self” came to refer to the first person perspective (Taylor 1989, 176). This occurred as the result of two significant developments. The first is Descartes’s use of “disengaged reason” in order to take an “objective” stance towards his own experience—articulated in his \textit{Meditations}. Of importance here is how Descartes quarantines his own thoughts and feelings as if they were not his own, in order to discern their ontological certainty.\textsuperscript{145} The second development is the ideal, advanced by John Locke, of a “human agent who is able to remake himself by methodological and disciplined action” (159). This comes about because Locke, influenced by the “disengaged” approach of Descartes towards his self, constructs a picture familiar to moderns: that of the disengaged agent who can subject his or her own beliefs and desires to rational scrutiny, and thereby, reform them (171).\textsuperscript{146} As I noted earlier, it was through the creation of this notion of the self that the disciplinary practices of modern societies, which Foucault so determinedly sought to bring to light, were made possible. It also advanced the quest for civility. As we saw in the previous section, “Civility

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\textsuperscript{143} Of course, there are many individuals who abide by the ethic of authenticity and have little self-awareness. For many to be “true to oneself” might simply involve adhering to one’s desires (i.e. only wearing red shirts, or only driving a Ford). This seems to me to involve little self-awareness; certainly not the kind my research participants spoke of, for the most part.

\textsuperscript{144} More accurately, this inwardness begins with Socrates, but for my purposes here, Descartes is of primary significance.

\textsuperscript{145} “What Descartes calls on us to do is to stop living ‘in’ or ‘through’ the experience, to treat it itself as an object, or what is the same thing, as an experience which could just as well have been someone else’s” (Taylor 1989, 162).

\textsuperscript{146} “The disengagement both from the activities of thought and from our unreflecting desires and tastes allows us to see ourselves as objects of far-reaching reformation. Rational control can extend to the re-creation of our habits, and hence of ourselves” (Taylor 1989, 171).
requires working on yourself, not just leaving things are they are, but making them over. It involves a struggle to reshape ourselves” (2007, 101). If we accept this, it becomes clear why the “disengaged agency” (130) utilized by Descartes played a formative role in changing our understanding of subjectivity. Next, Locke paved the way for the kind of “radical reflexivity” found among Puritans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Taylor outlines it:

The modern ideal of disengagement requires a reflexive stance. We have to turn inward and become aware of our own activity and of the processes which form us. We have to take charge of constructing our own representation of the world, which otherwise goes on without order and consequently without science; we have to take charge of the processes by which associations form and shape our character and outlook. Disengagement demands that we stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits, and by making them objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny or remaking. (1989, 174-5)

Thus ever since Descartes and Locke, the quest to “know thyself” has meant taking an “objective” stance towards oneself. What is important to note is that “this disengaged, disciplined stance to self and society has become part of the essential defining repertory of the modern identity” (136). Moreover, with the rise of psychology as an authoritative discourse, which I briefly discussed earlier, the modern self has been couched in psychological terms. We cannot but understand ourselves as beings with psyches.

Indeed the self-inquiry of some of my research participants had everything to do with becoming the disengaged subject. That is, objectifying their “self” in order to identify what were and were not the beliefs and desires that were socially or culturally conditioned. For instance, Leslie, a Drama student,

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147 Of course, the Puritans engaged in self-examination to reassure themselves and others about their piety (chosen by god; tied to the doctrine of predestination)—which, as Weber informs us, they were considerably (and understandably) concerned about—nevertheless, the approach was the same.

148 Of course, a position of actual objectivity towards oneself is likely an unattainable ideal. “Objective” here denotes a sense of detachment, whereby one consciously dis-identifies from the beliefs or qualities under scrutiny in order to assess them or reform them. It entails a kind of observation of one’s inner life. How truly objective a stance one can muster is likely to depend upon the individual in question.

149 Taylor writes, “Where earlier people spoke of possession by evil spirits, we think of mental illness” (2007, 540).
recounts, “So I started to journal this summer and started to go through all of the different things that I believed and tried to figure out where they came from, and then reflected as to whether I should keep those beliefs or throw them out.” This task, it begs us to say, is rather like that undertaken by Descartes in his *Meditations*. Engaged in what might be called a kind of cognitive hygiene, Leslie placed her beliefs under rational scrutiny in light of the evidence before her, in order to determine what stands the test. Leslie’s quest for self-knowledge involves identifying those beliefs, which she believes represent who she “truly” is, in contrast to those that are foreign to her. Like her, the majority of SBNRs I spoke to took for granted their ability to “objectify” themselves with the aim of reforming their selves.

This disengagement is not peculiar to Leslie, or her fellow SBNRs. In fact, we all are, for the most part. As I stated earlier, following Taylor, it is integral to the civilizing process. The question remains, whether Leslie’s—a self-proclaimed SBNR—disengagement can be said to abide by the same logic as everyone else’s. It might get us somewhere if we remember that most SBNRs tended to view self-examination as a precondition for spiritual “growth” or “development.” Thus, for SBNRs like Leslie, it would seem that her quest to identify her true self, and become responsible for herself, must involve taking the disengaged stance. However, this does not answer the question regarding final ends. That is to say, by what logic might spiritual growth or development operate, and what is the SBNR ultimately aiming for?

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Altglas argues that the discourses on self-awareness and self-knowledge found within the spiritual milieu are complicit with neoliberal policies that encourage self-discipline and self-regulation. Placing her

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150 Taylor remarks, Immanuel Kant and other enlightenment thinkers believed that this disengaged rationality would enable individuals to see “the whole picture” (1989, 330), that is, to rise above oneself, and conceive impartially of the universal good. According to Taylor, Freud too can be said to have invoked a Cartesian stance towards the human mind. He believed that in becoming a disengaged subject with respect to one’s inner life, one could regain freedom and self-possession (446).
claim in historical context she suggests the turn inward in the name of salvation, propagated by the Puritans, took on new valences as the twentieth century progressed. Specifically, with the popularization of psychoanalysis through various cultural mediums (i.e. advice literature, advertising, movies, etc.) what was at one point a quest to demonstrate purity was replaced by “an ethos of self-improvement and autonomy, the quest for happiness, an optimistic outlook on the perfectibility of the self, and references to faith and moral virtues” (203). 151 This solidified, Altglas suggests, during the twentieth-century counterculture, whereby therapeutic techniques that aided individuals to transform their selves proliferated (204). Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) in Brightsided similarly argues that since the nineteenth century in America, there has been a rapid spread of what she calls the “ideology of ‘positive thinking’ ” (4), whereby everyday Americans, despite their social status or life situation must “smile or die” (15). 152 She remarks on the structural changes that took place during the twentieth century that aided and abetted its dispersal. “More and more middle-class people were not farmers or small business owners but employees of large corporations, where the objects of their labor were likely not to be physical objects, like railroad tracks or deposits of ore, but other people” (53). For individuals in the service industry—a rapidly growing sector then (and now)—the ability to seem confident and joyful (whether or not it was sincere) could pay dividends at work. Those who were business-minded, like the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, were quick to catch on to this trend. In 1952 he wrote The Power of Positive Thinking, which

151 The quest was presaged by the emergence of New Thought in the nineteenth century, and made popular by the rise of the Human Potential movement in the twentieth century. In their wake, “spiritual” and “religious” discourses were moved to a psychological register, not only for the sake of health, but also for the pursuit of happiness, understood as worldly prosperity. This was certainly helped along by the advent of anti-depressants in the 1950s, which normalized the pathologization of “negativity” both in and out of the workplace. No longer was individual suffering the result of Satan, sin, or even the inevitable neuroses attached to human life, but instead the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain, and/or a lack of effort on the part of the individual.

152 Similarly Robert Wuthnow writes, “A different understanding of discipline that also grew in popularity during the 1980s was the idea that people of faith should try hard to cultivate a happy, positive, cheery outlook on life” (1998, 96).
Fuller suggests is “one of the most influential books in American religious history” (146). Accordingly, Ehrenreich argues that the ideology of positive thinking, and the industry it spawned, coincided with and bolstered the rise of late capitalism and the erosion of the welfare state.

With this in mind, Alglas claims, “discourses on the ego underline that the self, in other words, is the object of normative discourses that encourage its constant observation and regulation. One more time, individual subjectivity is significantly shaped by social discourses and norms” (258). Consequently, for Alglas, Ehrenreich and others, the emphasis placed on self-examination and self-awareness by SBNRs has everything to do with the social and economic demands placed upon them. The ability to manage their emotions, keep their “ego” in check, and sustain a positive energy—associated with their “spirituality”—enables them to increase their social capital and ultimately become complicit with an oppressive economic regime. On this view, what some SBNRs consider “freedom” is simply the freedom to discipline themselves (and take joy in doing so) according to the dictates of social structures (which operate for the most part outside of their immediate awareness). Alglas, channeling Foucault, sums it up, “‘Free will’ has to be understood, not as liberation from norms and values, but as individual responsibility. Students are expected to become the active and autonomous agents of their ‘self-discipline’... They are encouraged to develop self-awareness and examination in order to regulate themselves; this, in accordance to a set of moral values defining ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ attitudes and the works of a transcendent authority... which generate rewards and penalties” (256).

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153 Peale’s enormous success spawned a cottage industry of self-help, motivational books and materials—both secular and religious in nature. Retaining the protestant emphasis on work (both internal and external) whilst shedding the notion of sin, there emerged book after book on how to improve one’s productivity and efficiency at work whilst attaining happiness—that is, subjective wellbeing. Among some of the more famous titles include: Napoleon Hill’s (1987) Think and Grow Rich, Stephen Covey’s (1989) The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Tony Robbins’s (1992) Awaken the Giant Within. And more recently, James Allen’s (2007) As A Man Thinketh, and Timothy Ferris’s (2009) The Four Hour Work Week.

154 “The disciplining of the self through increasing self-control and examination is nowhere more obvious than in discourses on the ‘ego’” (Alglas 257).
This is a powerful and persuasive critique, one that I have much sympathy for. These scholars have identified how subjectivity is operated on in disciplinary ways in advanced industrial societies. They have revealed how discourses can ultimately define, while at the same time limiting our freedom, in ways we might be completely oblivious to. However, there are a numbers of ways in which these views don’t adequately grasp the whole picture.

To begin, let us return to the case of Leslie. During her self-examination over the summer Leslie asked herself, “Why am I pushing myself so hard that like it’s such a big deal that I have this responsibility and have to do with it like amazing things? Like, I should be striving to do the best that I can do, not the best in the world. So why do I have this belief that I have to be the best in the world? And is that too high for what I am?” She finally came to the realization that much of the pressure she put on herself derived from the expectations of her father. She explains, “He’s like, superhuman, so I felt like I should be superhuman, I think. And then I was realizing that I suddenly got all this responsibility and started breaking down that maybe I’m not. And that was when I started, sort of, looking into myself, and trying to figure out why I wanted … why I was striving to be these things that I wasn’t … what it came from and what I should strive to be.” Although Leslie’s reflections did not seem to lead her to identify the most pressing social justice issues of today, nor did they spur her into immediate social action, I would like to suggest it is significant to us for a number of reasons.

The first has to do with the fact that Leslie’s self-examination did not, contra Altglas, lead her to become more productive (in the sense of seeking to “produce more” of the labour her father wishes her to produce), but rather, to question why it was she felt the need to be so productive in the first place. One might argue that Leslie’s ability to rid herself of her anxieties might actually aid her to function and in future become more productive, thereby reinforcing Altglas and Ehrenreich’s views. Although this remains a possibility, the impression I received was that Leslie was seriously challenging the entrenched
beliefs within her, passed on to her by her father, that equated the good life with no more than material success. This impression was evidenced by her statement that instead of being an accountant like her father, she wants to be a “children’s performer” because she wants to “make people happy.”

Of course, it remains true that paid performance is a form of emotional labour that may reinforce the late-capitalist system by supplying workers (and their children) sufficient entertainment to keep them working (or prepare them for work). Indeed, Leslie’s choice to become an entertainer is hardly anti-capitalist. Again, entertainers play a significant role in the current economy. This fact illustrates how, although the ethic self-awareness may lead one to reject the ideological frameworks of one’s childhood, there is no guarantee one will one use it to advance the aims of social justice.

Still, there is yet more to uncover. For instance, Leslie’s personal situation bespeaks the changing face of parenting as a result of the narrowing scope and ultimate decline of religious institutions. Bellah and coauthors note, “In the eyes of the successful children of professionals without strong religious beliefs, parental love is narrowed to a reward for doing well. Moral standards give way to aesthetic tastes and technical skills of the achievement-oriented upper middle class. ‘Being good’ becomes a matter of being good at things; being right, a matter of having the right answers” (1985, 60). Leslie’s internal scrutiny of the materialistic values of her father may be the only means by which millennials in the same position as she can break free of the ideological hold their families have on them; and in turn, the only means by which a new conception of the good life can be instated in public life. The critical disengaged stance she takes towards those beliefs she believes have been inculcated into her by her father increase her autonomy by enabling her to determine that she wants something else. For let us remember, “Objectification of the world gives a sense of power, and control” (Taylor 2007, 548). Accordingly, an anonymous SBNR tells me “Finally being aware of the insecurities and anxiety my parents have projected

155 This seems to harken back to the philosophy of Rousseau. Recall that Rousseau believed “Goodness is identified with freedom, with finding the motives for one’s actions within oneself” (Taylor 1989, 361).
onto me throughout my upbringing allowed me to stay present and alert when I noticed such behaviors in them. These behaviors no longer affect me the way they used to and I feel a sense of mental clarity and peacefulness.” Thus we see how disengagement can enable a new form of self-direction and self-control.¹⁵⁶

We should remind ourselves why this “objectification of oneself” was seen as essential to the Enlightenment project. That is, “Disengaged rationality” was seen as morally useful because it could “separate us from our own narrow, egoistic standpoint and make us capable of grasping the whole picture” (1989, 331). In other words, by objectifying oneself and assessing one’s beliefs by the light of reason, “we are no longer imprisoned in the self; we are free to pursue the universal good” (331). Of course, some SBNRs are inclined towards self-analysis, not in search of some higher end, but rather, as a means of becoming more competitive, efficient or productive in their socially detrimental day jobs.¹⁵⁷ However, for others, such practices, are a means of transforming themselves—of understanding their inner natures in order to, in their own way, transcend them.

Whether Leslie’s self-analysis is evidence of this remains open to debate. Still, there were others for whom the ethic of self-awareness played an arguably more progressive role. As Mary tells us “When I think of self-awareness, I think of being in touch with something that’s going on inside you … so it’s kind of, not monitoring, but being conscious of those things.” Becoming “conscious” is an apt term, for it implies how much within ourselves is, in fact, unconscious.¹⁵⁸ And as critical scholars such as Carrette —
and King remind us of the ways in which “consent” is manufactured by means of socialization, one would think that those engaged in a thorough process of self-analysis might have the best chance of identifying the ideological strands they’ve internalized.159

Recall the case of Oscar. He has engaged in much self-inquiry, and has arguably endured, as John Cottingham puts it, “a long struggle towards greater self-awareness and clearer resolution, whereby [he has been] progressively freed from shadows and projections inherited from [his] past” (2005, 144). He did so by facing his past trauma, but also, by coming to see the ways in which society has indoctrinated him into a specific way of being—one with its own coded gender, sex, and racial norms. Resultantly, I believe Laura E. Pérez (2014) aptly describes how the ethic of self-awareness can align itself with the aims of social justice:

   the cross-cultural injunction of wisdom traditions to know one’s self results in both psychological healing and ideological and political empowerment, for the practice of integrating a psyche that has been splintered as a consequence of the psychological and social violence of racializing, classist, patriarchal, and heteronormative socializing processes, for example, turns power to us as individuals and thereby as active, meaningfully engaged members of the human ecosystem as well as the planetary ecosystem. (25)

Indeed, Oscar’s self-analysis led him to not only challenge the “limiting beliefs” he internalized, but also to gain a greater awareness of the ideological forces within him, and their inner workings, that fuel the engine of capitalist consumer society. Oscar tells me that as a child he stole because “when you don’t have any self-worth and you find self-worth and validation through external things, and when you are still operating on that mode—even though I mean my socialist background says, I shouldn’t want

159 nature of the objects to which they are directed, can frequently be distorted by all kinds of dark projections and shadows from the past, shadows whose distorting power can easily elude us because we are unaware of their very existence” (63). Still, there remains the possibility that such self-analysis reflects the dominant ideologies at play within society. As Taylor’s analysis illustrates, this is undoubtedly the case in some respects. However, it would be wrong to conclude that because disengagement is tied to the modern identity, it is complicit with all reigning ideologies. The majority of cases I have presented thus far certainly support this.
material things—so then what does my ego want? Material things. Whenever I’m pissed off at my grandpa, I just want to have money. I just want money, when the angst comes out.” Thus for Oscar, consumer culture is built upon a faulty premise. He elaborates

If you’re not going to consume, don’t consume out of the understanding of what actually is impacting, not just everyone else, but you. How it actually is affecting you. If you’re consuming because you are trying to fill an emotional void, well, what’s the lesson here? That we created a mechanism inside of ourselves, that when we feel bad, I’m going to buy a new pair of whatever. I’m going to buy this to make myself feel good. I’m going to do something external to make myself feel good internally. The lesson here is we have to do something internally to make ourselves feel good internally. Right? Ultimately we find happiness within ourselves, not in external things. So when you take care of this, there’s no need for unnecessary consumption.

For Oscar, only by paying close attention to the structure of his desires—that is, by becoming self-aware—was he able to ascertain these insights. Such self-analysis is thoroughly psychological in nature, and yet, I would argue, poses a radical challenge to the ethic of consumerism pervading advanced industrial societies, and thereby neoliberal policies. Most significantly this is because the post-industrialist economies of today are no longer run on production, but rather consumption, as François Gauthier has illuminated.160

Here the ethic of authenticity plays a formative role as well. For in contemporary western societies, which are replete with publicity and advertising, products are not bought on the basis of their utility, but rather, for what they say (to others) about us.161 That is, consumer culture is premised upon the supposed importance of crafting a self in relation to others vis-à-vis social identity. But with the case of Oscar, his “true self” needs no furnishing, for it is believed to exist prior to his earthly desires; desires which he ascribes to his “ego.” And as he makes clear, “peacefulness” does not come by way of giving

160 See François Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen’s (2013) Religion in the Neoliberal Age.
161 This was first made clear by the economist Thorstein Veblen in his Theory of the Leisure Class (2007 [1899])—what he called “conspicuous consumption.” More recently Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) offered a judicious analysis of why we consume certain goods and not others in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.
the ego what it wants. Accordingly we can see the way in which his spirituality defies the materialism of consumer culture.

For SBNRs like Oscar, self-awareness comes by way of self-analysis, and is done with the end of self-transformation.\textsuperscript{162} This transformation paradoxically has to do with becoming more “authentic,” and determining, for oneself, how one should best live. Such self-work is by no means easy, for the ego—culturally and socially conditioned—resists at every turn. As one of my research participants put it, “our ego is always going to stop us from growing and expanding, right? Like ego voice wants us to stay stuck and not change, and attach to negativity and all that stuff. So that voice is going to kick and scream if I’m signing up for something that’s going to transform me.”

Despite this struggle SBNRs like Charles, a recent engineering grad, persist. He tells me of the benefits of his meditation practice, “you start seeing those tendencies, you start seeing how the subconscious is trained to react to situations and stuck … it’s just the fact that … we think we have complete control over ourselves, but we don’t have any control over our mind at all.” After having completed a 10-day Vipassana meditation retreat in India, Charles shares that upon returning to university he discovered he could no longer relate to certain friends the way he used to:

It’s weird. So I have some friends who I went and saw… and it was so weird for me. You know, it was like, ‘Oh you haven’t changed’ and you just have a lot of compassion for them. And you kind of, you see the way they think, and the way they always talk about the mundane, and they talk about how they want to check out the stock market and get more money, and it’s all about things that they want to do and stuff. And you just accept it for what it is, and don’t judge it. And you see where you can maybe alter their mindset, alter their views. If it is going to be a positive thing, if you think you can make them happier.

Charles emphasized the estrangement he experienced from these friends as a result of the changed perspective his meditation and spiritual life have brought him. Whether or not that change can be

\textsuperscript{162} Cottingham writes, “Here the psychoanalytic drive for self-awareness and the moral drive towards self-perfectioning are subsumed into a more fundamental search for ultimate meaning in our lives” (2005, 78).
sustained is an open question, but the point being made is that despite the fact that some SBNRs engaged in a quest for self-knowledge do so according to the logics of advanced capitalism, a closer look at the ways in which such self-inquiry is utilized, and the insights garnered as a result of it, reveal that such self-analysis can in some cases actually be subversive of social norms by undermining the ideological strands at large in consumer culture.163

What Oscar and Charles are engaged in is, we might call an askesis,164 or more simply, a program of discovery (or perhaps uncovering). Such a program is at the heart of the “reflexive spirituality” (Roof 1999, 75)165 of many of my research participants (although by no means all) and, as we have seen, can enable various forms of psychic decolonization. For instance, Charles’s self-analysis may help him to identify what philosopher Miranda Fricker calls epistemic injustices.166 Oscar’s identifying his “limiting beliefs” paved the way for his learning to challenge the entrenched cultural norms embedded in the western habitus. Liam and Neil in learning to become honest with, and accept, themselves were able to overcome the ethos of homophobia they grew up in. It is important to note that these projects could only be done through a process of self-objectification, whereby these individuals approached their beliefs and

163 Another example of this is offered by Laurie. She tells me, “Like sometimes, I’m just like, ‘I want, I want, I want’. But that’s just me not trusting that everything is okay just the way it is.... That’s just consumerism, right? And I’m living in a culture that’s telling me I need to be a certain way, but really that’s not what makes being around me as a person enjoyably, right? It doesn’t matter what pants I’m wearing.... Like it doesn’t matter! Like that doesn’t make a difference. It matters what energy and what I’m actually bringing to the situation, so I try to focus more on that. So when I’m getting into that needy ‘I want’... then I try to focus my energy on something spiritual because then it’s gone, you know? Cause it’s not real; if that makes sense.”

164 Pierre Hadot (1995) explains that in ancient philosophy, “the word askesis designated exclusively the … inner activities of thought and the will” designed to transform the individual, or, in other words, “spiritual exercises” (128).

165 Wade Clark Roof defines “Reflexive spirituality” as “a contemplative act of stepping back from one’s own perspective and recognizing that it, too, is situated in a plurality of possibilities. This capacity of understanding one’s view as just that—a view—forces attention to biography, history, and experience and creates consciousness about the positioned nature of all our perspectives” (1999, 75).

166 Nevertheless, this self-analysis would certainly be bolstered if the individual comes into contact with perspectives that are radically different from their own. Inward reflection plays an important role but is unlikely to be sufficient unless it is motivated by the challenge posed by alternative perspectives (see Miranda Fricker’s (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*).
desires from a “detached” perspective in order to determine whether or not they ought to be reformed. Of course, SBNRs, like all individuals, are capable of self-deception, and are therefore not destined to identify, let alone rectify, such vices; however, what I want to put forward is the possibility that, if such self-inquiry is informed by a deep ethical commitment to others, and thus motivated, such a “spiritual” quest is both noble and needed. I would even argue a socially just world cannot be achieved without individuals engaging in such programs.  

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A similar view, I believe, was offered by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), the late queer chicana literary scholar and activist who subscribed to the view that individual self-work was necessary to any social justice agenda. In outlining her plan for fighting racial and sexual oppression in *Borderlands/La Frontera* she wrote: “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (109). Similarly, Vaclav Havel in a speech delivered to the joint meeting of the U.S. Congress said, “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better … and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed, whether it be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization, will be unavoidable” (Havel 1997, 167)

167 At the same time, I concede that an *askesis*, when taken up independent of community, may have difficulty achieving the project of self-transformation. For, epistemically speaking, it is more difficult to identify one’s own blind spots, as it were. It is ultimately the accountability one receives within a community that enables one to discover aspects and dimensions of oneself that are in need of reform. Without the accountability provided by community, the individual risks reproducing their own prejudices and biases. As it relates to my participants, I believe that many of them, although they may not have been explicitly involved in a “spiritual community,” understood the importance of intimate relationships in achieving “spiritual progress.” Most of them spoke of how “intimacy,” “vulnerability,” and “honesty” in their relationships were essential to their friendships. Although I can only speculate, I surmise that among my participants, close friendships provided this kind of accountability. Although this is certainly more true for some than others.
I think the words of Anzaldúa and Havel address a significant point: regardless of the social structures in which humans are embedded, to a certain extent, humans can choose to love or hate, choose to accept or discriminate, choose to help or hinder. There is no doubt that they would both admit that working on individual consciousness is not sufficient to bring about systemic change, however, my guess is they would agree that it is a fundamental part of the solution. It is this insight that I believe Engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (1995) tries to draw attention to: “To work for peace, you must have a peaceful heart” (74).

In sum, the ethic of self-awareness and the dictum “know thyself” ought not be viewed as, at best, promoting individualized solutions to systemic problems. This is because real change does not, nay, cannot occur without the individual emancipation and empowerment they bring. Under an oppressive regime, economic, social or otherwise, individuals are required to engage in programs of self-discovery/recovery in order to catalyze collective change. Indeed, psychic decolonization and social decolonization develop reflexively. Although I admit that individual transformation is not sufficient to bring about a socially just world, I am nevertheless denying that the ethic of self-awareness is merely psychologically beneficial. Given the inherent interdependence of individual consciousness and collective action, we ought to view some askesis as furthering the aims of social justice from both a micro and a macro perspective. This fact suggests the dichotomy of individual transformation vs. social change is, although not entirely false, certainly misleading. This is because the ethic of self-awareness, when aligned with the appropriate political agenda can and does aid in bringing about a socially just world, as the accounts of my participants have demonstrated.\(^{168}\) Thus it is not the fact that individuals are engaged in self-examination with the aim of becoming more productive or emotionally intelligent that I believe

\(^{168}\) At the same time, I qualify this statement by suggesting that an askesis, or project of self-transformation ought not be done independently of others. That is, given our interdependence, true self-analysis can be self-directed but must involve others. For otherwise the individual risks self-deception and falling prey to their own (or their cultures’) prejudices and biases. I thank Jacqueline Davies for this insightful point.
should seriously concern us, but instead, the final ends such self-examination is aimed at. No doubt such ends are related to the changing tides of political economy, but to reduce individuals to such social forces is to play a determinist card. As I have hoped to show, such ends range considerably in their substance, and depend largely on the sources of the selves in question.
Chapter 6

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned broadly with the lived relationship between contemporary spirituality and social justice among Canadian millennials. I began by delimiting the specific discursive framework that I argue my research participants share: self-spirituality. Heeding Bender and McRoberts’s advice to investigate the genealogical origins of a specific site of spirituality, I then traced its content and structure to the appropriate intellectual and cultural origins. In doing so, I sought to illuminate why self-spirituality cannot be understood apart from the making of what Taylor calls the modern identity. The methodological argument that underpins this thesis is that in order to discern the social and political implications of self-spirituality, we must investigate the sources of the selves in question. I therefore grounded my analysis in qualitative data retained from interviews conducted with Canadian millennials who self-identify as SBNR. Accordingly, I used their accounts to assess the cogency of the dominant scholarly accounts alive in the field. In this chapter I will address a number of implications this analysis holds for the study of contemporary spirituality more generally, and how it relates to the pre-existing literature that makes up the field.

The first implication concerns the polarization so often presented in the academic literature between spiritual individualism and engaged spirituality. The analysis I have presented here, I believe, troubles this proposed dichotomy considerably. It does so by shedding light on how complex contemporary spirituality in its lived form really is. For instance, those who propound the spiritual individualism tag may be correct in deeming self-spirituality more “individual” in the sense that it views the individual as being of supreme importance, and begins and ends with the self. However, to contend
that it necessarily follows from this that SBNRs are politically disengaged, or apathetic towards issues of social justice is crudely mistaken. As we have seen, there exist a number of SBNRs whose individual emancipation is seen as the first of many stepping-stones along the path to social change. Moreover, this camp also seems unduly pessimistic (or some might argue naïve) with respect to the possibilities for change in today’s society. I argued earlier that taking responsibility for one’s life—that is, placing the burden of action on oneself in order to bring about change, in the current climate, is more often than not necessary to stir action. This may be an unfortunate fact yet it remains true nonetheless. Conversely, those who endorse engaged spirituality may overemphasize the ability of SBNR spirituality to revitalize community, especially given its hostility towards conformity and its emphasis on being authentic. They might also blind themselves to the ways in which self-spirituality can hold an ambiguous relationship to social justice, or be subversive of some norms while reinforcing others. For instance, the ethic of authenticity tends to be subversive of norms which revolve around issues of gender, sex and race. This is not surprising given the formative influence of the counter culture of the 60s and 70s in shaping my research participants’ self-spirituality; at the same time, it might be said that among these millennials there exists a significant lack of class-consciousness. Although I remain confident that there are SBNRs out there who are fighting economic oppression and the many inequities that result therefrom, among my research participants the diminished interest in class-based issues, in contrast to those pertaining to other facets of one’s identity, was certainly noticeable. Nevertheless, given the involvement of many of my participants in not-for-profit organizations and the like working to help those in need, there is little doubt that the caricature of SBNRs as narcissistic, selfish, and uncaring is quite simply wrong.

Second, I recognize that the lived accounts of my research participants do not repudiate the etic accounts I have used them to critique as they apply to other sites of spirituality. I concede that given the localized scope of my analysis, and my small sample size, my analysis here cannot speak for the spiritual
milieu in toto. Nevertheless, my aim was never to disqualify them outright, but rather, to spark a
critical and nuanced discussion about the politics of spirituality. This was needed, I believe, because as
John Law and John Urry (2004) suggest, research methods are performative. That is, “they have effects;
they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help bring into being what they also discover”
(393). In other words, as cultural researchers we ought to strive for as balanced a view as possible when
assessing the phenomena before us. Otherwise, we may end up (implicitly) endorsing that which we
condemn. In turn, I took Paul Heelas’s warning seriously, attempting to use as rich and varied a language
as possible and to “tease out the aspectual” (2008, 183) within the framework of self-spirituality and,
more importantly, in the ways it is experienced and applied.

In sum, the lived accounts of my research participants stand as evidence that contemporary
spirituality can and sometimes does work for social justice. Some might criticize their pragmatic approach
to social change on the basis that it seems too preoccupied with individual emancipation and not enough
with social structures. This view remains valid, although I have tried to suggest that individual
emancipation ought not be viewed as categorically distinct from systemic change, but rather, one integral
part of the process. I imagine, however, that this claim will continue to remain controversial. At the very
least I have hoped to shed light on how young people today think about their spirituality, as well as how
they view it playing a role in their everyday lives. One thing that remains crystal clear to me is that
spirituality, whatever it is, involves and holds implications for one’s full experience—mind, body, and,
yes, spirit. In other words, the spiritual life is not simply theorized about, but is, in fact, lived.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

The plethora of avenues this study opens up are too numerous to discuss here, thus in this
concluding section, I will simply address a few of the most important points I ascertained in the process
of writing it, and then gesture towards a future project that I hope will some day be completed.
When I began reviewing the academic literature on contemporary spirituality I was shocked by the sheer amount of derision I sensed directed at SBNRs. It saddens me to think that, for the most part, the academy has not yet taken seriously the earnestness with which so many SBNRs view spirituality as integral to their aspirations and struggles for a more just and peaceful world. It gives me hope, however, to know that this is changing. With the recent establishment of the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* by the British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS), along with the establishment of a number of other academic journals centred on exploring concepts, frameworks and philosophies associated with “spirituality,”169 I am confident that we are in the midst of a changing tide in scholarly attitudes toward SBNRs. As I hope to have shown in this thesis, I believe this is merited. What goes by contemporary spirituality, although certainly not always a force for good, can and does propel individuals to work for social justice and fight oppression. Many of the lived accounts I’ve presented in this thesis have evidenced this fact. However, by no means would I welcome a lack of critical scholarship on SBNRs. There is no doubt in my mind that there are strands of contemporary spirituality, and certain discourses thereof, which work (often insidiously) to preserve the oppressive status quo. This makes investigating the diversity inherent to the spiritual milieu all the more important. Given the intimate relationship the category SBNR holds to the modern identity, we can rest assured that in assessing its social and political qualities, we shall find no simple answers. Cultural phenomena are complex. They do not lend themselves well to black and white assessments. It is therefore our responsibility, as cultural researchers, to tease out particularities from generalities, identify existent tensions and contradictions, and map out the lived relationships, however messy they might be.

Upon completing my analysis of the accounts of my participants, I was struck by the many similarities, thematic and structural, they shared. Given the diversity in life experiences and cultural backgrounds I began my research with the assumption that what went by “spirituality” would be categorically distinct from person to person. Although there were undeniably important idiosyncrasies distinguishing their accounts, nevertheless, for the most part the similarities outweighed the differences. It was for this reason that I was able to ground my analysis in the framework of self-spirituality; almost across the board, the SBNRs I interviewed could be said to adhere to its structure. However, in this thesis, my aim has been to draw attention to the ways in which individual particularities formatively shaped the ways in which the core ethics informing this framework were applied. Thus my focus remained on the interaction or interplay between biography and abstract principles. Where I believe there exists fertile soil for future research pertains to the question of whether or not there exist specific ideological strand(s) substantively informing the self-spirituality of my participants, and what the content and structure of this/these strand(s) looks like. In other words, rather than giving close attention to the ways in which individuals live their spirituality in unique and particular ways, we might do well to investigate how unique individuals, despite their particularities, abide by a shared ideological framework—one that holds its own unique relationship to social justice. Although I recognize that there have been studies of this kind, I don’t believe they have been focused specifically on Canadian millennials. Why this might be of interest is because it would enable us to discern the basic political orientations of a large subset of the Canadian population. And given the rising presence of young SBNRs in Canada and their increasing clout on the political scene, discerning the ideological strands that inform the way they think about themselves, others, morality, society, and politics (just to name a few) is arguably of utmost importance.
References


Appendix A

Research Ethics Approval

February 19, 2015

Mr. Galen Watts

Master’s Student

Cultural Studies

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Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GCUL-036-15; Romeo # 6014841

Title: "GCUL-036-15 The Spirituality and Social Justice Project"

Dear Mr. Watts:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GCUL-036-15 The Spirituality and Social Justice Project" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.
Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. James E Miller Faculty Supervisor
   Dr. Jane Tolmie, Chair, Unit REB
   Ms. Danielle Gugler, Dept. Admin.