MORE SPIRITUAL THAN RELIGIOUS:
CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS FIELD REQUIRE NEW APPROACHES

Heinz Streib

‘Lived religion’ signifies a shift of focus—from the institutionalized forms of beliefs and practices to a more precise focus of attention on the religiosity of the people, of individuals and groups as embedded in the contexts of life-worlds and biographies. Thus, ‘lived religion’ includes attention for beliefs and practices which may not be in accord with the official teachings of religious traditions. ‘Lived religion’ may dwell in sub-currents of religious organizations, or flourish outside organized religion. In our Western cultures the self-identification of “being spiritual” is one of the increasingly popular ways of expressing an individual—and eventually unconventional—form of religiosity or the search for it. In this article, we focus on the “spiritual” self-identification: We will discuss the problem of a theoretical framework for understanding “spirituality,” we summarize extant empirical results and present our own empirical findings, and we conclude with a prospect on future research.

Spirituality—Conceptual Clarifications

In the first place we consider “spirituality” to be the self-identification of research participants and not a scientific concept. Thus, we do not start with a discussion of the various recent attempts of defining ‘spirituality’. On the contrary, we have strong reservations against the latest fashion in the social sciences of promoting ‘spirituality’ as a supplement or substitute for ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity’. It is a waste of time to re-invent the wheel and, at the same time, to ignore centuries of highly sophisticated discourse about the concepts of ‘religion’ and

1 In this text, “spirituality” in double quotation marks indicates self-identification of research participants, while ‘spirituality’ in single quotation marks refers to the concept.
‘faith’ in philosophy, theology, religious studies, and the social sciences. And in favor of our intent of including the contemporary spiritual quest into the concept of ‘religion’, we are in the position of referring to a large number of proposals for conceptualizing un-churched or de-institutionalized (Streib 2007b) forms of religion, some of which suggest the use of adjectives such as invisible (Luckmann 1967; Knoblauch 2003) or implicit (Thomas 2001), some re-conceptualize ‘faith’ in contrast to ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ (Smith 1963; 1979). To suggest another conceptual avenue of including the spiritual quest into the concept of religion: Psychology of religion would stand itself on solid ground by re-considering Schleiermacher’s (1799) definition of religion as “sensibility and taste for the infinite”—which Schleiermacher, in his third speech, beautifully explicated by his appreciation and fascination for the “longing of young minds for the miraculous and supernatural” and their openness for “every trace of another world” as “the first stirring of religion” (Schleiermacher 1799, 59). Here we encounter a (pre-psychology, pre-evolution theory, pre-phenomenology) approach to a comprehensive conceptualization of religion—in true phenomenological manner.

In an article like this there is not enough space to develop and justify a comprehensive theory of ‘religion’ (including ‘spirituality’), but the task here is to indicate the conceptual frame for research on “spirituality”. And it is my suggestion to work with the term ‘lived religion.’ This term, is a good starting point and provides a basic conceptual framework for understanding and researching the contemporary “spirituality” and spiritual quest. ‘Lived religion’ decisively suggests taking the religious self-understanding of the people on the street, everyday religion (Streib 1998), as point of departure for reflection and research (Dinter, Heimbrock & Söderblom 2007).

Thus, we approach “spirituality” as part of ‘lived religion’. The basic thesis is this: “Spirituality” can be fully explicated in the conceptual framework of ‘religion’—including however clear and special attention to life-world and biography, but also to the experiential dimension and inward orientation of religiosity. “Spirituality” requires no brand-new approaches of conceptualization, but a re-reading and re-considering of what the theory of religion has to offer. The second part of this initial thesis says: “Spirituality” is ‘lived religion’ which, in part and by an increasing number of people, is lived outside traditional religions. This second part of the thesis, however, indicates even more irrefutably the