CHAPTER TWO

REAL RELIGION AND FUZZY SPIRITUALITY?

TAKING SIDES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Introduction

This chapter investigates a puzzling disjuncture: between what recent empirical research is revealing about spirituality ‘on the ground’, and the way in which a number of influential sociological studies of religion have characterized such spirituality. The dissonance was brought home to me, first, in 2000–2002, when I was involved in a study of religious activities in the town of Kendal, UK, and then in the summer of 2005, when I carried out related pilot research in the town of Asheville, North Carolina. On both occasions, and in both localities, ‘spirituality’ was found to be a significant part of the religious landscape, rapidly proliferating, but exhibiting enough common characteristics to make characterization and research relatively unproblematic. By contrast, a number of important texts in the sociology of religion characterized the same phenomenon as diffuse, confused, amorphous, lacking in salience and significance, transitory, and insubstantial.

In what follows I explore this tension between what can be called the ‘inadequacy approach’ to spirituality, and the picture which emerges from much recent research, including my own. I suggest that the divergence can be explained in terms of the enduring presence of a submerged norm of ‘real religion’ which continues to exercise a powerful influence within the sociology of religion. This norm, shaped around an implicit commitment to historically influential forms of church Christianity, is unable to accommodate spirituality as ‘real’ religion, and is forced to

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1 The first project, the ‘Kendal Project’, was funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and carried out with Paul Heelas, Ben Seel and Karin Tusting. Findings were published in Heelas and Woodhead (2005). The second project was funded by the British Academy, and carried out with Helen Berger.
conclude that it is a ‘fuzzy’ pretender to the title. Setting this in historical perspective, I draw attention to the mutually-constitutive opposition between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ which lies at the origin of spirituality in the nineteenth century, and conclude that it remains influential within the sociology of religion. My overall aim is to critique misleading accounts of spirituality in order to draw attention away from them and towards the emerging contours of a more workable and ‘un-fuzzy’ characterization of spirituality.

**The inadequacy approach**

**Spirituality as meaningless**

In presenting research on spirituality at sociological conferences I have often been told that the term is inadequate as a tool of scholarly analysis. Some non-English speakers have suggested that it has no equivalent in a number of European languages, and argue that it is irrelevant to their societies. Others cast doubt upon the meaningfulness or research-relevance of the word by making the assertion that no useful survey instruments have been, or perhaps could be, devised to investigate spirituality. Still others maintain that, although many people own and use the word, and although it has cognates in other languages or has been appropriated as an import word, it is so vague and fuzzy that even those who use it do not know what they mean by it. Although many of these claims remain unsubstantiated, the strongest evidence to support the claim of conceptual vagueness derives from surveys which ask people whether they would describe themselves as religious’ or ‘spiritual’, and finds that the majority – 74 per cent in Zinnbauer’s (1997) study and 64 per cent in Marler and Hadaway’s (2002) – are happy to describe themselves as ‘religious and spiritual’. We found the same in Kendal, where even conservative Christians were generally happy to describe themselves as ‘spiritual’. It is easy to conclude that the word’s range is so wide that it lacks any real scholarly purchase.

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2 I have heard these comments made at several conferences on the Sociology of Religion, including the conferences of the ISSR held in Turin in 2003 and Zagreb in 2005.

3 The comment about survey instruments was made at the conference of the ISSR (International Society for the Sociology of Religion) held in Zagreb in 2005.