CHAPTER FIVE

SEEING INVISIBLE RELIGION

RELIGION AS A SOCIETAL CONVERSATION ABOUT TRANSCENDENT MEANING¹

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Introduction: religious conversation in the United States


Authors of contemporary wisdom books travel around the country giving talks and leading workshops; their talks have titles like “Everyday Enlightenment,” “The Spiritual Adventure: Using Wisdom Traditions for a Meaningful Life,” “Bringing Your Soul to Work,” “The Heart of Compassion: Healing and the Sacred,” “Going on Being: Buddhism and

¹ This chapter, originally published in Sociological Theory 23:2, owes a great deal to the influence of a group of colleagues during my time at the University of Wisconsin, whom I came to think of as “the democracy dudes”; affectionately and respectfully, it is dedicated to them: Paul Lichterman, Nina Eliasoph, Rebecca Krantz, Susan Munkres, Lyn Macgregor, and Jorge Cadena-Roa. Thanks also to Rachel Dwyer, John Evans, Phil Gorski, and Greta Krippner for reviewing early drafts of the article. Special thanks to Thomas Luckmann for reading the article and providing me with several of his more recent conference papers.
the Way of Change,” and “Improving Your Life Using the Wisdom of the Ages.”

The magazine rack at the local grocery store displays a Life magazine cover that shouts “WHEN YOU THINK OF GOD, WHAT DO YOU SEE?”; a “Newsweek” cover story called “God and the Brain: How We’re Wired for Spirituality”; a ‘Ladies Home Journal’ that allows readers to “Test Your Spiritual I.Q.”; a TV Guide with a cover story on a miniseries called “Jesus”; a “Shape” magazine that recommends, in a story called “Head Trips,” that readers take “spiritual vacations” to “learn to integrate the sacred into everyday life.” Contemporary folk singers tote their guitars and their voices to crowded coffeehouses and colleges across the country, singing songs with lyrics like these:

God is Spirit / Spirit is everything / even the Devil

Hell is fear / what to do? / You’re not in it / it’s in you / even the Devil / and God

Good and Bad / are empty names / opposites are all the same / even the Devil / and God

Joy and pain / are Siamese twins / sharing a brain

Body is Spirit / Spirit is everything / even the Devil.2

The growing societal conversation about what the Barnes & Noble people call “spiritual matters” has begun to capture the attention of sociologists of religion. Robert Wuthnow describes the popularity of this nonspecific, nonchurch religion as a historical shift in Americans’ relationships to the sacred, toward a “spirituality of seeking” (1998: 3). Wade Clark Roof describes a similar shift, from belief-oriented religion to an attitude of religious quest, facilitated by an expanding “spiritual marketplace” marked by new “suppliers” of religious meaning (1999). These two works offer rich interpretations of an emergent American religious culture; they paint a conceptual picture of the religious landscape as it appears to the individual seeker-of-meaning. However, as their use of the word “spirituality” signals, these authors have a primary interest in individuals. They look at contemporary American religious culture through a conceptual and methodological lens that highlights individuals’ relationships to religious meaning, individuals’ relationships to religious