Without any doubt spirituality, and especially its recent forms, are topical in religious studies. One characteristic of present-day spirituality is the diversity of its practices and beliefs, which is a good reason for using the plural—spiritualities—in scientific studies of it. In addition to fairly traditional religious spiritual practices, we observe secular expressions. Nevertheless virtually all scholars suppose that such spiritualities are invariably religious activities or ideas, or at least directly connected with religion. The cardinal problem in this article is: to what extent are these manifold spiritualities religious, and if not, what should be their designation?

To answer the question we need clear concepts of both religion and spirituality—either definitions or good descriptions. However, we will only find appropriate categories or qualifications if we verify their adequacy in concrete situations or examples of spiritual practices and beliefs. My hypothesis is that many current spiritual practices are experienced as secular and must be designated as such. I would like to develop some more accurate categories or a typology, based on Dutch examples, especially from my own field of research, which is popular spiritualities.

Firstly I show that in religious studies there is a real need for distinctions between different spiritualities, a need which is probably less acute in other disciplines that study them. In the second section I illustrate the diversity of current spiritualities by giving an overview of the Dutch situation. The third section presents the principal theories of religion and spirituality which are current in religious studies. In the fourth section I advance my typology of various spiritual practices and in section 5 I discuss this typology with reference to the authors already cited.

1. Spirituality in Religious Studies: The Need for Distinctions

Traditionally scientific study of spirituality in the twentieth century was part of Christian theology, which obviously presupposed a Christian concept
of spirituality: mysticism or ascetic piety.¹ After about 1970, when other disciplines started exploring spiritual practices and beliefs, the association with the sacred (or the divine, or higher powers) in such practices seemed to be sufficiently common to consider them all religious in one way or another. This also legitimizes the application of standard theories of religion to spirituality, for instance the functional theory of solving life problems with supernatural help, or that of secularization.

Since the 1970s sciences involved with religion and spirituality have evolved a new approach to this field of research.² ‘Religious studies’ is an umbrella term for academic disciplines engaged in the study of religions. Religious studies as such is not an academic discipline, but is carried out with the help of disciplines such as (1) anthropology and (2) history of religion, (3) comparative religion, and (4) sociology and (5) psychology of religion. In some institutions (6) theology is also considered to be part of religious studies. But usually a division is made between theology as a hermeneutic science, intended to reflect on believers’ inside perspective, differing from the other disciplines that together constitute religious studies and have a neutral or more detached approach. Finally, (7) philosophy of religion likewise has a separate status. The fact that religious studies is an umbrella term implies that it does not have one specific methodology. Its methods originate from the various disciplines that together shape religious studies, such as fieldwork, text analysis and interpretation, historiography, comparisons, phenomenology, quantitative surveys and qualitative research.

These methods have produced many descriptions of our subject, that is all kinds of spirituality.³ Often such descriptions are given New Age headings, which usually stem from the researchers’ particular slant (etic), whereas practitioners generally prefer to call their activities or ideas ‘spiritual’. What strikes me in such descriptions is that most researchers take the term ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’ for granted. They seldom scrutinize the exact meaning

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