Sleepwalkers and Higher Selves: The Mediatisation of Personality and Essence in Online Enneagram Teachings

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Introduction

When the aging Peer Gynt, the main character of Henrik Ibsen's play, returns to Norway after years of restless travelling around the world, trying a wide range of roles and personalities, he finds himself alone in a forest where he picks up an onion that he begins to peel: “What a tremendous amount of layers! Will not the core soon be revealed! No, God if it will! To the innermost inner everything is in layers, only smaller and smaller. Nature is witty!” (Ibsen 1898: 474. My translation). Peer Gynt's personalities seem to be imaginary and even false layers are structured around an empty core. Using the metaphor of layers as a way of representing the self is a common way of talking about personality in a present-day New Age-setting that the Enneagram is part of. However, where Peer Gynt finds emptiness and nothingness, the Enneagram apologists, teachers and authors Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson find our “True Nature [...] right under the layers of our personality.” (Riso & Hudson 1999: 377). In fact, these layers of personality, according to the branch of Enneagram that Riso and Hudson represent, are what hinder us from achieving “the total merging of the individual consciousness with God, so that there is only God-consciousness” (Riso & Hudson 1999: 376). This, however, does not imply that personality is irrelevant. Quite the opposite; the spiritual seeker needs to know who he or she is before the spiritual journey – another frequently used metaphor – can begin. The Enneagram not only intends to provide a map and a detailed description of nine different personality types, but also stipulates an idea of progress and development associated with reaching spiritual “awareness” and the spiritual quest for “non-being” and a “non-dual” way to live. Even though this spiritual endeavour takes place in several different, often “secular”, areas offline, it is the rapid spread of Enneagram teachings online that is of interest here.

This chapter will examine the mediatisation of Enneagram teachings through an analysis of nine programs dedicated to the Enneagram types, produced by the web-based Conscious TV (CTV), and hosted by Iain McNay. CTV is described as “a UK based TV channel covering the areas of Consciousness, Healing, Science Non-Duality and Spirituality” (http://www.youtube.com/user/conscioustv/about). Of particular interest are the personal narratives expressed
by the persons – the Enneagram types – interviewed by McNay. Furthermore, I will look at the strategies and practices suggested to be able to attain the overall purpose of “letting go” of personality’s grip so that a person can “get in touch” with his or her “true inner self”, what usually is referred to as essence.

As with the “New-Age movement” we have to do with religious expressions that cannot unquestionably be categorized as religious. This definitional vagueness has increased in recent years when more explicit spiritual beliefs – that concern divinity, cosmos, spirituality, energies, ages, etc. – are downplayed by the movement itself. The new spirituality has allied itself with evidence-based medicine, psychology and various forms of science. Furthermore, it gathers around a principal notion that involves ideas about every person as a carrier of an internal “higher self”, the so called hs-factor, with potential for development (Heelas 2002: 370). A similar aspect is also discussed by Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, who describe spirituality as an “enlightenment [that] involves becoming aware of what you already have, rather than subordinating oneself to some external force” (Trzebiatowska & Bruce 2012: 64). Even though I will not abandon the notions of religion or spirituality completely when discussing the Enneagram online, I will take Gordon Lynch’s perspectives on the new media’s importance for mediatisation and reification of the sacred into account. “All sacred forms are mediated”, writes Lynch and continues:

The interaction of symbol, thought, feeling, and action that characterizes sacred forms is possible only through media that give sacred forms material expressions. Media enable communication about, and interaction with, those forms. Such media include images, sounds and material objects, spaces, institutional practices, and even the bodies of those who are taken, in some way, to embody or exemplify the sacred.

LynCh 2012: 87

The focus in this chapter is on how sacred forms are expressed in personal life-stories online, and how these new expressions of the sacred are packaged and shaped on CTV. The online presentation of a new “sacred” subject is inevitably embedded in the media itself, or as Andreas Kitzmann formulates it in Saved from Oblivion (2004): “the web provides a place for self-documentation that is unlike anything else that has preceded it. [...] the web paradoxically blurs and maintains the conventional distinctions between the public and the private.” (Kitzmann 2004: 59). This statement suggests that a “spiritual” discourse and praxis online differs significantly from offline versions, and that such change is aligned with the media itself (O’Leary 2004: 45–46). Furthermore, new digital