
The emergence and spread of contemporary spirituality are currently amongst the most discussed themes in European religious research. The present social empirical study in Austria by Franz Höllinger and Thomas Tripold is devoted to the so-called “holistic milieu” that is said to be a great source of generation for new spirituality. Significant weight is attached to the question of to what extent the spiritual ideas have their roots in the actors’ biographical experiences and thus become part of their lifestyle.

The book starts with a roughly one-hundred-page overview of the way the subject under investigation can be slotted into present-day religious research. To this end, the sociological literature on the peculiarities and delimitations of the “holistic milieu” is shown in some detail, referring to the characteristic beliefs and the relation of the “holistic milieu” to the concept of new religious movements. The authors then address existing attempts to explain the emergence of the “holistic milieu,” looking to historical, socio-philosophical, and psychological approaches in search of explanations.

While the first section of the book is a summary of the theoretical interpretations and criticisms of alternative religiosity that are known to date, the second empirical section is devoted to a number of desiderata in research into contemporary spirituality. Here the authors are concerned above all with the social background and motivations of actors who appear as suppliers and consumers of spiritual activities. On the one hand, the analysis is based on two regional samples in which a full survey of the respective spiritual providers was carried out, and on the other hand it relies on a representative population survey that aims to ascertain the prevalence of spiritual practices amongst the Austrian population.

The authors show that the proportion of the population who regularly engage in spiritual practices on a sustained basis (the “core group”) is relatively low in terms of extent (depending on how the field is demarcated, between four and eight percent of the population), whilst the proportion of the population (the “marginal group”) who know of the activities through hearsay and make use of them sporadically has
now grown to a quarter to a third of the population. As in several previous studies, it becomes clear that the “holistic milieu” cannot be positioned totally outside traditional churchgoing. As far as the actors’ social background is concerned, the analysis confirms previously accepted hypotheses about which strata support contemporary spirituality: amongst other things the “holistic milieu” is characterised by women, middle-aged men, people with a high standard of education, an urban environment, and also professional activity in the modern human services professions.

In terms of consumer motivation differences are apparent between the core and the periphery of the holistic environment. While for the former the focus is on finding meaning and discovering themselves, those who are only occasionally interested reveal a more strongly instrumental relationship, more frequently stating health aspects and reasons of physical and mental regeneration.

Chapter Six represents one of the most important elements of the publication. The authors ask the core group of the “holistic milieu” about the circumstances in their lives that had awakened their interest in spiritual practices. As Höllinger and Tripold show, “spiritual careers” usually begin with biographical “crises” which lead the actors to question their previous life and set off in search of new values. Here they distinguish between three types of people with spiritual interests: “seekers of meaning,” “those who have always had a calling,” and “sufferers.”

Biographical ruptures are also a major feature of suppliers’ experiences in life. In many cases their “spiritual career” emerges from a discontent in their professional career up to that point, resulting in a new search for employment that will support the actors’ self-actualisation. Most of the providers originally come from a caring, advisory, or healing human services profession. However, the proportion of radical career changers should not be ignored, as more than half of the providers questioned originally came from business, technical, and other occupations.

Only a very small number of providers have devoted themselves to the spiritual services business based on purely economic motives. On the contrary, the earning opportunities here are often more precarious than those in the occupations they have come from. It is much more the case that their professional reorientation is part of their turning towards “more meaningful” areas of activity as a result of finding themselves in a crisis.

Thus the authors’ close look at the biographical descriptions of the healing providers, including their relationships with their customers and clients, argues against premature talk of the “commercialisation” of the religious field in the sense of its being a process in which economic perspectives are acquiring a dominant influence. The providers’ involvement in the spiritual sector is not directed primarily towards commercial success. There is no need to doubt the authenticity of many of the new religious entrepreneurs because due to the turnaround in their own lives they share the experiences and needs of their public: having come to some extent from difficult life situations themselves they have the mission to help other