Current Perspectives on Spirituality in Northwestern Europe

ELISABETH HENSE & FRANS MAAS

Participation in Church activities is steadily declining in Europe. At the same time, interest in spirituality continues to increase and spirituality has become an extremely broad field of study. We begin this essay, therefore, with a general diagnosis of the climate of contemporary European spirituality. Then, within this framework, we present two profiles of spirituality that have been attracting attention in recent years: the bond between spirituality and art—the theater, in particular—and the bond between spirituality and the social sectors of education, employment, and caregiving. Both of these give form to spirituality within a secular culture but have differing relationships with classical spirituality.

THE CHRISTIAN OF THE FUTURE WILL BE A MYSTIC OR WILL NOT EXIST AT ALL

Recently, Speling, a leading periodical of spirituality in The Netherlands, tried to make an inventory of spirituality in the Low Countries. In that issue, Kees Waaijman (for many years director of the Titus Brandsma Institute in Nijmegen, one of the leading spirituality research institutes in Europe) gave his assessment of the spiritual situation using Karl Rahner’s well-known one-liner from 1966: “Tomorrow’s devout person will be a ‘mystic,’ someone who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will not exist at all.” The future spoken of in 1966 is the “now” of today. At that time, Rahner saw the spirituality of the future as characterized by three orientations: experience, the world, and everyday life. We will pursue Waaijman’s findings in each of these domains.

The concern for experience within the horizons of one’s own existence, rather than with patterns and visions imposed from elsewhere, is quite evident in contemporary European spirituality. Contrary to what is often presumed, this experience so close to one’s own personal life is not necessarily any more superficial than the act of appropriating traditional wisdom for oneself. Many references in the Scriptures also draw on such original, primordial experience. Rahner’s prediction was relevant on this point and on the second point, as well: that spirituality would become concerned with the world.

In terms of the world, Rahner saw a new opportunity where, for generations, spirituality had been characterized by a turning away from the world,
the body, and ordinary life. After all, for Rahner, the world itself, as well as hu-
man action in the world, was fundamentally oriented toward God, since they 
are carried by God’s unutterable Mystery. This turning toward the world has 
indeed taken place. Spirituality has broken open its one-sided concern for the 
Church and theology and, proceeding from basic anthropological principles, 
has given meaning and substance to life overall. Secular spiritualities have 
come into existence in the areas of education, caregiving, and employment. 
In principle, this development is positive, but whether these spiritualities will 
be able to maintain a bond with living tradition and theology will be decisive. 
Equally important is the question: can Christian theology extend itself to em-
brace these developments?

Finally, Rahner predicted a turning toward everyday life as normative for 
ascesis. Until his time, many different ascetic practices—strict rules, self-con-
trol, and self-denial—had been the most noteworthy forms of spirituality. In 
contrast, Rahner proposed ordinary life as the place par excellence for putting 
spirituality into practice. His proposals have been eagerly adopted. Spiritu-
ality has turned away from ascetical eccentricities, becoming more ordinary, 
broader, more extensive, more everyday, perhaps even too ordinary—for in the 
meantime, the need for eccentricity is beginning to appear again. This is hap-
pening, fresh and full of fun, outside traditional spiritualities; Astra TV, tarot 
cards, foot reflexology, sweat lodges, gurus who demand total surrender, etc. 
It is also happening in reactionary spiritualities: groups with strict behavior 
codes, fanatical oaths of secrecy, and elite isolation in the certainty of being 
the true guardians of tradition. Can such strange forms of spirituality perhaps 
be understood as a reaction to a situation where spirituality has become too 
bland? All things considered, attention and resoluteness are necessary if one 
is to experience everyday reality as full of mystery. Perhaps it is this attention 
and discipline that have grown weak. Where spirituality becomes ordinary and 
everyday, there is also a danger that the firm resoluteness needed to discern 
depth in the ordinary and to get beneath the surface of the everyday becomes 
unfeasible. In that case, Rahner’s predicted swing toward everydayness works 
against itself. Spirituality tends toward superficiality. A persistent alertness is 
needed if Rahner’s perspectives are to succeed. Time and again, the prerequi-
sites have to be the subject of reflection so that the developments, so hopefully 
contemplated a half a century ago, can remain fruitful. That, too, is the task of 
the study of spirituality.

Against the background of Rahner’s far-sightedness, Waaijman made an 
inventory of the contemporary spiritual climate in Northwest Europe. We will 
use this framework to highlight two current spiritual threads: spirituality in 
contemporary theater and societal spirituality. These two threads are comple-
mentary in the sense that the first presupposes classical spiritual texts and seeks
to present them in contemporary theatrical forms, while the second presupposes contemporary forms and inquires into the central classical spiritual themes present within them. This means that the presentation of the first thread will be more descriptive, while the second will be formulated more in terms of certain problems.

**SPIRITUALITY AND ART/THEATER**

In this section, we will briefly sketch the interplay between art/theater and spirituality in Northwest Europe, using examples taken from Germany in particular. In the process, we encounter a trend that gives classical spiritual texts a new lease on life.

Art and spirituality have a rich common history within Christian European culture, a history that had long been dominated by spirituality. However, in modern times, art has become emancipated from this domination. Art began to go its own way, often quite provocatively. In late modernity, spirituality seemed to disappear more and more from art—it was no longer a theme. However, now, under the influence of postmodernity, the tide has once again turned: art and spirituality have found each other again. It is noteworthy that this new rapprochement is based on a respectful relationship of equivalency in which the free play of the imagination and the experience of one’s own creativity are of importance.4

The turning point had already become visible during the twentieth century. “The deepest longings and insights of men and women”5 attracted the attention of the plastic arts:

Kandinsky sought an art endowed with what he called an “inner sound,” and the work of his middle years culminated in poetic images of a universe sacred or almost sacred, alive with gorgeous color and stately motion. Brancusi sought to embody an elusive “essence” in works of stunning simplicity and formal sophistication. Mondrian intuited “the universal that towers above us” and wished to bring it into our world without denaturing it; he too sought to release the essential from the world of accidental appearances. Henri Matisse sought the image of a stable and luminous equilibrium beneath changing appearances.6

In this sense, a great many painters and sculptors conceived of their work as a spiritual journey, and sometimes as spiritual expression, as well, or even as a form of meditation.

A recent Master's thesis at Radboud University Nijmegen researched experiences of visual artists, which are similar to mystical experiences, and came to the same conclusion.7 All the selected artists spoke of a kind of flow experience in which they had a feeling of being lifted above themselves. They had the
impression “of being seized, of being completely taken over,” even though it did not necessarily have to do with anything Divine. The artists used language from diverse spiritual contexts to interpret these experiences, all of them taking their own subjective perspectives as a point of departure.

During the past few decades, this new presence of spiritual experience in art has also had an effect on European theater, which, strikingly, has given a great deal of attention to spirituality. In theater, according to Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow, it is not only “telling the story of meaning” but “to enact and embody that story” that is important. Festivals are organized around the theme of spirituality and theater; there are special editions of theatrical periodicals dedicated to the common ground between theater and spirituality; and there are quite a number of artists who have launched high-profile productions in this area.

The MusikTheaterKöln (Germany) is a company under the direction of Ursula Albrecht that has been using mystical texts as its point of departure since 1996. This began with koans from the Buddhist tradition, and since then, Christian mystical texts have held a central place. At first, these were classical texts from John Climacus, Albert the Great, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross. Later, Albrecht also began to work with texts from relatively unknown mystical writers: Franciscus Amelry and Jean de Saint-Samson, two Carmelite authors. The company aims at an artistic re-interpretation of mystical texts. According to Albrecht, a modern German translation of the text is most important, one that can challenge artists and audience to wrestle with the substance of the text. This begins with a careful reading of a text that sounds strange and makes statements that are surprising or provocative. This reading is followed by reflection on the text in all its many facets, playing with possible meanings. Finally, there is a subjective, personal explanation of the text. Albrecht works with various composers, instrumentalists, singers, and actors, each of whom genuinely contributes from their own artistic resources.

The Gateless Gate, from the Mumonkan.

Rainer Quade, Ralph Soiron, and Christoph Maria Wagner base their composition for three voices (countertenor, baritone, and bass), keyboard, clarinet, percussion, and guitar on three short koans from the Mumonkan. Between the three fourteen-minute compositions, Albrecht shifts gears twice, with seven-minute intermezzos for soprano, in a way that lends solid form to the triptych. The first koan, “Fuketsu’s Silence and Words,” speaks of the possibility or the impossibility of uniting mystical silence with mystical speech. The second koan, “Ummon’s Seven-fold Robe: Put on Your Robe with Seven Stripes at the Sound of the Bell,” plays with the unity and multiplicity of reality. If you are enlightened, everything is one and the same. Although the robe is put
on, it could just as well not be. Everything is so much the same that one begins to hear properly when one listens with the eye. The third koan, “Gutei Raised His Finger,” portrays enlightenment as an interior reality that cannot be attained via external, mechanical movement. This is made painfully clear to the student by cutting off his finger. Korean folk songs were used to link the three koans to each other. The traditional songs, rendered by a woman’s voice, were a strong contrast with the very masculine, modern music by Rainer Quade, Ralph Soiron, and Christoph Maria Wagner. The whole had an extraordinarily comic and, at the same time, puzzling attractiveness. It was, in fact, a new koan, presented to the audience in its fascinating incomprehensibility.

The Offering Box Sermon. In 1997, Christoph Maria Wagner composed a three-part work for flute, clarinet, trumpet, guitar, piano, five voices, and one actor, based on the complete text of the sermon Nolite timere eos by Meister Eckhart. The content of the sermon concerns a theme that Eckhart often touched upon: the distinction between the Godhead [Gottheit in German] without origin and God in the process of becoming. People can speak of God, but not of the hidden Godhead, because the Godhead is one in itself and cannot be perceived in counter-position with anything exterior. The composer was especially inspired by a phrase in the sermon that expresses how God tastes himself and how, in this tasting, he tastes all creatures, not as creatures but rather as God. Wagner composed this phrase as a persistent smacking.

The piece is passionate, full of humor, and sometimes painfully wrenching, giving expression to God’s strange otherness and incomprehensible un-creatureliness. At the same time, it portrays persons who do not know how to deal with the incomprehensible Divinity. Sometimes a comic approach is chosen, sometimes erotic images, or exaggerations stemming from abstruse depths which consequently take on bizarre forms. In the midst of all this, spiritual experiences can emerge: a spiritual terror, for example, or a sense of being seized. The youthful spirit with its animated vivacity may surprise the audience but it is quite appropriate for Meister Eckhart, who described himself as becoming younger every day. The person who makes the breakthrough of entering into the Divinity, where life wells up anew each moment, becomes ever younger. This sense of mystical youth is one of the elements that makes the production so attractive.

Scala Nostra®

The Ladder of Monks by John Climacus, together with statements made by churchgoers in Cologne about Jacob’s ladder, was the point of departure for this 1998 production. To be more precise, the titles of the various chapters of
the Ladder were set against the churchgoers' personal statements about Jacob's ladder. The artists (soprano, bass, and actor), working under the direction of the composer, Andreas Daams, and using the dramatic arts to process this material, developed a very free, light-footed musical structure. The singers present about half of the thirty titles of the Ladder while the actor improvises, drawing from the pool of statements made by the churchgoers.

This production presents what is often recounted regarding spiritual processes: after the initial fascination with God, and after the first fervor of the encounter, people are challenged to integrate the spiritual reality into their daily lives. This often seems an impossible challenge, sometimes leading to dramatic fissures in real life. In this production, however, the director did not choose the path of painful wrestling, but rather approached the topic with light-footed humor. The acting is almost comic. The set—four wooden planks laid over and under each other to form a square, with a little tree of life in the middle—as well as the costumes and the props also contribute to the bizarre impression. There are some serious moments here and there during which the audience suddenly catches a glimpse of the spiritual journey. This is especially true of the finale, the statement made by a Franciscan churchgoer about Jacob's ladder, which subtly shifts the comic to the level of faith.

**Las Canciones**

In 1999, the MusikTheaterKöln brought out the chamber opera, *Las Canciones*, based on the world-famous poem of the same name by John of the Cross. Many of the images in this poem are taken from the Old Testament book, the *Song of Songs*, in which the love of God for his people and, conversely, Israel's love for its God, are presented as a relationship between bride and bridegroom. That is the way Jewish scripture scholars interpreted the *Song of Songs*. Early Christian authors also followed this same allegorical approach, although for them the *Song of Songs* became an image of the mystical marriage between Christ and the Church or Christ and the human soul. For Ursula Albrecht (director) and Andreas Daams (composer), working with this material meant sincerely turning inward: the ardent desire for the Divine bridegroom was now on stage. Without comedy or any sense of remoteness, the text and music expressed the surrender of the soul to God. At a certain point during the rehearsals, when the surrender of the singers had increased, they began to feel a need to be concealed. In response, a house was designed for them, in which they were only half-visible. This covering helped, for they had begun to feel embarrassed when singing these texts and melodies. Hidden inside, it was easier for them to let themselves be drawn into the text and music and this became noticeable in their voices. The four cellists and the director remained
outside the house, suggesting a more poignant expression of the hiddenness of the soul.

*Albert’s Garden*²²

In 2002 there was a simple and sober production for two speakers and one nightingale, with texts from *De animalibus* and *De vegetabilibus* by Albert the Great. Father Willehad Eckert, OP, (died 2006)²³ played the part of St. Albert. Frank Albrecht played the part of a contemporary person who entered into inquisitive conversation with the great scholar. A witty, pointed, and often amusing interplay of thoughts and words arose between the two characters concerning plants and animals as signs of the presence of the Creator. A lovely garden was placed on a table between the two actors, as a reference to the soul as an interior garden. The voice of a nightingale floated above the conversation.

The Room of Silence, *from Franciscus Amelry.*²⁴

This production, which premiered in 2004, was performed ten times in German and once in English during the 2004-2005 season, and is still included in the repertoire of the MusikTheaterKöln. So far, it has been the most successful piece performed by the company. Without a doubt, this has to do with the fact that it explicitly carries on a respectful conversation of equals between art and spirituality. In practice, there are conversations with the audience after the performances, making it “believed-in theater.”²⁵ The artists share their personal experiences with this spiritual text, bring their own spiritual journey into relationship with this production and set free a wide range of reactions in the audience concerning the life of believers and non-believers.

The content of this production is a dialogue between the soul and her “nurse,” the Holy Scriptures. The soul spends seven days in the inner chamber of contemplation, and the “nurse” comes to speak with her from time to time. Step by step, the “nurse” leads the soul to an encounter with God and whenever the soul tastes the presence of God, the “nurse” retreats so that the soul can enjoy undisturbed intimacy with God. These moments of encounter with God are described by a mystagogue, who explains what happens to a person who comes closer to God.

Under the direction of Reiner Witzel, the artists have developed a structure for musical improvisation. The form is an extension of two spiritual practices that are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition: *lectio divina* and spiritual direction. Both practices began among the desert fathers and mothers through four steps—*lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation)—the believer is transformed in God, with the process of transformation being facilitated by a spiritual director.
The actual production (2009) for clavichord, actress, and voices, is based on the *Epithalamium* of Jean de Saint-Samson, one of the most passionate love songs in Carmelite mysticism. The four artists—Margareta Hürholz (clavichord), Barbara Schachtner (soprano), Joerg Bräuker (bass), and Ursula Albrecht (actress)—listen to the text, which is heard through loud speakers. They open their hearts to receive the text and let themselves be carried away by it: Margareta Hürholz improvises at the clavichord, Barbara Schachtner and Jörg Bräuker sing spiritual and profane melodies, and Ursula Albrecht expresses the inwardness of meditation through her silence and readings. The interweaving of the individual soliloquies functions as an intersubjective exploration of the various experiences of God’s love in which the artists have a part to play, albeit in different ways. This makes it possible for the audience to see how personal expressions of being touched by God are diverse, depending on the situation of each person, but at the same time are communal. The production reveals how the desire for God ultimately extends to a silence in God. There are conversations with the audience following each performance, with both the performances and the conversations mediating an ultramodern impression of Carmelite mysticism.

In order to gain an idea of the kind of spirituality presented in these productions, the members of the MusikTheaterKöln were interviewed in the summer of 2009. It is clear that the MusikTheater does not have any theological agenda. It is not a matter of proclaiming any particular faith or of acting as a pastoral mediator in matters of faith. Nor does theater seek to be sacramental in the sense of referring to the Holy and making it present. It does have to do with the personal perspectives of the artists as they interact with the mystical texts. The artists want to feel what touches them, to experience how a network of faith is woven within each person as well as among them as a group. They want to feel their own vitality and to challenge and confirm one another in their creativity. Some of the productions, especially the last two, lead to conversations with the audience—then the show is no longer a play but a documentary of authentic artistic-spiritual life. As such, it inspires the audience to go in search of their own spiritual expressions. What is central to this process is the increased value of the person as subject and their individual spiritual journey.

**SOCIETAL SPIRITUALITY**

In this section, we briefly sketch the development of societal spirituality in The Netherlands, which brings to light a problem. “Societal spirituality” implies spirituality in the social sectors of employment, education, and caregiving.
New developments are now under way in these areas. Since the middle of the twentieth century, spirituality and religion have been being forced out of these social sectors into the private sphere. Before that time, the Churches had been tangibly present within the social sectors. Workers and management had their own faith-related organizations. Other groups, such as sports teams, debating clubs, and youth organizations, had their own spiritual advisors. The Churches, as well as movements connected with major worldviews and philosophies of life, all had a strong influence on the lifestyle of their members. However, in the course of a few decades this fell apart, not so much as a result of outside pressure by anti-religious movements but rather from the inside. Religious identity, which once penetrated all areas of life, has been hollowed out and is no longer felt to be necessary or helpful. Rather, it is perceived as interfering with contemporary autonomy and freedom. For a time, it seemed as though spirituality and religious piety might disappear completely. Yet, over the last couple of decades that no longer seems to be the case.

This new development can be described as a growing interest in spiritual customs, ideas, and practices that are detached from their former religious context. What is especially significant is that this interest seems to be primarily functional: whether the spirituality in question contributes to the search for meaning and wellbeing. In The Netherlands, the success enjoyed by the books and workshops of Eckhart Tolle illustrated this phenomenon. We also note that pilgrimages are making a comeback. In the various social sectors, we will briefly outline these new developments, using a few examples.

**Caregiving**

Over a few decades, the caregiving sector broke with the power and influence of religious orders whose focus had been on charity. Caregiving had to be removed from that spiritual context. However, the publications of Annelies van Heijst, for example, set the tone for the current reversal. She reveals the spiritual component of caregiving, placing aspects of traditional Catholic charity in the foreground, which previously had merited scorn and derision. For a long time, anything religious was also anathema in the areas of psychosocial caregiving and psychotherapy. That probably had something to do with the resistance within this professional group to the often-authoritarian interference of ecclesiastical authorities in the social services, and possibly also with a personal protest against religious patterns, which social workers had encountered in the course of their own lives. Psychology's own concern with acquiring a professional profile certainly played a role as well. It required a clear methodology so it had to be purified as much as possible from philosophical or religious language. Here, too, the tide is turning to some extent. The contributions of the social sciences, especially psychology, were already appreciated within
the study of spirituality but recently a reciprocal interest has arisen. Spiritual practices, such as so-called “mindfulness,” for example, are attracting the attention of psychiatrists and psychologists in their own clinical practice. The interface between psychotherapy and pastoral/spiritual direction are being re-explored in terms of how they might complement and support one another.

Business

An interest in spirituality is also unmistakable in the areas of employment and management. The CNV (The National Federation of Christian Trade Unions in The Netherlands) is working together with the Titus Brandsma Institute to research the presence of spirituality within the work environment. The CMM Brothers (Congregatio Fratrum Beatae Mariae Virginis Matris Misericordiae) have renovated their monastery in Vught, converting it into a center called “Zin: the convent for meaning and work,” where the relationship between spirituality and work holds a central place and is approached from practical, theoretical, and consultative angles. This has attracted a great deal of interest. Many books are also being published on the subject of spirituality and entrepreneurialism and management. Of course, critical questions have to be posed. For example, is the interest in spirituality in business life really as broad as is often suggested? It is evident that, for the most part, this interest originates with, and is stimulated by, the higher levels of management. A second related question is: does this movement toward spirituality secretly serve economic interests, since people who are relaxed and experience their work as meaningful and satisfying will be better producers? Naturally, such critical areas have to be thoroughly investigated but that does not take away from the fact that interest in spirituality is unmistakable at the level of employment and entrepreneurialism.

Education

During the last few decades, a sort of neutralization has taken place in the field of Christian education. Under pressure from pluralism in the make-up of school populations, it seemed clear that classes on various philosophies of life and religious convictions should be offered to students as an elective, on an information basis, without formation in any specific spirituality. In the meantime, however, a call was also heard for less permissiveness at the level of philosophies of life. For some years, Paul van Tongeren’s book about virtue and ethics has been used as the philosophy textbook in secondary schools. Philosophers such as Ad Verbrugge and Michiel Leezenberg criticize fragmentation in education as well as other areas. Quality and sustainability are the principal areas of formation in philosophy of life classes in, for example,
schools belonging to the Carmel College Foundation in The Netherlands. Attention is given to the possibilities of spirituality in multicultural education.  

Thus, there seems to be something going on in the social sectors in terms of philosophy of life, religion, and spirituality. Here, only a few examples have been given but that is enough to make institutes that study spirituality realize that this direction cannot be neglected in years to come. However, that is easier said than done. Something is immediately obvious to anyone who casts a glance at the current literature concerning spirituality in these social sectors. The language and images used come almost exclusively from the social sciences, behavioral sciences, and organizational development, and these are quite different from those used in the Christian spiritual tradition, where they are primarily taken from philosophy and theology. This difference often implies selection as well; not all the themes of traditional spirituality recur in societal spirituality. A selection is made and priorities are altered. Themes such as authenticity, human closeness, and wellbeing in work are prominent in societal spirituality, but so is the environment. Other themes from traditional spirituality are missing.

On this point, we should explore for a moment the book *Inspirational Teachers* from a Dutch Catholic education think tank. Here, the distinction between spirituality expressed in the language of the human sciences, and expressed in more traditional language, also takes the form of a distinction between a more segmentary and a more integral approach to spirituality in education. Both appear in the book. The segmentary approach appears in a chapter describing a research project that investigated the inspirational qualities of the teacher and what these qualities brought to student development. Here, spirituality is limited to a specific set of qualities such as an appreciation of beauty, gratitude, clemency, and modesty. A group of students was asked to call to mind a teacher whom they regarded as inspirational. They were then presented with seventeen qualities—varying from, for example, “good at teaching” to “serving as a good example.” From the responses, it seems that all of the qualities were attributed to the inspirational teacher to a certain extent. The students were then asked to what extent this same teacher had brought another twenty qualities to their development as students. These qualities were divided into three groups: social virtues, spirituality and transcendence, and knowledge and insight. It is striking that spirituality linked with “transcendence” is here associated with rather benign qualities—modesty, gratitude, clemency—and not with qualities such as social responsibility or creativity. This limitation was established by the researchers, not by the students.

In another chapter, Kees Waaijman’s vision of spirituality in education provides a contrast. Within the centuries-old Judeo-Christian traditions, spirituality expresses the total expanse of qualities and learning processes that
play a role in education. This is a more integral approach to spirituality. Here, for example, spirituality is substantially concerned with the subject matter and the quality of teaching. Six levels were distinguished: the presentation of the material; the affective undertones that resonate within this presentation (affinity with the material, pleasure, thirst for knowledge); mental habits and ways of thinking (flexibility, openness, creativity, a feeling for critique and other approaches); the teacher’s character; the relationships with colleagues and students (authenticity, attentiveness); and the relationship with God (open for a deeper awakening, awe and reverence, giving and/or receiving meaning, the numinous).

**Questions of Definition**

A striking phenomenon in the overall societal context is the enormous divergence in what is called “spiritual” or “spirituality.” If spirituality is active in so many divergent areas, then what exactly is spirituality? Does it not simply dissolve amidst all the multiplicity? This is not so when there is a converging movement radiating from a central unifying point. In Christian spirituality, that unifying point has always been the relationship with God. Of course, this can be interpreted in different ways but the realization of transcendence creates a perspective in which diverging aspects complement and support each other. An “inside” appears that the many spiritual facets have in common. In Christian spirituality, this “inside” is the relationship with God through the Incarnation. But the necessity of an “inside,” a central, unifying point, is not limited to the Christian tradition. In Judaism, it is the Torah, or sometimes the Messianic expectation as well. In Islam, it is *dhikr Allah*, surrender, and the actions appropriate to that surrender. In Buddhism, it is *sunyata*, emptiness. In Hinduism, it is the principle of non-duality, where *atman* is *Brahman*. Every religion or philosophy of life has its own central, unifying form by means of which its conventional spirituality is organized coherently. Remove this central core and you remove the heart of the spirituality. You are left with a few free-floating spiritual elements (for example, spiritual practices). This is what has happened during the past few decades, and the demand for a broad-based spirituality is not able to replace what has been lost.

**The Problem: The Absence of A Center**

What is striking at present is that it is precisely this matter of a relationship with God that is often being left out of spirituality. In his essay on education, Waaijman suggests: “Spirituality is usually neutralized into a general ‘search for meaning’ or something similar. However, experts in the field of spirituality in education are correctly questioning whether it is ‘possible, or productive, to talk meaningfully about spirituality without reference to a particular spiritual
tradition, or at the very least a context of practice, shared belief and relationship in which the human spirit engages in spiritual practice. My answer is: no.”

Spirituality, in all its pluriformity, cannot do without this central point of convergence. And in the Christian tradition that means a relationship with God Incarnate. Not that it has to be centered yet again on well-ordered religious certainties. It is not a matter of definitive answers but space must be made for the question of something ultimate, of truth, of something that surpasses human works, of a Someone who is greater than our hearts (St. Augustine).

The diverse facets of spirituality are held together at that point of convergence. There, these facets interweave with each other and form a coherent whole. Spirituality cannot effectively exist without this central point of convergence being brought into the picture in some shape or form, without it being lived out, without it becoming the content of formation in education, for example, or without it being applied in the social sectors of employment, caregiving, and education.

*Research Perspectives in Societal Spirituality: An Incognito Relationship with God*

The relationship with God should be present in societal spirituality but appears not to be most of the time. Or perhaps it is there unseen? In addition to physical, mental, and emotional energies, much of the literature concerning spirituality and employment or management also identifies a spiritual energy, often described as the capacity to enter into relationship with something greater than the human person, as of service to the world. It is asserted that attention is being given to physical, mental, and emotional energies in the workplace but that “spiritual energy” includes these other three energies in addition to bringing an elusive vitality into play, a power that is present in every human person.

In this way, the notion of “energy” (δύναμις, ψυχή) is introduced into literature concerning workplace spirituality using nonreligious language, but as an energy that includes the physical, mental, and emotional capacities yet surpasses them. This means that spirituality is not reduced to matters of psychic wellbeing or human resources. At present, institutes for the study of spirituality are searching for equivalents to a relationship with God in our culture. Are we dealing here with an implicit or unseen relationship with God? In its own way, the contemporary study of spirituality is busy with what the Second Vatican Council emphasized as the question of reading the signs of the time. On the one hand, reading the signs of the times interrogates contemporary forms of societal spirituality about the transcendental dimension as the heart of their
spirituality. On the other hand, it will welcome such forms of spirituality as possible metamorphoses of the classical relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

Within an overall characterization of European spirituality as defined by human experience, by the world and by everyday life (as Rahner foresaw it fifty years ago), the contemporary spiritual climate is focused on two fields. Its relationship to art and its connections with various social domains. As we have seen, in theater productions there seems to be no reticence regarding the traditional center of spirituality, the quest for God. Thus, mystical texts are “performed” artistically, yet in ways open to this quest. However, as we have also seen, in the various contexts of societal spirituality, the relationship with classic theistic forms of spirituality is somehow much more problematic.

NOTES

1. This essay has been translated from the Dutch by Sr. Joanna Dunham, OCSO, Abdij Koningsoord, Arnhem, The Netherlands.
7. See Machtheld Valenkamp, Door meer dan mensenhand gemaakt (Master’s thesis, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2008).
8. Valenkamp, Door meer dan mensenhand gemaakt, 63.
13. See, for example, the Flemish-Dutch theatrical troupe Wunderbaum with their production “Kamp Jezus” (last performed in 2008); Lotte van den Berg with her “Winterverblĳf,” a production about her father, Jozef van den Berg (last performed in 2008); see also, Jozef van den Berg, who retired from his work as actor and puppeteer and who
now lives as a hermit; see “Catharina van Siena,” by Thorsten Lensing (2001); “Die
Bibel. Eine Sinsuche in fünf Teilen,” by Bruno Cathomas (2004); “Der Bus,” under the
direction of Stephan Kimmig (2005); “Menetekel,” by Louis Naef (2006), and many
other productions.


15. See Heinrich Dumoulin, Mumonkan—Die Schranke ohne Tor (Mainz Grünewald,


17. Dumoulin, Mumonkan 76.

18. Dumoulin, Mumonkan 45.

19. See Kölnische Rundschau, August 26, 1997: “Tiefrotes Herz am Boden kündet von
Sehnsucht”; Stadtspiegel Bochum, March 13, 1998: “Zwischen Tragödie, Lust und Qual”;
WAZ, March 18, 1998: “Mittelalter im Backsteinhaus.”


21. See Fermate 18/4 (1999), “Eine moderne mystische Oper”; see also Kölnische Rund
schau, September 4, 1999: “Winde singen”; Niederrheinische Nachrichten, September
10, 1999: “Eine zeitlose Partitur ohne Verfallsdatum”; Rheinische Post, September 15,
1999: “Brautgesang in der Enge eines transparenten Zeltes”; Niederrheinische Zeitung,
September 15, 1999: “Der Gesang der Winde”; Westfälische Rundschau, April 8, 2000:
“Im Zelt in der Kirche St. Petri erklingt ein geistlicher Gesang”; WAZ, April 8, 2000:
“In den Seelen tobt Widerstreit”; Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung, August 2, 2000:
“Die Seele als Braut”; Donau Kurier, October 2, 2001: “Geistlicher Gesang entführte in
einen Raum jenseits der Zeit.”

22. See Eichstätter Kurier, November 18, 2003: “Pointiertes Gedankenspiel in Alberts Gar
ten.”


24. See Elisabeth Hense, Die Kammer der Andacht. Formbeschreibung einer Theater
produktion, (Leuven: Peeters, 2007). See also: Kölnische Rundschau, October 24, 2004:
“Vom Mut, nach Gott zu suchen”; Kölner Stadtanzeiger, August 24, 2004: “Askese
statt Sinnenlust”; Westfälische Nachrichten Münster, November 17, 2004: “Die Seele
spielt Klarinette”; Liobabote, December 2008: “Die Kammer der Andacht,”

Appel, eds., By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual

26. There are no reviews from this production.

27. Frans Maas, “De verleiding, de kras en de tranen, Over de sacramentele dimensie van
religieuze kunst,” lecture given on January 11, 2008, at Radboud University Nijmegen.

28. Hubert Knoblauch, Populaire Religion, Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft
(Frankfurt / New York: Campus, 2009).

29. Ineke Albers, Heilige kracht wordt door beweging losgemaakt. Over pelgrimage, lopen
en genezing (Groningen/Tilburg: Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap, 2007); Peter Jan
Margry, Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World (Amsterdam: Bakker: AUP, 2008);
Charles Caspers and Peter Jan Margry, 101 bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland (Amster
dam: Bakker, 2008); Charles Caspers, “No Places of Pilgrimage without Devotion(s).
Past, Present and Future,” in Jan De Maeyer, et al., eds., Loci Sacri: Sacred Places and
Their Secrets (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit, 2009).

30. See Annelies van Heijst, Liefdewerk: Een herwaardering van de caritas bij de arme
zusters van het Goddelijk Kind, sinds 1852 (Hilversum Verloren, 2002); also, Heijst,
Menslievende zorg: Een ethische kijk op professionaliteit (Kampen: Klement, 2005); and
Heijst, Iemand zien staan. Zorgethiek over erkenning (Kampen: Klement, 2008).
31. Compare the KSGV’s study days in November 2009 and March 2009 on “Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality,” Eric Stoppelenburg et al., *Mindfulness: Spirituele traditie of therapeutische techniek* (KSGV, Tilburg, 2009). [The KSGV is a Dutch association whose aim is to explore the relationship between faith, religion, meaning, and mental health.]

32. *Spiritualiteit in Psychotherapie* (Tilburg: KSGV, 2001); See also the ongoing attention given to this topic in the periodical: *Psyche en Geloof, Tijdschrift van de Christelijke Vereniging voor psychiaters, psychologen en psychotherapeuten*.


