New Age Spiritualism: I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For

The Good Word

Karen Stollznow
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A friend who owns a bookstore once told me, “Customers drawn to the New Age section seem to buy every book but never find whatever it is they're looking for.”

New age spiritualism has its origins in the nineteenth century spiritualism movement that introduced the world to mediums, channeling, Ouija boards, and séances (and paranormal fraud). Today, spirituality encompasses a diverse range of beliefs and practices.

Is New Age Spiritualism a Religion or a Gateway to Leaving Religion?

Spiritualism in and of itself might not be religion, but it can include religion. Spiritualist beliefs often integrate facets of philosophy, culture, jargon, and rituals from historical religions blended with pseudoscience and the paranormal (like voodoo). Spiritualism draws mainly from Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism but also indigenous and other faiths.

Spiritualist beliefs can be polytheistic or monotheistic, and the theistic higher being could be a God, Goddess, Creator, Supreme Being, or Omnipotent Presence. However, spiritualism is not invariably theist. For those who perceive themselves as nontheistic but still “spiritual,” spiritualist beliefs are compatible with atheism. For these believers, the nontheistic higher power could be the Cosmos, Chi, Prana, Love, Light, or Life Force.

Spiritualism is often conceptualized as religion, much as atheism is, because the structure of religion is our comparative cognitive model. However, there is no clear-cut continuum of belief to nonbelief. There are parallels because spiritualism is a belief system, but it is eclectic, unstructured, dynamic, and idiosyncratic. People who practice some form of spiritualism might describe themselves as spiritual persons, but they wouldn’t necessarily employ spiritualist as a label of self-identification or spiritualism as a designation for their beliefs.

Without denominations or sects, spiritualism is composed of loose communities that often evade classification. Alternatively, there can be in-group categorization, such as the theory of homeopathy or the various schools of yoga. This broadness and factionalism gives rise to the continual emergence of new beliefs, like psychic medium Sylvia Browne’s “religion,” the Society of Novus Spiritus.

Many proponents value spiritual beliefs for this very lack of labelling and rigid structure. It is religion without a rule book. There is no unified theology, no universally defining characteristics nor collective history. There is no doctrine. The holy book of spiritualism is whatever self-help book is currently on The New York Times Best Seller list. The priests and popes of spiritualism are authors and celebrities, including fire-walking motivational mentor Tony Robbins, psychic medium John Edward, and Wayne Dyer and Phil McGraw, the prophets with PhDs.

The intersection of religion and spiritualism is often mysticism. Customs of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, such as speaking in tongues, divination and healing through the Holy Spirit, are also spiritualist practices. But there is no single spiritual House of Worship; the temporary “church” is the yoga class or reiki workshop. Although there is no formalized liturgical service, spiritualism is often ritualistic. Advocates of spiritualism enact their beliefs and petition the powers not only with prayer but other forms of intercession, including meditation, mantras, Pilates, and positive affirmations.

Instead of entrance to Heaven, spiritualist beliefs have more esoteric goals of attaining enlightenment, consciousness, awareness, oneness, and mindfulness. Depending on cultural preference, its goal is an individualist spiritual quest to find your true self or is...
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Deniers are not Skeptics

Michiganders by granting sweeping new powers to practitioners of unscientific bogus medicine and treatments, said the Center for Inquiry.

Should Skeptics Be Skeptical about New Age Spiritualism?

Overall, spiritualist beliefs are pseudo-religious, but they are often pseudoscientific too. Belief systems tend to be outside the realm of skepticism for many skeptics, but
irrational, dangerous, and unscientific practices are always our concern and are often testable.

Spiritualism is often framed as religion but also framed as science. This can be confusing for the consumer. Proponents claim that they too were skeptical until they were convinced by the evidence. Anecdotal evidence is still evidence, isn’t it? The homeopathic preparations are beside the aspirin on the pharmacy shelves. The herbs are natural so they must be safe. Traditional Chinese Medicine has been around for thousands of years. The naturopath has a nicer bedside manner than the medical doctor. The only thing that supersedes science is the exotic; if it is foreign (and especially Eastern), it is imbued with unquestionable authority and wisdom.

Science has credibility, and spiritualism can appear to be integrative. Parapsychology and Postmodernism have a scientific facade. Dr. Deepak Chopra is a medical doctor. Bruce Lipton aims to “bridge science and spirit.” Feng Shui is adapted for business, and there are psychic financial advisors. Homeopathic doses of physics are blended with hyperdimensional physics and linguistics with Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Astrology aligns itself to astronomy, and birth chart declinations give the semblance of science. Electromagnetic readers are scientific tools, used irrelevantly for ghost hunting. Spiritualism does not use the scientific method; its approaches are metaphysical, not empirical.

Some proponents of spiritualism promulgate inaccurate and often unsafe ideas. Anti-vaccination organizations engage in fear-mongering campaigns, leaving communities susceptible to contagious diseases. Moon landing conspiracy theorists jeopardize the public’s understanding of science. Historical revisionists rewrite history erroneously. Even if a spiritualist theory is proven wrong, it’s reinterpreted as “correct.” The end of the world is always nigh, but suddenly this becomes a metaphor for any current global problem. Of course, the next scheduled Armageddon is the real one!

Some spiritualism is guilty of undoing science and is harmful when it actively undermines what is known. Scientists turned pseudoscientists commit this academic irresponsibility. They disregard science and discard their formal education yet flaunt their qualifications, invoking the lexicon of science with convincing authority. The metalanguage of physics, math, and neuroscience is adopted to appeal to the intellect of consumers. Fringe scientists try to persuade the public with conventional yet ambiguous terminology like “quantum” and “energy.”

Recognizable, trusted terms are used to peddle spiritual concepts persuasively. Spiritual practitioners are psychic surgeons, psychic detectives, and herbal therapists. The unorthodox is portrayed as orthodox, giving us Ayurvedic medicine and Homeopathic vaccines. Science is name-dropped in The Science of Getting Rich and Christian Science. Scientologists and Raëlians blend science fiction into their theories.

“Gut feelings,” “intuition,” and “knowing” are employed to defend extraordinary claims for which there is no extraordinary evidence. Instead of addressing the Burden of Proof, claimants expect skeptics to disprove their outrageous claims. Correlation equals causation to some non-skeptics, and Occam’s Razor is simply ignored.

Cold Comfort or Culture?

New age spiritualism fills the void created by secularization. Spiritualist beliefs and practices try to address the shortfalls of religion and the gaps of knowledge, offering a modern alternative. Self-identifying as a “spiritual person” conveniently addresses the question, “What do you believe in?” Otherwise, you’re just a soulless, immoral atheist.

Spiritualism is not overtly religious, and perhaps this is why it appeals to some people as a non-committal, secular belief system for those not ready to give up the trappings of religion. But it is a break away from religion. Spiritual beliefs can be stepping stones on the path to letting go of religion.

Perhaps we’re all a little spiritual by social necessity. Spiritual beliefs and practices tend to reflect popular culture and lifestyle. In a sense, we’re merely living in our own times when we utter “Thank God,” speak of a “soul” or “spirit,” burn an incense stick, shop for organic food, read our stars in the newspaper, or self-medicate with vitamin supplements. These seem to be customary, but we don’t want to assign unrelated significance to these acts.


Some find spiritual experiences in society. Coincidences become synchronicity. Luck is not made. Outside influences affect our lives. We choose our parents before we’re born. Our friends are kindred spirits. Our partner is our soul mate. We tend to observe
the hits and ignore the misses. We recall that chance encounter that led us to meet our partner, but we forget the car accident and the unsuccessful relationships. Alternatively, we put these down to “bad luck” and read the failures as “life lessons” we’re “meant to have” on the path to finding our true selves.

Some find spiritual experiences in nature. The complexity of nature is misinterpreted as evidence for a creator or designer. We derive incredible emotional satisfaction from physical phenomena. Some wish on shooting stars and rainbows. Sunsets and night skies inspire romance, wistfulness, and hope. These powerful feelings can be so overwhelming that they seem to come from beyond, but they come from within. This is the naturalist connection to the universe of which Carl Sagan spoke⁷, but the sense of awe is misconstrued as divine.

Spiritualism is what we make spiritual. It is about meaning. We tend to think our “spiritual experiences” are unique and deeply meaningful, and they are…to us. They are no doubt profound, but they are human experiences and individual experiences. Assigning additional importance to them is a subjective attempt to understand the objective world.

For many, spiritualism is an ongoing quest. The search for truth ends in falsehood. The shamans and gurus are false gods. Enlightenment becomes disillusionment.

But many seekers of new age spiritualism never seem to find what they’re looking for…

Notes

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Karen Stollznow is an author and skeptical investigator with a doctorate in linguistics and a background in history and anthropology. She is an associate researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, and a director of the San Francisco Bay Area Skeptics. A prolific skeptical writer for many sites and publications, she is the “Good Word” Web columnist for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, the “Bad Language” columnist for Skeptic magazine, a frequent contributor to Skeptical Inquirer, and managing editor of CSI’s Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice. Dr. Stollznow is a host of the Monster Talk podcast and writer for the Skepbitch and Skepchick blogs, as well as for the James Randi Educational Foundation’s Swift. She can be reached via email at kstollznow[at]centerforinquiry.net.
I have climbed highest mountain I have run through the fields Only to be with you
Only to be with you. But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for. I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one Bleed into one Well yes I’m still running.
You broke the bonds and you Loosed the chains Carried the cross Of my shame
You know I believed it. But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for. How about we keep it simple before you give him a full-blown interrogation?” asked Aayla, her own interest was betrayed in her voice. “I didn’t want to lose Daphne or Tonks to age. Our children either,” Shaak Ti and Aayla both exchanged looks at that, it was the exact sort of thing that Jedi had to be worried about, becoming too attached to people that they would sacrifice anything in order to keep their attachments, often sacrificing who they were in order to do it.