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GUEST EDITORIAL

The Yin-Yang of Spirituality: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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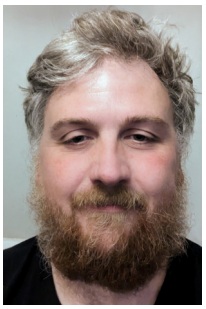

The concept of *spirituality* has a long and winding history. The term is rooted in Christianity, where "the spiritual" was initially contrasted with that "of the flesh," meaning everything that is contrary to the Spirit of God. The "spiritual person" was someone who lived under the influence of the Spirit of God and had "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:15–16). In contrast, "the flesh profits nothing," meaning that there is no hope of salvation or spiritual insight that can be achieved through human effort. Throughout the Middle Ages, the "spiritual" was living in line with a set of Christian values regulated and controlled through the centralized power of the Church. The grip of the Church eventually eroded through a series of crises from the Black Death, famine, the breakdown of the feudal system, the rise of Protestantism, and the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Spirituality, in turn, shifted from the authority of the Church to an internal experience that included the mental aspects of life (Sheldrake, 2013).

In the 21st century, the concept of spirituality strayed from its conventional religious foundation and is now understood as a broad and multifaceted concept. In Western countries particularly, people increasingly identify as spiritual but not religious and are turning towards secular and more individual forms of spirituality (Fuller, 2001). These include diverse practices such as fasting to achieve control over one's desires and senses for the sake of spiritual transformation, seeking spiritual experiences in nature to appreciate the beauty and interconnectedness of the natural world, and astrology as a spiritual tool to develop a deeper understanding of the self and the world. The task of providing a *true* definition of spirituality is a "moving target," as definitions continue to shift and expand (Bregman, 2020), although most researchers broadly characterize it as *the search for, or communion with, the sacred* (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Pargament et al., 2013). We are therefore left to understand how this notion of spirituality— as manifested via attitudes, beliefs, or experiences— has been studied and explored within an extensive research literature.

An overwhelming dominance of research has explored the "positive" or efficacious aspects of spirituality on psychological well-being and health-related behaviors (Bozek et al., 2020). The take-home message is that the more spiritual that we claim to be, the better we tend to feel about ourselves. Spirituality has thus become a bedrock of the "positive sciences" where the darker aspects of human existence are disavowed in favor of how our spiritual life can be probed and poked as a variable to find how best it can improve our health and welfare (Roussiau et al. 2023). These assumptions are embedded within popular culture and the self-help industry, where spirituality has exclusively been aligned with improving one's well-being. As Humphrey (2015) noted, "the literature is replete with monopolar models which celebrate only the light and love awaiting spiritual seekers" (p. 2377).

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But this perspective is arguably short-sighted, as an awareness of the darker side to spirituality helps provide a more holistic understanding and appreciation of the human condition. There is a dialectical tension at play in spirituality, where a path to enlightenment and salvation is riddled with sacrifice and sometimes self-destruction. In this sense, there is no "yin" without "yang." This is exemplified in the 2019 film *Saint Maude*, directed by Rose Glass. Katie, who refers to herself as Maud, is a devout Christian who works as a palliative care nurse in a seaside town in Britain for an ex-dancer, Amanda, who is dying of cancer. Amanda lives a life of excess and often mocks Maud's spirituality. Maude draws on her spirituality to give her personal strength, but by the end (sorry for spoilers), she sets herself on fire for the "glory of God" and is left screaming in agony as she burns alive. Here, we have spirituality literally engulfed in both positivity and negativity; we cannot simply neglect one for the other. It is at this juncture, to provide a counterbalance, that we are interested in the darker side of spirituality.

Distinctions have likewise been made between healthy and pathological spirituality, with the latter being practices that cause harm to oneself or others (Crowley & Jenkinson, 2009). For instance, consider Persinger's (1997) study that strikingly found "of the men who reported a religious experience, attended church weekly, and displayed elevated complex partial epileptic like signs (5.7% of 629 surveyed males), 44% stated they would *kill another person if God told them to do so*" (p. 128, emphasis added). Other sobering examples of stress and suffering in spirituality abound, including different forms of "ecstatic pain" related to fasting, celibacy, tattoos, fire walking, body mortification, bloodletting, snake handling, or self-flagellation. Extreme rituals like these and others are not limited to arcane cults but can be found within the mystery traditions in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, as well as the customs of some secular communities (Xygalatas, 2022).

Relatedly, Glucklich (2014) reviewed a broad selection of mystical writings to identify two fundamental dimensions in ecstatic mystical experience —a feeling of self-transcendence and an extremely high level of positive affect. It seems that "pain" is instrumental in promoting both experiences and is thus extremely pervasive among mystics who report ecstatic states of consciousness. On a more practical level, Xygalatas et al. (2019) reported that some extreme rituals even serve as culturally-prescribed remedies for a variety of maladies, and especially those related to mental health. Other times, the prosocial effects of darker expressions or activities of spirituality facilitate social bonding (e.g., Munson et al., 2014) or the moral cleansing of collective groups (e.g., Mitkidis et al., 2017). This view echoes Hobson et al. (2018), who characterized the function of rituals in terms of regulating emotions, performance goal states, and social connection.

Darker forms of spirituality also include the concept of "offensive spirituality," which refers to presenting oneself as "spiritually developed" to induce a false sense of superiority and using spiritual practices in a way that limits someone else's actions or choices (Battista, 1996). You can see this played out with sex and death cults that function through "prophetic and enlighted" leaders. The Jonestown massacre in 1978 is a harrowing reminder of the power of words when spoken from the mouths of cult leaders. When Jim Jones uttered the words "*drink the Kool-Aid*," it sparked a mass suicide of over 900 people. Offensive spirituality, therefore, functions through the cult leader as an ego-ideal for their followers who is instilled as a "father" (it is not surprising then that we find most cult leaders are men) that lays down the law and offers a means of identification. The image of the cult leader becomes one to emulate and aspire to for the followers. This is well recognized within the make-up of cults themselves, for example, The Family International's (formerly Children of God) "Love Charter" has devised a scoring system which measures members' spiritual and practical progress within the group and their willingness to follow leadership.

Cultic groups (typically referred to in the research literature as psychologically manipulative groups) have been extensively studied within psychology and related fields (e.g., Castaño et al., 2022, Stein, 2021) and are a very real social phenomena with significant psychological, social and legal implications. The cult, as discussed above, needs the symbolic father figure who gives spiritual enlightenment and commands the sacrifice of the body of their followers in a ritualized act (e.g., sex orgies or mass suicide). The cult, therefore, functions through a 'give and take', but there are other forms of dark spirituality that are cannibalistic in nature and operate purely through consumption. It is to this end we see the emergence of the "energy vampire," a metaphorical concept which has entered common parlance and refers to people who are typically close to us, such as friends, family, or coworkers, who either consciously or unconsciously feed off others' emotional or mental energy. The concept has been reified, and energy vampires are positioned as a threat to spiritual and emotional health, as they leave us feeling drained and despondent, forgetful of who we are and what our purpose is. Energy vampire characteristics include always wanting to be the center of attention, lacking empathy, and blaming others for everything.

The energy vampire has become a popular device in film and TV, for example, with the character of Colin Robinson played by Mark Proksch in the series *What We Do In The Shadows*, exemplifying this. There is the use of both met-

aphor and metonymy where Colin works (both financially and to feed) in the corporate world by draining the life of his co-workers through extended monologues during the daily grind of routines when at the water machine, filing cabinet, or by the printer. The energy vampire symbolically serves as a means of draining the life from us, just like working through the repetition of boring activities. Navigating energy vampires is a huge issue in pop psychology, which is awash with signs to watch out for and strategies to banish energy vampires. For example, Alla Svirinskaya (2019), energy healer to the stars, described energy as *"a precious part of your identity"* (back cover, emphasis added). She recommended that to ward off energy vampires, people discover their own auras and tune into the auras of others, being alert to all negativities. The energy vampire, nonetheless, has become a spirituality focused on self-growth and enjoyment from feeding and draining of the desires, hopes, and goals of others. Given the 21st century focus on the individual and self-growth, where we are told to look after "Number 1," the energy vampire comes as no surprise as it feels like a symptom of how we presently live.

This Winter 2023 Special Issue provides the forum to explore what darker spiritualties entail in the modern era. The editorial has set the scene with the mutation of dark spiritualities from their religious origins that provided a moral compass on how to live our lives. We have argued that dark spiritualities take different forms, from cults to energy vampires, and are reproduced in films and modern culture. Whilst these darker spiritualties are secular in the 21st century, they still retain an ethical focus on how best to take care of oneself. The answer seemingly tends toward self-sacrifice or the sacrifice of others for your own self-growth. It is a "dog eat dog" world, and at this juncture, the special issue takes up the challenge of addressing how these darker spiritualties appear and function, what they tell us about people, our spiritual beliefs, and the wider culture to which we belong. The topics and contexts presented across the papers are both broad and diverse in scope, ranging from demonic possession, dark tourism, death exposure to hypnotic sessions, but they retain a focus on darker spirituality that pulls them together.

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