

BOOK REVIEW

Secular Spirituality: The Next Step Towards Enlightenment (Studies in Neuroscience, Consciousness, and Spirituality) by Harald Walach. New York: Springer, 2015. ISBN 978-3-319-09344-4.

Harald Walach's *Secular Spirituality: The Next Step Towards Enlightenment* is an ambitious book that touches on a variety of abstruse materials, ranging from medieval mysticism to quantum mechanics. The author is a clinical psychologist who in this book takes on the role of physician of worldviews. The title *Secular Spirituality* may confuse the reader because the word *secular* connotes non-religious and non-spiritual. But by secular he actually means "not part of any institutionalized dogma or belief-system." Although the distinction between spiritual and religious, a popular trope nowadays, can be overdone, it is central to Walach's project.

He begins by describing himself as having had important spiritual experiences, but treats them critically and with nuance, a stance essential to his notion of secular spirituality. In this book, he comments on many topics, distinctions, and presuppositions, and not always with clarity, which can retard the flow of the narrative; therefore my comments are highly selective.

Walach's project seems to be twofold. He wants to disentangle the gold of spiritual experience from the dogmatic, variously tainted, residues. The first step is to rescue spirituality from religion and its biases. But the author also takes on the complementary task of rescuing the spiritual from the hubris of science. To succeed in freeing the spiritual from the fetters of religion *and* from the ignorance of dogmatic science: that happy conjunction of fates would constitute 'the next step towards enlightenment'—our book's subtitle.

Walach stipulates that his idea of enlightenment is meant in the 18th Century European sense where science throws off the shackles of superstition and tyrannical religion; but his usage also includes mystical enlightenment, as described in the ecstatic poetry of a Rumi or the meditations of a Meister Eckhart. So much for the main idea of the book: saving spirituality from science that has fallen under the spell of physicalism, and creating a new science informed and transformed by spirituality.

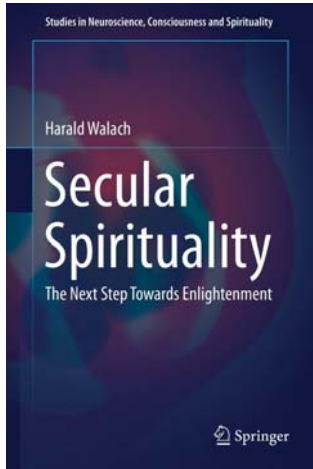
Walach begins by clarifying his terms and making explicit the important presuppositions of his thought. Experience is central and immediately self-verifying; conflict arises only at the level of doctrine (p. 5). The crucial

thing for those who yearn to take the next step is to preserve the freedom to hold whatever “doctrines” (or non-doctrines) we choose to name or describe our original experience. As experience lives in tension with doctrine, so does spirituality live in tension with religion. Walach refers to religion as the “vessel” of spirituality. The vessel can rust, crack, break—and is therefore replaceable; the spiritual is self-renewing because it is anchored in something “absolute.” Walach is not happy with postmodern relativities, and invokes William James, Robert Forman, and others as having documented the universal aspect of spiritual, especially mystical, experience.

Chapter 4 defines the concept of spirituality as a form or mode of consciousness, and then poses the question of the “reality” of consciousness. The shortcomings of idealism and materialism are reviewed, the author preferring a kind of dual aspect monism, in which the mental and the physical are conceived as irreducibly real but complementary, each rooted in a oneness and wholeness of being that mystics and few others can intuitively grasp. Walach underscores that experiences of secular spirituality may occur via scientific or artistic inspiration and in other surprising ways. Science and secularized spirituality are compatible; there is duality but not dualism; oneness without reductionism.

Chapter 5, *Neurobiology and Physiology of Concentration and Relaxation*, should be useful to the spiritual psychologist. Combining secular science and consciousness studies, it shows how certain traditional spiritual practices like meditation generate health benefits as well as heightened cognitive and creative powers. And, I would add, beyond the lab science of recent decades, in the history of religions, anthropology, medicine, mediumship, shamanism, and psychical research, we find a plethora of reportage on altered states of consciousness and extraordinary phenomena. All this material offers the reader a way to practice “daily psychological hygiene.” This phrase of Walach’s is apt for our secular world, which needs to hear talk of spiritual life translated into talk of psychological health and earthly well-being.

From here we move on to a discussion of some of the dangerous ways spirituality may be distorted. Of this there is abundant material to observe and analyze in the world around us today, but Walach instead raises the question of how Nazi psychology was driven by a sick spirituality. Narcissism is also a danger that can sneak into the sanctuary of spiritual life. The old spiritual masters called it pride, and reckoned it the worst of sins; but it helps to find equivalents that speak to the 21st century. Also in line with the author’s project, the spiritual dimension he wants to retrieve from oblivion in no way entails that we disparage reason; it does, however, broaden our concept of rationality along with our concept of what is possible in human experience.



In the course of discussion, the spiritual therapist becomes a prophet and a reformer. For in order to take the next step towards enlightenment—the untrammelled flowering of our spiritual consciousness—there are many problems we have to deal with. There are, we are reminded, daunting issues of meaning, energy, climate, fundamentalism, peace, poverty, misery, knowledge, values, commitment, unity, and scientific progress. The contention is that spirituality, wed to science and an ethos of human solidarity, is our best bet for coping with all problems and crises, our best hope for a more enlightened society. For the author, systematic spiritual

education offers the only reliable, long-range remedy for the ills of modern society.

We cannot cover all his views on so many monumental matters, but some of them are quite sensible.

This culture will only take root when we have top politicians and political administrators who are fearless and work from a place of inner conviction
 . . . (p. 190)

This is clearly a matter of consciousness and spirituality, generally lacking in most politicians and plutocrats, and would point the way to an enlightened society. Moreover, peace between religions can only proceed from nurturing the depths of spiritual experience.

Creating “a culture of experience of connectedness” is the way to cultivate peace between religions. The term *connectedness* is a bit threadbare here; something deeper and more profound is at stake. I need to feel more than “connected” to the people around me before I can care deeply about their fate. In any case, the idea of ‘connectedness’ has a dark side, and can be used to serve the interests of domination. If we hope to advance toward enlightenment, we need to celebrate pluralism as well as ‘connectedness.’

One thing keeps the world in continual *dis*-connectedness: the disproportion of wealth and power of the entrenched few and the poverty and oppression of the many. Apart from the gross discomforts of deprivation, there is the more racking pain of injustice. Walach believes that secular spirituality has the power to speak to the evils of poverty and oppression. The impoverished and the oppressor both suffer from a deficit of consciousness;

a failure to realize the ultimate, all-uniting state of consciousness. “The experience of a basic unity,” Walach writes, “would certainly prohibit maximizing profit as a guiding principle of society and politics” (p. 197). The dominant market-driven mentality isolates and separates us, feeding our narcissism and turning everything into a competition.

But if the critical mass of people has understood in their depth that individual welfare is impossible without common welfare . . . then structures [political and economic, he means] will change. (p. 198)

If we could train people to have such experiences, it might be possible to create an enlightened nation, city, or at least significant groups of people. But in the objective world we inhabit, the ‘profit motive’ is not an abstract idea we can banish by fiat. It incarnates a ruthless system of global capitalism, which undergirds and controls our politics, the wars we constantly prosecute, and the things we consume, think, love, and crave—in short, our world. These are not promising circumstances for promoting a revolution of spiritual consciousness that could kickstart a new age of enlightenment—an outcome that Walach holds is empirically conceivable and necessary for our survival.

How to create a science of secular spirituality potent enough to neutralize the evils wrought from our material sciences and ideologies? Walach’s entire project favors one thing: education. He wonders why have we not invested billions of dollars in a national department of peace instead of the trillions we lavish on ‘defense’, ‘security’, and military technology? The only realistic prospect is to train and educate human beings to undergo transformative, spiritual experiences—but without coercion or dogma.

There is also this big but unfortunately utopian idea. Science, according to Walach, ought not to operate in a value vacuum. We need a paradigm of science that is oriented toward serving the common good—not the militaristic needs of empire or the profit-driven goals of corporate capitalism. Evidence suggests that we have yet to realize our potential as a species; but to bring it about we cannot rely on the dream of some messiah saving us but on a willed collective process of human self-education. The whole idea of salvation needs to be scrapped and in its place erected the ideal of self-knowledge and self-mastery. I call this idea utopian but at least possible and worthy of admiration.

Is there another way this miracle of enlightenment might come about? The literature of so-called “crisis apparitions”, the “third man” phenomenon, deathbed visions, and near-death experiences offer hints. It is conceivable that as we disintegrate from climate change, economic collapse, revolution,

crime, war, and lawlessness, a spontaneous transformation might occur: a kind of global near-death experience. It may appear as a collective response to the collective cry of humanity in extremis. A nature-spawned apocalypse may await us: A moment may arrive when it dawns on human consciousness that the game is up, the old options are off the table, and something completely different is necessary.

The book ends on a note of paradox. The scientific quest has taken us far but not far enough. A more well-rounded enlightenment requires that we free ourselves “from the monopoly of a certain kind of rationality and doctrine, even from the monopoly of the rationality that has arisen out of the enlightenment itself” (p. 206). The paradox applies also to getting rid of the monopoly of religious dogmatism by returning to the “fountain” of immediate spiritual consciousness that is the root of all religions.

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