The spiritual transformation of giving: Generosity’s constitution of the self and community in post-religious society

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Abstract
How has the ‘benevolent self’s relation to others changed as a result of (first) the liberalization of monotheisms and (then) the uneven transition to post-religious spiritual formations? The apparent (and misleading) effacement of the self in traditional monotheistic generosity has ultimately given way to a ‘liberal’ glorification of the self. In advanced liberalism (typically dubbed ‘neoliberalism’), the glorification intensifies, but paradoxically becomes self-critical. Post-religious spiritualities interact with these advanced liberal dynamics to open up new possibilities for self- and community-formation. Even though the contradictions between self-centeredness and self-criticism are most acutely experienced within American post-religious spirituality, a suggestive discussion of Egypt demonstrates that these trends are not exclusively ‘Western.’ In both contexts, the corporate takeover of spirituality confines alternative forms of generosity.

Keywords
charity, community, liberalism, neoliberalism, self, spirituality

Résumé
Comment la relation du « benevolent self » (« soi bienveillant ») aux autres a-t-elle changé, à la suite (d’abord) de la libéralisation du monothéisme et (ensuite) de la transition inégale vers des formations spirituelles post-religieuses ? L’effacement apparent...
(et trompeur) du soi dans la générosité monothéiste traditionnelle a finalement fait place à une glorification « libérale » du soi. Dans le libéralisme avancée (généralement appelé « néolibéralisme »), la glorification s’intensifie, mais paradoxalement, elle devient plus autocritique. Les spiritualités post-religieuses interagissent avec ces dynamiques libérales avancées pour ouvrir de nouvelles possibilités de formation du soi et de la communauté. Même si les contradictions entre le centrage sur soi (self-centeredness) et l’autocritique sont plus intensément vécues dans la spiritualité post-religieuse américaine, une stimulante discussion sur le contexte égyptien révèle que ces tendances ne sont pas exclusivement « occidentales ». Dans ces deux contextes, la prise de contrôle de la spiritualité par les entreprises restreint les formes alternatives de générosité.

**Mots-clés**
charité, communauté, libéralisme, néolibéralisme, soi, spiritualité

This article discusses an ingrained tension within benevolent acts: the troubled relation between finding the self and letting it dissolve in the other. Communitarian (apparently self-effacing) aspects of giving predominated Abrahamic religions over the millennia. In the last couple of centuries, however, the ‘liberal revolution’s glorification of the individual pushed good deeds in a self-oriented direction. The more recent (especially American) turn to post-religious spirituality, I argue, is another step in this liberal transformation of benevolence. However, by bringing in Eastern spiritualities, the American post-religious turn also opens up the mental space to question the self-centeredness of late liberalism. Nevertheless, such criticism is marginalized by the corporate takeover of spirituality and generosity. A discussion of Islam-inspired charities in Egypt points out that similar processes are in motion in contrasting cultural settings, even if with different dynamics.

**The liberalization of giving and spirituality**

My account focuses on charity, which is admittedly a specific instance of care, but it also provides insights into benevolence in general. Even though the link between generosity and spirituality has been most deeply explored in the case of Christianity, all monotheisms display parallels in this regard (Chalmer, 2012; Cohen, 2005; Holman, 2009). Traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were mostly characterized by a communitarian ethos of giving. The main thrust of generosity in these contexts was creating bonds of interdependency between God, the donors, and the beneficiaries. Kochuyt (2009) has argued that the (Islamic) charity relation resembles Mauss’s gift relationship: the rich take their wealth from God, and they are obligated to spend it to form the community of believers. Wealth is seen as neither the result of predestination, nor of hard work: it is God’s *gift*. Unlike in Mauss, though, the reciprocal relation does not consist of a dyad, but a triad. God gives, and expects not only prayers, but affection for the poor and community formation.

While this understanding of benevolence rendered explicit one aspect of the donor’s self-making (growth through spiritual merit), it obscured self-serving aspects of generosity (e.g. the urge to build a reputation or legitimize wealth). Concomitant with
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carrying out a spiritual revolution without which we would not have known the love of the stranger (Lindberg, 2008), traditional monotheisms also hid from view the generative dialectic between self and selflessness.

Political economic thought decisively swept away the spiritual veneration of the poor (though Protestantism had already paved the way for this counter-revolution). Ricardo, Malthus, and others reasoned that the best method of creating an efficient society was to abrogate the social protection of those unwilling to work (Polanyi, 2001). These thinkers had immense influence on the processes which brought about industrialization.1 The negation of (emotionally-driven) religious generosity, without which we would have no modern capitalism as we know it, reached its peak in the mid-19th century.

However, right before the decline of this hyper-rationalism, the Anglo-American wealthy strata experimented with a form of generosity that would be in line with the sway of the market. This experiment was interestingly contemporaneous with the beginnings of the welfare state in other capitalist countries such as Germany, and it provided a counterpoint that would be globally picked up only a century later. Back then, the experiment proved restricted and temporary, but it foreshadowed the neoliberalism of the late 20th century. In the 1870s and the 1880s, late Victorians moved away from the initial heartlessness of political economy. Reformers decided that the poor had a right to exist too. Yet, sufficiently infused with political economy, they could not go back to older Christianity’s spiritual respect for the poor. The charitable organizations springing up especially throughout the Anglo-Saxon world during these decades put an emphasis on transforming the poor. The right form of care would not only distinguish between the deserving and undeserving. It would take the seemingly most hopeless and undeserving and create good workers out of them (Himmelfard, 1991).

This led to an early version of (what theorists of neoliberalism would later call) ‘responsibilization’ (Rose, 1992): the deliverance of aid on the condition that the beneficiary remakes herself in the image of the ideal market agent. The trend is no longer restricted to the Anglo-Saxon world as it was in the late 19th century. Neoliberal charity is on the rise in contexts as diverse as Egypt (Atia, 2012), Turkey (Can, 2007), and Italy (Muehlebach, 2012). Islamist movements are leading actors in this transformation. In Egypt, there is a mushrooming of preachers who teach their audience that applying management science to one’s own life is as much a part of faith as prayer and fasting. They re-channel Islamic alms from hand-outs to the poor to ‘development’: the goal is no longer to ‘succor’ the poor, as in pre-modern times (Singer, 2002), but to transform them into entrepreneurs. While still mostly shrouded in the garb of selflessness, the self-serving (e.g. wealth-legitimizing) aspects of neoliberal generosity are less well-hidden than those of communitarian charity. In that sense, liberalism paradoxically allows sociologists to more lucidly discern the dialectic between self-making and selflessness (while monotheisms had, for millennia, carefully hidden the contradictions of caring for others).

Neoliberal generosity is not restricted to religious organizations. In fact, contemporary spirituality has spilled beyond the boundaries of such organizations, challenging both religion and secularism. What are the implications of this new spirituality for the self? Does the post-religious overemphasis on individual quests further sharpen the tensions between self and selflessness (and therefore create more opportunities for reflection and social transformation) or rather obliterate selflessness altogether?
Post-religious spirituality

Spirituality is an experience that allows one to get in touch with non-material aspects of being. It is the search for God, ultimate meaning, connection with the divine (or the universe/nature). This basic sense finds echoes in non-Western cultures as well, such as the distinction between maddi and manawi in Islam. The term, however, has gained a more distinctive meaning in the last decades of the 20th century (Fuller, 2001), especially in the United States (Roof, 1999). The frequently heard phrase, ‘I am spiritual, but not religious,’ has come to pit it in contrast to religiosity (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). To avoid terminological confusion, some scholars have distinguished religion-based spirituality from unchurched spirituality (rather than religion from spirituality as such) or sacred from secular spirituality (Moaddel and Karabenick, 2013). For the purposes of this article, I will resort to an overlapping distinction, that between ‘religion-based spirituality’ and ‘post-religious spirituality’ (to go beyond the ‘church’-related references of Christian culture and to recognize the pervasiveness of post-secular culture at a global scale).

Spirituality and benevolence

In religion-based spirituality, the connection between spirituality and charity is almost automatic (Fournier, 1990; Lowenberg, 1988; Wuthnow and Evans, 2002), if multidimensional. A religious individual’s search for meaning is inseparable from communion with other souls and efforts to save yet more souls. In both Christianity and Islam, helping the unbelievers, wayward souls, etc. is both a way to purify one’s own soul (and gain Godly rewards) and encourage others to lead more proper lives. Collective healing of the world’s suffering (‘tikkun’ in the Jewish tradition) is a core (though contested) part of one’s connection to God in all three versions of monotheism.

In post-religious spirituality, the bond between the search for meaning and helping the unfortunate is not as firmly established. In Fuller’s (2001), Roof’s (1999), and Wuthnow’s (1998) widely cited books on the issue, for instance, there is little reference to charity. When other-oriented behaviors come into the picture, they are along the lines of a ‘hands off’ political correctness (instead of hands on care). For instance, ‘seekers,’ along with ‘spiritual atheists,’ have a deep love for the world in the abstract, and might even embrace compassion in principle (Solomon, 2002; Palmisano and Pannofino, 2017: 141), but have no distinct theology of love of the poor, the sick, the elderly, and the disabled. Statistically speaking, the correlation between activism or volunteering (or care for others) and post-religious spirituality does not seem to be strong (see the survey results in Schnell and Keenan, 2013; and Wuthnow’s [1991] discussion of two surveys; but see Dillon and Wink, 2007).

Does this mean that caring for ‘distant’ others is inessential to post-religious spiritualities? The answer cannot be straightforward. Spiritual seekers’ so far restricted focus on charity introduces a challenge, but also opportunities for the re-imagination of care.

Why is such re-imagination necessary to begin with? There is a growing sense that charity and philanthropy are under-appreciated by contemporary religious institutions (Schervish, 2008). Despite their heavy investments in these activities, many of these
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Institutions have lost the spiritual, loving touch of authentic caritas. Some of these scholars seek the remedy to this ill in the proliferation of post-religious spiritualities (Dillon and Wink: chapter 9). While available statistics (and most qualitative studies) do not consistently support such investment in (post-religious) spiritual charity, some ethnographic studies raise the possibility that vigorously post-religious charitable practices have escaped the attention of scholars. In her study of an apparently non-religious charity, Bender (2003) has found out that people volunteer with a broad range of secular, spiritual, and religious motivations; these so thoroughly blend into each other that it would be impossible to sort them out as religious vs. post-religious through survey methods. Bender’s interlocutors exemplify how non-religious, extra-institutional, yet deeply spiritual narratives motivate charitable work.

In sum, incipient philosophical, theological, and ethnographic considerations suggest that post-religious spirituality might in the future be more integrated to charity and care. This integration is already in the making, counter-intuitively, in the bosom of cutting edge capitalism.

Post-religious spirituality, individualization, and ‘corporatization’ of faith

The relative post-religious disinterest in charity is linked to a broader issue: the murky relationship between (Western) unchurched spirituality and community. On the surface at least, seekers seem to be much more individualist (Dawson, 2011) than community-oriented. Paradoxically, however, what scholars have called the ‘corporate takeover of religion’ (Carrette and King, 2004) pushes the ultra-individualized seeker to engage with community; and the criticism of this takeover therefore opens up new possibilities for spiritual philanthropy.

There is indeed a constitutive relationship between unchurched, ‘seeker’ spirituality and individualization. Fuller (2001) argues that people do not usually pick new spiritualities and then become unchurched; rather, their alienation from organized religion (due to rational questioning, abuse by authorities, hypocrisy of congregants, or coming from an unobservant family) leave Americans unchurched. But living in an extremely materialistic universe (and influenced by the nation’s spiritual history), many keep on searching for the divine, rather than become secular (cf. Dillon and Wink, 2007: 207–208). This virtuous (or depending on viewpoint, vicious) cycle reinforces tendencies of individualization.

Unlike America’s more rooted religious traditions (e.g. see Bellah et al., 1985), the newer trends of spirituality do not have communitarianism built into them. Individualism is unshackled. Unchurched spiritualists’ freedom to choose the best elements of the world’s traditions appears to be a welcome antidote to (stereotypical) congregants’ blind adherence to just one; but, it runs the risk of collapsing into supermarket freedom. The individual freedom scholars so frequently praise usually comes with metaphors and similes that give away a quite non-spiritual existence: new age eclecticism, they tell us, is like shopping; Barnes & Noble (an American chain store that sells books and toys) is the new synagogue, where large sections on Eastern and new age religions extend ‘over
into either the management or leadership sections’ (Fuller, 2001: 155). The very framing scholars use to praise new spirituality (unwittingly) reinforces the latter’s critiques (who tend to find in it another expression of neoliberalism, i.e. of the broader cultural push to envision all facets of human behavior as variants of market, or management, behavior).

There is a growingly visible tension between this individualism and Eastern religions, especially as practitioners of Eastern faiths have started to voice frustrations with appropriations of their practices (Bell, 2002: 240; Fronsdal, 2002; Wallace, 2002: 37). The Eastern spiritualities (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, etc.) that American seekers heavily draw on promote self-consciousness, isolation, and awareness only as ways to reach deeper connections with the divine (and, in some versions, other fellow human beings).

In post-religious spiritualities, by contrast, connections with others is at best a secondary concern (Carrette and King, 2004: 156; but see Dillon and Wink, 2007). The Western incorporation of Hinduism and Buddhism tends to remove both the other-oriented and the world-denying versions of self-renunciation (Carrette and King, 2004: chapter 3). The dialectic of isolation-community building is marginalized in favor of a scientifically-motivated, therapeutic ‘individuation’ (Fuller, 2001: 138). Many seekers seem to be trapped in an unending ‘journey’ of individuation, which prevents them not only from forming community, but also from sustaining a deep connection with the divine.

Drawing on Fowler’s theory of the ‘stages of faith,’ Fuller (2001: 168–170) argues that most believers usually get stuck at the fourth stage (of loyal submission to community and authority), whereas seekers have definitively moved on to stage five (individual rebellion to established truth). However, (an unspecified) ‘large number’ have not progressed to the sixth stage of combining faith and reason, and transcending the dichotomy between individuation and community, remarks Fuller. In other words, even the favorable scholarship on post-religious spiritualities acknowledges (if in passing) the trap of one-dimensional individuation.

Even though scholars have not paid enough attention to this trap, the sociological factors that contribute to it are worth exploring. What kind of a social concatenation would encourage the elevation of the unchurched to Fowler’s sixth stage? Are there already signs that the seekers are moving beyond individualist spiritualities?

There is indeed a debate about whether post-religious spiritualities are bound to be stuck to a quest-driven individualism, as detractors have argued for a long time (Bellah et al., 1985 and especially their widely discussed condemnation of ‘Sheilaism’; Lambert, 1999: 307–323). Several commentators believe that post-religious spiritualities can result in an ‘expansive self’ that ultimately connects with others (Dillon and Wink, 2007; Schmidt, 2012; Solomon, 2002). Most vividly in Dillon and Wilk’s account (2007), solitude, focusing on the self, and even years of therapy are taken as possible routes to sustained generosity. However, the solidness of that route hinges on individuals’ psychological resilience (i.e. ‘hypersensitive’ narcissists do not ‘expand’ their selves in this way, according to their study). Even though the authors don’t pose it in these very terms, an unavoidable sociological question arises: can post-religious society develop (spiritually sensitive) patterns and (non-doctrinaire) institutions that would channel psychological growth along the lines cherished by Dillon and Wilk, rather than leaving
this development to the whim of individual strength? We can see spiritual charity as a possible venue through which an expansive self can be constructed in more sustainable ways, but there are reasons to be cautious about this possibility, due to another risk it exacerbates.

This related risk of post-religious spiritualities (which goes hand in hand with the ‘one-dimensional individualization trap’ discussed above) is an almost ‘natural’ link to the corporate world. The overlap between the management and spiritualities sections at hypermarket-style bookstores (noted approvingly by Fuller) is not accidental. Instead, it has a very instrumentalist flip side. Corporations have been actively promoting spirituality to boost efficiency. Some also integrate social responsibility and philanthropy with spirituality to further encourage employee commitment. Social and management sciences have also been supporting such efforts by pouring out studies on the effect of spiritual philanthropy on productivity and job performance (e.g. Ke et al., 2015; for a review see Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2004).

All of this finds concentrated expression in the confluence between post-religious spiritualities and the high-tech world. It should not be surprising that the San Francisco Bay Area has been at the forefront of both new spiritual currents and the boldest advances in tech-heavy capitalism. The icons of Silicon Valley (Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, Jeffrey Skoll, Mark Zuckerberg, etc.) have publicly vaunted their spiritual credentials, but this is not simply a matter of celebrity lifestyles. Companies of the Valley resort to heavy doses of meditation and Buddhism (along with cardiovascular exercise) to smooth out the rough edges of competitive life. Overworked, ambitious young people are put to treadmills, Yoga exercises, and meditation during their lunch breaks; and are further programmed for success and optimism through formal ‘mindfulness’ education and meditative retreats. Even fasting, a core practice of world religions, can be appropriated by Valley spirituality to allow employees to skip meals and work more; burn fat tissue instead of sugar to look more fit; and go beyond their individual selves and ‘connect’ with co-workers and the mission of their company. While spirituality is presumably post-materialist, high-tech culture actually marries spiritual techniques and chic, refined material concerns (cf Dawson, 2011): 21st-century high-tech materialism (now bolstered by meditation) promotes ‘fit’ sleekness and electric cars, to replace the crass materiality of the 1980s-type body builder and his fascination with monster trucks and large SUVs. Does such meditation and mindfulness make their practitioners more attuned to the earth and suffering, or simply more productive and materially superior to others?

To complicate matters further, the corporatization of giving might even go hand-in-hand (not with a bland version of individualization but) with community-building and political activism. As strange as it seems on the surface, corporate capitalism claims to offer a way out of the extremes of individual self-absorption. Some feminist activists and scholars, for example, emphasize that they share a vision with Ford and PEW, which are major corporate-linked donors. This shared vision boils down to perceiving spiritual philanthropy as one of the key routes to community-building and resolving inequity, poverty, and injustice (Hunt, 1999: 122–124).

Is it possible to disentangle the pro-corporation and anti-radical project of Pew Charitable Funds from its community-generating thrust documented by these scholars? What to make of Ford, its overall history, and its contemporary funding of critical and
progressive social science? While the multiple (and contradictory) potentials these organizations cultivate should be tackled by future research, there are two paradigmatic cases of spiritual philanthropy that breed individualization in a more straightforward fashion.

**Spiritual philanthropy and responsibilization**

Two (connected) household names exemplify contemporary American spiritual giving: Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey. The former’s primary significance is the resources at his command; the latter’s, her power to define public culture. Together, they have been transforming (especially) education.

Gates Foundation (the largest charity in the US) is the forerunner of ‘new spirituality’-driven philanthropy. Although a member of the Catholic Church, Melinda Gates emphasizes the faith-driven, but also multi-religious, ecumenical nature of their giving. The Gates partner with multiple religious organizations ranging from Lutherans and Catholics to the explicitly ‘responsibilizing’ Salvation Army. Bill Gates points out that their philanthropy is not based on any specific faith tradition: ‘It doesn’t relate to any particular religion; it’s about human dignity and equality. . . The golden rule that all lives have equal value and we should treat people as we would like to be treated.’ However, the Gates do not uphold any elaborate version of seeker spirituality; they rather put post-religious spirituality into practice, by referring to philanthropy as ‘God’s work,’ yet denying any basis in a certain dogma (see below for strong parallels to trends in Egyptian benevolence). The dichotomy in some of the literature between religious spirituality and non-religious spirituality does not work in the case of the Gates, since their philanthropy (spiritual; not religious in the doctrinaire sense; and ‘neo-ecumenical’ in the sense that it provides through both secular and religious institutions built by multiple faith traditions) is located in the gray area between the two (cf. Schervish, 2008). Gates’ funding of public education is a textbook example of responsibilization. The aid is completely conditional on teachers’ test performances and geared towards weeding out teachers who cannot produce high test results among their students.

Another frontrunner in spiritual philanthropy is Oprah Winfrey. While she cannot compete with the Gates in terms of the amount of giving, her integration of responsibilizing logic and spirituality is even more upfront, partially due to its mass media-driven nature. Oprah Winfrey explicitly invites her beneficiaries (and the poor in general) not to blame structural factors, but only themselves, if they cannot succeed. Her open embrace of this (‘neoliberal’) logic is bolstered by a parade of therapeutic and spiritual experts who frequent her show and emphasize faith-guided self-help and personal responsibility (Peck, 2011). Unlike more traditional charities that help large numbers of people in small and basic ways, Winfrey’s schools in Africa select a few talented students and cultivate them in schools equipped with not only science and math, but beauty parlors and (predictably) Yoga studios (Peck, 2011: 90–91). Yoga and meditation have become an almost inseparable part of spiritually-guided generosity. Oprah Winfrey also systematically collaborates with the Gates to transform American education.
The meager diffusion of post-religious philanthropy in the Middle East

Although concentrated in the Anglo-Saxon world (and particularly the United States), post-religiously spiritual philanthropy is by no means an exclusively ‘Western’ phenomenon. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the theological underpinnings of (apparently secular) aid throughout the globe (Barnett and Stein, 2012: 16–28; Fassin, 2012 [2010]: 248–251). However, factors that induce post-religious philanthropy in America and elsewhere, and the main characteristics of the underlying spirituality, are not identical (despite overlaps). Discussion of non-Western spiritual philanthropy can contribute to the ongoing search for more context-specific theorizations of spirituality, and the way it interacts with religious traditions (Morris, 2016) and secular dynamics (Palmisano and Pannofino, 2017).

I will take Egypt as an example, which makes a methodological note necessary. By no means ‘representative’ of the Middle East, Egypt is an indicative case, given that its religious movements have been trendsetters in the region. The Egyptian case shows the increasing prevalence of post-religious-benevolent tendencies in the least likely places on the globe, but demonstrates their limits as well. I carried out extensive fieldwork in Egypt to probe into Islam-inspired generosity, but along the way I also came upon post-religious dynamics. The interviews quoted below are from this larger study of charitable organizations in (Turkey and) Egypt, for which 130 people were interviewed in depth.

Whereas American individualization is both an entrenched aspect of the broader culture (and is further reinforced by alienation from ‘organized religion’), in Egypt, post-religious spirituality is a result of political repression of religious groups (as much as religious alienation). Despite stereotypes regarding the Middle East, this repression is not always ‘secular.’ Religiously-tinged regimes and leaders (such as the so-called ‘believer president’ Anwar Sadat) are among the main agents of repression. Repression severs many believers from their religious organizations (about which many harbor grievances to begin with).

As important to notice is that, unlike American faith, Middle Eastern Islam is not organized around (American-style) congregations. This raises methodological difficulties. The universality of the sociological concept ‘church’ is already questionable due to the stark differences between the organization of (say) Vatican and American Protestant denominations. But it is even more difficult to export this concept (the definition of which is so core to recent debates about spirituality) to the Middle East. The relatively more dispersed, yet (in the case of Sunni traditions) relatively standardized patterns of organized religiosity render comparison (between ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ practices) more challenging. In Middle Eastern Islam, many believers simply follow their neighborhood imam, relatives, and state education in learning and practicing their faith. Many others fuse these with a faith cultivated by now legal, now clandestine, and mostly semi-legal organizations that combine religion, social service, and politics in fluctuating doses.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the exemplar of such organizations. Over seven decades, different regimes have coalesced with it against common enemies. (The enemy was British imperialism in the case of Nasser; communism and Nasserists in the case of Sadat and Mubarak). The same regimes have intermittently repressed the Brotherhood.
The occasionally extreme risk of facing these waves of repression, as much as the Brotherhood’s expectations of tight discipline and submission, have pushed many away from this organization.

Especially in the 1990s, a young generation of believers repudiated Islamist politics, but retained their spirituality and social service sensibilities. Many of them cannot be characterized as post-religious in the American sense, since they have established Islamic preaching networks along with philanthropies (e.g. see the ‘cool preachers in jeans’ analyzed by Atia, 2012). Yet others (who can be called ‘post-religious’ with some caveats) have sidelined preaching in their work and dramatically reduced the centrality of communion.

Even these post-religious Egyptians, however, are partially different from American seekers: they are not in search of other religions they can mix and match with their faith of origin. Like American seekers, though, they are open to working under the same charitable roof with practitioners of other faiths (or unbelievers). As importantly, some among them link their benevolence (not necessarily to Islam as such) but to broader, ‘humanistic’ motivations. Their vocabulary resonates with that of the Gates Foundation (rather than with either the Muslim Brotherhood or their ‘cool’ competitors).

The top leaders of Egyptian post-religious charities and philanthropies are still inspired by (orthodox Sunni) faith. Yet, among middle-level staff and administration, there are many people who are inspired just by ‘humanity’ and ‘spirituality.’ In what is arguably the strongest post-religious charity in Egypt (which mobilizes around 100,000 volunteers every year), ‘love of God’ fuses the top administration and much of the staff. However, there are some administrators who take a different line, and are welcomed in the organization. A woman in her 20s, a 2008 graduate of a prestigious public university, insisted that it was incumbent on every human being to do volunteer work, regardless of religion: ‘[Our] association has no relation to religion. We don’t talk about religion. We do good works for the sake of good works. This is a humanistic issue (mawduʿ insani), not Islamic or Christian. . . . The idea of service is not religious. . . . But I can’t deny that spirituality (rawhaniyyat) is involved.’ These administrators could openly discuss their post-religious take on the organization’s mission in the presence of more religiously oriented administrators.

Another large organization combined aspects of spirituality and responsibilization. Self-reliance and civilizing people were the key words for this association. Managers (practicing Muslims, whose generosity was inspired by their individual religiosity) emphasized that they not only gave goods but taught people how to work and make profit (along the lines of Salvation Army-type organizations). A staff member, a lawyer in his 50s, drew attention to pragmatic as well as humanistic motivations. Even though he got the staff position because he needed extra income, his reasons for sticking to it were more complex. He would get paid more at a non-charitable job. Also, he had a private office and could demand the market rate for his charitable services. The reason why he stayed at this association as a paid staff member was the willingness to help others, due to his ‘human side’ (ganb insani). He argued that religion was not one of the factors that motivated him to do charity (despite my different ways of formulating and repeating a question regarding religious motivation and its link to generosity). The founders of the organization too (though themselves religious) pointed out that theirs was a non-religious (la-dini) organization.
Staff at a smaller (but financially strong and politically well-connected) philanthropy used a spiritually rich language to talk about their service, with no reference to (textual) religion. This particular organization was explicitly modeled on American practices and sensibilities. A staff member told me she had a ‘blessed career.’ The donors were also blessed, she insisted. Her experiences exemplified the benefits of a spiritual path: ‘When I started to work in aid, I found it very blessing. You get paid to do something that benefits others. . . . When I was working for an international company with a salary three times as high as my current salary, many bad things happened to me. Ultimately, I had a terrible car accident and my luxurious car was trashed. Now, I earn less, but I also lose less. With God’s blessings, this is a more lucrative activity. . . . This is baraka [God’s blessed abundance].’ She added that benevolence also taught her how to use her earnings more properly. This was a common theme especially among my women interviewees, both religious and relatively post-religious ones: Working for charities taught them how to discipline their family’s finances.

Post-religious sensibilities were not restricted to the individuals: they shaped the way the organization operated. Both English and Arabic allowed the association to blend spirituality with business. The words blessing and baraka saturated everyday life. The association cooperated with banks to put the phrase ‘shop and be blessed’ (in English) on credit cards. When consumers (most of them Egyptians) shopped with these cards, a certain percentage of their spending went directly to charity (a technique promoted by Oprah Winfrey, among other spiritual philanthropists, and viciously attacked by critics of philanthropy).

In short, a spiritual experience of generosity’s significance rendered explicitly Qur’anic references and religious authorities spurious or secondary. At least, they were mixed in with other (non-Qur’anic) cultural elements. Blessing (in English), baraka (in Arabic), one’s own life moments (e.g. accidents) and path (disciplining one’s spending through techniques learned at a benevolent organization) all reinforced the stability and lucrativeness of careers (and, beyond the walls of the organization, the meaningfulness of shopping). Nevertheless, such full spiritual neoliberalization does not shape all ‘post-religious’ Islamic contexts. As Morris (2016: 391) has shown, (some) Islamic Sufi practices in Britain focus on internal and subjective experiences, just like postmodern spirituality. However, they do not breed ‘detached individualization.’ Further research is needed to gauge the relative prevalence of such in-between practices (when compared to fully neoliberal ones).

**Conclusion**

The debate regarding the link between ‘seeker’ individualism and spirituality (and their contribution to neoliberalism) is inconclusive. Perhaps new spirituality is just a further deepening of (and for the non-West, further adaptation to) Western liberalism (with its emphasis on the inner self and personal quest); but perhaps it is something more (cf Heelas, 2008: 14–15, 128–136, 176, 202–206; Morris, 2016: 401). We can tentatively say that there are trends that point to the possibility of an entirely novel understanding of the self (that goes beyond liberalism, while incorporating the latter’s criticism of non-liberal notions of the self). Yet, these trends mostly remain in the shadows of neoliberalism.
Coming to terms with the dynamics that restrict such trends requires a synthesis of contending theorizations regarding new spiritualities’ individualist (vs. critical and anti-systemic) dimensions (Dawson, 2011). This article points out that spiritualized generosity offers a venue through which we can think more systematically about the dialectic of self and selflessness.

We have seen that post-religious spirituality can (even though it does not always) spur charity, philanthropy, and activism. However, the strongest trends in these directions adapt a philosophy of generosity that risks isolating individuals further and/or making them dependent on market forces or corporations (even while simultaneously rendering them autonomous from other social forces). Are there promising, sustainable, and practical new spiritualities out there that not only escape late liberalism’s grip, but offer alternative modes of being in the world, self-making, and caring . . . which can ultimately replace liberal ways of understanding and reproducing the self? That, I venture to say, is one of the urgent research questions to be raised and answered.

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Notes
1. Townsend, who defended that starvation was the natural method by which people would be forced to work (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 118–120), was the most extreme proponent of this anti-charitable dogma.
2. Earlier sociology of religion did not systematically differentiate between spirituality and religion. For instance, Luckmann’s (1967) book on the privatization of religion treats ‘ultimate significance’ as an essential part of religion, which allows him to argue that religiosity persists despite the unchurching of the West. However, the more recent literature treats the ‘church’ (in the sense of institutionalized belief and conduct) as a necessary part of the definition of religion, and assigns ultimate meaning to the realm of spirituality. In this sense of the term, spirituality still pervades mainstream and non-mainstreams churches, but is increasingly cultivated in unchurched settings.
3. This sense of the term emerged in the 17th century, but there are (Greek, Christian, and Judaic) precursors in the preceding millennia, which do not completely match the current use of the term (McGinn et al., 1985; Principe, 1983; Raitt, 1988).
4. As Fuller (2001) emphasizes, the newer, ‘American’ sense of the term has been in the making ever since colonial times. Other early modern contexts, such as France from the 1830s onwards, also witnessed non-religious spirituality, albeit with much less individualist characteristics (Sharp, 2006).
5. About 20 percent of Americans are ‘spiritual, but not religious,’ while another 10 percent are in-between the churched and the unchurched (in contrast to 6–15 percent who are secular)
(Fuller, 2001; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). These numbers have been contested (Marler and Hadaway, 2002), and they have been fluctuating.

6. Even though most of the literature presents this as a dichotomy (e.g. Fuller, 2001 for religion-based spirituality vs. unchurched spirituality; Spohn, 2003 for Christian spirituality vs. the new spirituality; also see Wuthnow, 1998 and Roof, 1999), some scholars (e.g. Schervish, 2008) use the word ‘spirituality’ in a more nebulous way (to include the churched and unchurched). Moreover, even when expressed outside the boundaries of religious institutions, spirituality still relies frequently on structures and language of religions (Bender, 2010; Morris, 2016). Sociologists have also pointed out that the ‘folk wisdom’ that contrasts religion and spirituality should be questioned, since communities and experts have an important hand in the constitution of (the allegedly individualistic) unchurched spirituality (Morris, 2016; Wood, 2009).

7. While there are parallels between the (20th century Middle Eastern) secular spiritualities and Islamic modernisms that Moaddel and Karabenick (2013) have documented on the one hand; and the ‘unchurched’ spiritualities that contemporary American scholars explore on the other; the ‘effusive quest culture’ (Roof, 1999), neo-ecumenical eclecticism and choice-centeredness of the latter are mostly absent in the former. Here, I focus on individualist and religion-infused spirituality (like America-focused scholars, and unlike Moaddel and Karabenenick), but seek to explore its implications beyond ‘churched’ contexts, which requires a different binary than the ones mentioned above. When discussing Anglo-American contexts, I still occasionally use the concept ‘unchurched.’

8. Nevertheless, for inconclusive debate regarding correlations between giving and religiosity, see Lim and MacGregor (2012), Ruiter and De Graaf (2006), and Wilson (2000).

9. This difficult-to-define (but widely used) term roughly means a person who desires to experience spirituality as a privatized journey, throughout which s/he combines elements of various faith traditions.

10. For an attempt to claim Pauline divine love (‘charity’) for atheist spirituality, see Comte-Sponville (2007).

11. See (Tuğal, 2016) for the significance of *caritas* for historical Christianity; and for Catholic attempts (including the social gospel) to reinvigorate the social teachings of the Church along the lines of this concept.

12. Non-religious spiritualities of other geographies and eras (e.g. African spirituality, fascist spirituality, Arab nationalist spirituality) establish tight links between the self and others (du Toit, 2006; Moaddel and Karabenick, 2013).

13. Based on the research of Paul Heelas (2008), however, one could argue that self-oriented spirituality is counterbalanced more strongly by community-building ones in the British case when compared to the US.

14. Moaddel and Karabenick (2013) generalize this line of thinking further by pointing out that any major suffering that spills beyond established religions’ theodicy frameworks pushes people to secularize their worldviews.

15. Yet, it would be dangerous to fall back on overgeneralizations regarding ‘Eastern’ spiritualities too. For instance, there was indeed an authentic convergence between mid-20th century American countercultures and individualist aspects of Zen (Seager, 2002: 110).

16. Nevertheless, even in its beginnings, the importation of Buddhism came with tensions. The influential co-founders of the Insight Meditation Society emphasized contrasting implications of Buddhist retreat: while Goldstein saw it as an individual matter, Kornfield (occasionally) emphasized its interpersonal aspects (Fronsdal, 2002: 288–289). Yet, it was the more individuating interpretation that predominated in the longer run.

17. However, there are strong countercurrents in the West. See especially Western authors who have contributed to ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ (Queen, 2002). Still, even this kind of
Western Buddhism’s strong urge to bypass immediate help to and love of the poor (and move quickly on to more abstract causes) should also be noted.

18. Carrette and King (2004) highlight the centrality of ‘psy’ disciplines and thought to the individualization of spirituality and analyze its historical evolution, which has culminated in Maslow’s direct connection between company efficiency and individualized spirituality.

19. However, notice that even in some of these texts, ‘solitude’ weighs more heavily than community and interdependence. Activism (more than charity, compassion, and caring in general) is usually upheld as the path to connection with others (see especially Schmidt, 2005).

20. This therapeutic approach to spirituality resonates with Western Buddhists’ belief that caring for others will automatically follow from insightful meditation (for a summary of theological discussions in America, see Fronsdal, 2002: esp. 298–299). See the statistical and other studies I cite above, which cast a doubt on this conviction.

21. While not as globally famous as the other figures mentioned here, Skoll is the first president of eBay, and a major philanthropist.


24. PEW is one of the largest charitable foundations in the US. Details regarding PEW’s role in undermining radicalism (and especially, channeling green movements in a pro-corporation direction) can be found here: http://www.wrongkindofgreen.org/tag/pew-charitable-trusts/

25. Not all corporate involvement in spirituality is necessarily instrumental. In order to allow us appreciate how businesses can indeed be morally responsible, Carrette and King (2004: 127–132) differentiate between ‘capitalist spirituality’ (instrumentalization of faith) and spiritual ‘business ethics,’ while also pointing out that the latter usually devolves into the former.

26. Even though they have raised their child as a Catholic, Bill Gates himself refrains from belonging in a faith tradition, though he believes in God. See: https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/bill-gates-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140313


28. See: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/bill-gates/9812672/bill-gates-interview-I-have-no-use-for-money.-this-is-gods-work.html

29. There is ample evidence of tight links between spirituality and generosity in the research on transnational aid. Unfortunately, religious and post-religious (or churched and unchurched, etc.) spirituality are not neatly separated out from each other in much of the literature. For an overview, see Walker et al. (2012).

30. For further methodological details, see Tuğal (2017). Due to the religion-focused nature of this study, my spirituality-related arguments based on it are provisional. Further research is necessary to corroborate these findings.

31. Elsewhere, I have analyzed broader (global-Islamic) factors that induce a shift from religious charity to philanthropies that de-emphasize creed (Tuğal, 2017). However, most of these philanthropies harbor (seemingly) depoliticized religion, rather than promote post-religious spirituality.

32. I am using ‘post-religious’ in the Egyptian context with different implications than Asef Bayat. For Bayat, all believers who have repudiated Islamism can be grouped under the umbrella term ‘post-Islamist.’ While helpful in some other regards, Bayat’s concept does not differentiate between Islamic preaching-oriented non-Islamist believers and the ones I analyze below.

33. I avoid revealing the names of Egyptian organizations (except the paradigmatic Brotherhood) due to security concerns.
34. Unlike the two interviewees quoted previously (who spoke exclusively in Arabic), this person intermixed English and Arabic, and the phrased ‘blessed career’ was uttered in English.
35. See Žižek (2010). For a critical evaluation of such criticism, see Tuğal (2016).

References


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