
The Rise of Eastern Spirituality in the West: A Study of Factors Contributing to Its Development

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Abstract

This article explores the factors affecting the rise of Eastern spirituality in the West, post-Second World War, including psychologization, countercultural, and non-religious spirituality, as well as the confluence of the New Age Movements, which began gradually at the end of the 19th century and expanded significantly in the mid-20th century. It also examines the cultural environment in the West during that time that contributed to this growing interest in Eastern spiritual traditions. As we know, humans are not content with simply living their lives; they want to understand the meaning and purpose of their existence, which involves the intellect, psychology, and environmental changes around them. In the Western case, psychological development played a key role in spiritual and mystical attraction, leading to non-religious spirituality. It finally became the cause of its tendency toward Eastern spirituality.

Keywords: Psychologization of Religion, Countercultural Spirituality, Non-Religious Spirituality, New-Age Movement, and Eastern Spirituality

Background

The background of Eastern spiritualism in the West is a complex tapestry woven from numerous interconnected elements. Approximately more than a century ago, the Western world became acquainted with the spiritual teachings of the East and attempted to comprehend them. Many of these teachings differed significantly from the belief systems of the three traditions native to the West: Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant), humanism, and broadly, esotericism. One significant aspect is the global cultural and political shift that emerged in the 20th century, which fostered a greater openness and curiosity toward Eastern philosophies and practices, particularly as Western societies began questioning traditional religious frameworks.

During the 1950s and 1980s, the word spirituality was progressively employed to mention the life and work of certain personalities in the history of religion. This sent back the growth of plans about spirituality in

American humanistic psychology, which also sketched Asian philosophical traditions. The belief in spirituality wrapped with a discourse of mysticism until the late 1980s, but references to the spiritual have increasingly replaced the idea of mysticism. Spirituality and mysticism also went through psychologisation, and the former emerged as preferable in designating a de-traditionalized and this-worldly phenomenon in Western society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The New Age movement has also significantly influenced the Western embrace of Eastern spirituality; with its eclectic blend of various spiritual traditions, the New Age movement has reflected a growing fascination with concepts such as meditation, yoga, and alternative healing practices derived from Eastern philosophies.¹

After the 1950s power disturbance, Americans seemed to retreat into self-interest, leaving people with no hope of improving their lives in any way that mattered, and they convinced themselves that it was assumed that psychological self-improvement was essential. Because of this, the shift toward personal fulfillment and spiritual growth reflects a broader social trend centered on communicating with their emotions and immersing themselves in Eastern wisdom. Where individuals sought refuge from external challenges and turned inward, pursuing activities that gave them a sense of well-being and purpose, an essential aspect of this change was the emergence of New Age thinking, which differed significantly from traditional religious and philosophical views. The 1960s global landscape witnessed a significant cultural and political transformation characterized by the rise of spirituality. This phenomenon represented an effort to influence the cultural sphere historically associated with religious institutions, thereby indicating a notable shift in the traditional paradigm.²

The decline of institutional religion can be seen as a departure from conventional Western-organized religious practices and beliefs. This tendency often involves moving toward individual spirituality, personal interpretation of faith, and questioning established religious institutions. As a result, people begin to transcend the boundaries of thought and explore spirituality in a more personal and selective way. Also, the Age of Enlightenment saw the development of liberal principles to challenge the traditional authority of the Church and establish a social and political structure that would prevent the religious conflicts of the past. As part of this movement, philosophers recommended confining religion to the private realm of life to isolate it from the public domain of politics, science, and philosophy.³ Contemporary social theorists have yet to fully recognize that this process is connected with the global spread of capitalism. These

trends were often described as the privatization of religion: to achieve this, religious discourse was excluded from the people's political arena, economic aspect, and scientific evolution, emphasizing individual choices, reliance, and personal states of mind. Philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant have already suggested limiting religion to a specific realm to prevent conflicts and intolerance that arise from different religious ideologies in Western societies.⁴

It is often recognized that religion has lost its social authority since the Enlightenment due to the rise of scientific rationalism, humanism, and modern democratic nation-states, known as secularisation. It is also perceived in some scholarly corners that many individuals during the decade of 1960s began to lose faith in conventional institutions and sought alternative methods to connect with spirituality and self-understanding. This shift was part of broader cultural and political movements to challenge existing power structures to promote individual freedom and independence. Also, the New Age thinking resonated with the counterculture of the 1960s and provided a means for people to find purpose and fulfillment outside traditional religious beliefs.

Psychologization of Religion

Since the advent of modern psychology in the 1870s, with the contributions of Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) and William James (1842-1910), there has been a gradual process of integrating psychological perspectives into the Western understanding of human experience. Before the advent of psychology, conceptions of the self were not exclusively governed by scientific measurements or notions of a fixed essence. Instead, the self was shaped by philosophical contemplation and what would now be described as spiritual forms of self-analysis.⁵ William James, Gordon Allport (1897-1967), and Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) were instrumental in the historical development of spirituality. Around 1950, the term spirituality began to gain widespread popularity in Western culture, coinciding with the post-war economic and political climate that facilitated the rise of modern consumerist lifestyles and allowed the term to acquire new meanings. In 1950, Gordon Allport proposed privatizing religion and aimed to cultivate a positive religious sentiment by rejecting institutional religion and promoting a subjective religious attitude. Allport's goal was to gradually diminish traditional religious institutions and replace them with a more personal, mature, and healthy form of religion. He used psychology to justify this shift, portraying it as a scientifically backed approach to individual well-being and maturity. This privatization of religion transferred the influence from religious institutions to psychological and societal forces. Allport's ideas contributed to the emergence of a more

individualistic and consumer-driven form of spirituality. Abraham Maslow introduced new terminology for religious experiences, separating them from traditional spiritual contexts. His ideas have contributed to the perception of spirituality as a secular rather than a primarily religious phenomenon. Maslow reinforced the private, intense model of religious expression that James had developed fifty years earlier. This self-centered spirituality was part of a broader process of shifting the social ideals of religion into the internalized world of the self, which is referred to as the psychologizing of religion.⁶

Counter-cultural Spirituality

The countercultural spirituality of the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by a widespread rejection of mainstream social norms and a search for alternative forms of religious and spiritual expression. This period witnessed the emergence of new religious movements and spiritual practices, alongside an increasing interest in Eastern religions, meditation, and Sufism.⁷ During this time, many young people sought to break free from traditional religious institutions and explore more experiential and personal forms of spirituality. This led to a renewed curiosity in exercises such as yoga, transcendental meditation, and the use of psychological sciences as a means of spiritual exploration.⁸

In the West during the 1960s, a significant shift towards self-spirituality was marked by a growing interest in personal introspection and the pursuit of individual spiritual paths. This era emphasized self-discovery, self-expression, and spiritual fulfillment through personal experiences and inner journeys. Similarly, the 1970s also witnessed a rise in environmental and social activism rooted in spiritual philosophies, emphasizing a holistic approach to living and a deeper relationship with nature. This period laid the foundation for a diverse and collective spiritual landscape shaped by the spirit of rebellion and the quest for individual and collective transformation.⁹

Non-Religious Spirituality in the West

The growingly non-religious perception of spirituality emerged with the establishment of psychology as the foremost science of the self in the post-war period. This has led to a change in many traditions, including established Western ones such as Christianity, by de-mythologizing them and moving away from the older cosmological and disciplinary language of the past, replacing it with the internalized and psychologically transformed language of spirituality. It became popular in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of humanistic psychology. Having been cast as a private and psychological phenomenon, spirituality underwent a second major shift in the 1980s.¹⁰

Non-religious spirituality in the West was a growing trend in which individuals sought meaning, purpose, and connection outside traditional religious frameworks. This spirituality often emphasized personal growth, mindfulness, and interconnectedness with the natural world. Non-religious spiritual practices included meditation, nature walks, yoga, and other activities to cultivate inner peace and harmony. Many people who identified with non-religious spirituality were drawn to concepts such as humanism, secular ethics, and universal interconnectedness, seeking to develop a sense of spirituality rooted in personal experience and exploring existential questions. This trend reflected a broader shift in Western society towards more individualized and eclectic approaches to spirituality outside the confines of organized religion.¹¹

The role of religion in shaping Western societies has been a central focus of religious studies for over a century. However, in recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on a concept known as spirituality. Studies have shown a rising preference among people to identify as spiritual rather than religious. This shift in terminology reflects an increasing interest in exploring personal beliefs and experiences beyond traditional religious institutions.¹²

Hindu Gurus have emphasized that Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion and does not seek to convert individuals to an exclusive sect or creed. This outlook was intended to alleviate any concerns. According to the Gurus, recognizing this principle's spiritual aspirations and ultimate purpose did not entail substituting Christianity for Hinduism. Instead, it was about discovering a broader and more profound understanding of Christianity.¹³

Spirituality is a broad concept that encompasses William James's ideas for defining religion. In his renowned work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James described spirituality as "the attempt to be in harmony with an unseen order of things," a definition that applies to everyone, regardless of their spiritual beliefs. As a self-professed Christian, the cited author believes in a Higher Power behind the visible order of things and sees this power as actively desiring harmony with humanity. Some individuals also consider themselves a combination of both.¹⁴

In 2008, the United Churches of Religious Science, one of two national Science of Mind organizations, changed its name to the United Centers for Spiritual Living. The decision to change the name was driven by the organization's core constituency, which preferred the language of pluralism over that of dogmatic religion. This shift reflects a trend fueled by New Age thought, signaling a move towards a more inclusive and spiritually diverse approach.¹⁵

New Age Movement's reflection

The New Age Movement was a multifaceted spiritual and social movement that emerged in the Western world during the 1970s and 1980s. It included a wide range of beliefs and practices often characterized by a holistic approach to spirituality, an emphasis on personal growth and self-discovery, and a focus on alternative healing modalities. It gained appeal by offering solutions to the pervasive feelings of instability and a loss of certainty that characterized the era. It represented a departure from the established orders of modernity, providing a different perspective on spirituality, self-discovery, and interconnectedness. New Age movements included New Religious Movements, a collection of religious groups and spiritual movements that emerged during the latter half of the 20th century. These movements were characterized by their innovative and diverse beliefs, practices, and organizational structures. During the 1980s, there was a significant shift in global consciousness as humankind entered a new age. The world experienced the emergence of new societal norms, laws, and logic to which individuals and communities had to adapt; this period marked a transformative era in which people were compelled to adjust to the changing dynamics of the world around them. The New Age movement was for those who believed that modernity was in crisis. New Agers were concerned with what was happening to this planet. They wanted liberation from institutional order, as many theorists have sketched modernity as an iron cage.¹⁶

The three basic elements of the new age were essential to understanding its philosophy. The first element considered the discrepancy between what life was and what it should be. This involved questioning the nature of existence and how it aligns with the beliefs about an ideal life. The second element revolved around pursuing perfection, which involved improving oneself, one's surroundings, and experiences. This pursuit could take various forms, such as personal development, spiritual growth, or the quest for a social ideal place. The third element involved the search for salvation, a fundamental aspect of many spiritual traditions often interpreted as the ultimate liberation from suffering or attaining a higher state of being. These three elements collectively formed the foundation of New Age philosophy. They guided individuals toward a deeper understanding of life, the pursuit of improvement, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment. The New Age Movement encompassed diverse beliefs and practices often characterized by a holistic approach to spirituality. This Movement departed from traditional religious and spiritual paradigms, seeking to integrate elements of Eastern and Western spirituality, as well as ancient and modern beliefs. It emphasized the

interconnectedness of all living things, the power of the individual to create their reality, and the idea that spiritual truth was subjective and could be found through personal experience. One of the central tenets of the New Age Movement was the belief in humanity's imminent spiritual transformation. This transformation was thought to usher in a new era of peace, harmony, and enlightenment. Followers of New Age philosophy were not bound by the traditional duties, commandments, and moral codes associated with theistic religiosity. They emphasized self-exploration, spiritual growth, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. This philosophy often incorporated various beliefs and practices, drawing inspiration from different spiritual, religious traditions, modern psychology, and science. According to the author of *New Age Movements*, Eastern spirituality has a rich history that dates back centuries, with some sources even tracing its roots to the pre-Christian era. However, in recent times, Eastern spirituality has profoundly influenced the West. This influence is characterized by practical vigor and the introduction of healing practices that have resonated deeply with Western audiences. The current manifestation of Eastern spirituality in the West centers on the pursuit of self-spirituality. This trend highlighted the growing importance of personal spiritual journeys and the impact of Eastern philosophies and practices in Western society. New Agers are often drawn to ancient civilizations in their search for spiritual inspiration.¹⁷

Initiation of Indian Spirituality in the West

The exchange of ideas from East to West originated with the ancient Greeks. Still, it gained momentum in the early nineteenth century when British scholars produced the first English translations of India's sacred texts. These translations made their way to America, where thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) were influenced by Indian philosophy. This influence slowly spread, gaining momentum in the late 1960s due to mass communication, social unrest, and increased travel. The unique aspect was the impact of global communications and new technologies¹⁸. This period has seen a growing interest in Indian spirituality among Americans, with many embracing Eastern philosophy, meditation, yoga, and other spiritual practices. This cultural exchange between East and West led to the emergence of Hindu-inspired meditation movements (HIMMs) and contributed to the development of a new religious consciousness. Meditation continued to gain popularity in the Western world over time, sparking interest in various philosophical aspects of Eastern thought. While only a small number of Americans have been drawn to India's mythology and religious traditions, the system of Vedanta

and the mental and physical practices of yoga have significantly appealed to Westerners.¹⁹

Americans are known for their ambitious outlook on life while also being pragmatic in their approach. They aim high, but they also value what works. Ancient religious teachings encouraged individuals to explore and test truths to see what resonates with them. Many seeking personal growth and fulfillment were drawn to the wisdom of Eastern spiritual traditions, which presented possibilities for transformation and transcendence. Those initially attracted to Vedanta-Yoga often cited its promised tangible spiritual and psychological benefits. Countless memoirs, research papers, and self-help manuals have documented how Eastern practices have enhanced the lives of those who follow them. These practices were experience-oriented rather than belief-oriented, and the Guru practitioners claimed that their services were for people of diverse faiths or no faith at all. For decades, advocates have effectively communicated Vedantic ideas, sometimes to persuade, sometimes to explain, and sometimes without any specific agenda or reference to Indian culture. As a result, millions of Americans have been strongly influenced by Vedanta-Yoga, often without realizing it. When questioned about their religious and spiritual beliefs, many expressed ideas reminiscent of Vedanta. Although they might not always be aware of the source, the influence could often be traced back to various sources such as a book, a teacher, a friend or family member, a therapist, a religious leader, or a health professional. The influencers might not have used explicitly religious language, but instead employed scholarly, scientific, or therapeutic terminology, or a generic, religiously neutral discourse that has emerged in response to religious pluralism. The line of influence could typically be traced back to an Eastern origin.²⁰

In the early 20th century, Harvard and Yale created professorships in Sanskrit. Indologists were crafting textbooks and translations, infusing new Indian flavors into the evolving New Thought movement. Those drawn to New Thought became the primary audience for gurus seeking to expand their influence from India to the West.²¹ And the Transcendental Meditation Movement resonated with practical-minded Americans seeking spirituality. Vivekananda and Yogananda first introduced it, and later advanced by Mahesh Yogi, who claimed to employ scientific language to elucidate spiritual practices for an audience with a scientific mindset, seeking validation from scientists to bolster the presentation of Transcendental Meditation in the American landscape. In the early 1970s, Transcendental Meditation practitioners approached Dr. Herbert Benson, a physician affiliated with Harvard University in Boston, offering to participate in experiments measuring their physiological changes during

deep meditation. In 1975, Benson's influential works simplified and communicated his research findings, which suggested that meditation can induce a state of decreased metabolism, termed a hypometabolic state, leading to profound relaxation and other biomedical benefits.²²

Indian gurus travelled to the West

Influential figures such as Vivekananda, Yogananda, and Mahesh Yogi introduced Indian spirituality to the United States. These spiritual leaders effectively conveyed the principles of Indian spirituality to the scientifically minded American audience by framing them in scientific language. This approach bridged the gap between spiritual practices and the prevailing rational, empirical worldview in the United States, fostering understanding and acceptance among a demographic that may have initially been distant from such practices. Their efforts played a crucial role in planting the seeds of Indian spirituality in the United States, paving the way for its integration into the country's cultural and spiritual fabric. In Indian culture, spirituality is highly valued and often compared to Western knowledge, usually described as the science of facts. At the same time, spirituality is considered the science of the soul, a uniquely Indian science that focuses on inner transformation and the exploration of consciousness.²³

Western adoption of yoga

Yoga is an Eastern holistic practice that typically refers to a collection of methodologies aimed at achieving spiritual transformation and culminating in the union of the individual and the divine. It encompasses physical postures, breathing exercises, meditation, and ethical principles. The practice aims to foster unity within oneself, between the body and mind, and between the individual and the universe. Through regular practice, one seeks to achieve balance, harmony, and a sense of well-being on physical, mental, and spiritual levels.²⁴ Western understanding of Yoga involves translating and interpreting ancient Indian practices and beliefs into contemporary Western culture. It has experienced a dramatic rise in popularity in the United States in recent years, with an increasing number of Americans incorporating it into their fitness routines. This ancient practice has become a staple in the wellness industry, capturing the interest of people of all ages and backgrounds. Americans spend a significant amount of money on yoga-related products and services, including yoga classes, workshops, retreats, clothing, equipment, and accessories. The growing interest in yoga, combined with the wide range of available products and services, has led to substantial spending in this market. According to recent reports, millions of Americans who

practice yoga spend billions annually on yoga classes and products, including equipment, clothing, vacations, and media.²⁵

The contemporary practice of yoga among millions of Westerners today can be understood as having deep roots in the Tantric tradition despite significant transformations in its form and context. This ancient connection provides valuable insights into the evolution of yoga and its enduring appeal to the West.²⁶ Some recent scholars suggest that Yoga has the potential to enable Christians to reconnect with the spiritual aspect of the body. Through yoga, individuals can engage in physical postures and breathing techniques that promote mindfulness and introspection. Many hold that for Christians, this can provide an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the mind-body connection and may offer a new way to experience spiritual reflection and contemplation. Incorporating yoga into one's spiritual practice can foster inner peace and holistic well-being, allowing individuals to nurture their faith while caring for their physical and mental health.²⁷ Indian spirituality has impacted the development of Western thought and culture; teachings, such as yoga and meditation, have influenced Western philosophy, psychology, and religion. The popularity of practices like yoga and meditation in the West directly results from Indian spiritual traditions. Due to the influence of Indian spirituality, concepts such as nonviolence, inner peace, and mindfulness have deeply resonated with Western societies.²⁸

Conclusion

The evolution of spirituality in the Western context from the 19th century illustrates a significant transformation shaped by cultural, psychological, and philosophical influences; as people continue to draw from diverse spiritual practices and philosophies, a rich tapestry of beliefs emerges, highlighting the dynamic nature of spirituality in contemporary society. The emergence of Eastern spiritual movements in the West, particularly during the transformative 1960s, marks a profound shift in how individuals engage with spirituality and their sense of identity. As traditional religious institutions faced decline, many sought alternative pathways that emphasized personal experience and self-discovery. This period marked a significant departure from established norms, where blending various spiritual traditions offered new avenues for understanding the self and the universe. The interplay between cultural, political, and economic factors played an essential role in shaping this landscape, allowing individuals to explore inner dimensions previously overshadowed by institutional doctrines.

As spirituality has become more individualized and psychologically oriented, it reflects the shifting values of contemporary

society that prioritize personal experience and self-actualization. This trend indicates a move away from mysticism associated with organized religion towards a secular and this-worldly interpretation of spirituality. The transition from psychological to religious spirituality during the 1960s marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of spiritual practices and beliefs within Western society. This period of cultural upheaval fostered a unique blending of psychological insights and spiritual exploration, encouraging individuals to prioritize personal experiences over traditional religious structures. This shift transformed personal spiritual narratives and redefined the interplay between psychology and religion. The intertwining of psychology and spirituality reflects a profound transformation in how individuals approach their existence within contemporary society.

The rise of non-religious spirituality in the West illustrates a significant shift towards individualized approaches to meaning and purpose, moving beyond traditional religious frameworks. Through the lens of mysticism, spirituality, or the New Age Movement, individuals seek harmony with an unseen order, fostering a more inclusive and holistic understanding of existence.

The growing interest in Eastern spirituality, particularly the teachings and practices of Indian traditions, reflects a cultural exchange between the East and the West. The foundational philosophies of the Upanishads and various meditation practices have resonated with contemporary Western seekers, leading to an exploration of personal growth and spiritual fulfillment. Influential figures such as Vivekananda, Yogananda, and Mahesh Yogi played important roles in this migration of ideas, bridging the gap between ancient teachings and modern understanding.

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