THE MODERN SPIRIT OF ASIA:
THE SPIRITUAL AND SECULAR IN CHINA AND INDIA
BY PETER VAN DER VEER

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The ways in which personal experiences are transformed into intellectual reflections and innovations are particularly illuminating. In *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, Peter van der Veer recounts how he was "bewildered" (ix) by the Hindu practices which motivated him to study Indology and cultural anthropology at university, and how his trip to China some twenty years later, whereby the thriving religious rituals "reminded him very much of India" (ibid) and inspired him to compare the spiritual scenes of these two places.

This book can be regarded as the fruit of that initial inspiration, and it is a particularly outstanding work in three ways. First of all, the comparative framework, which entails a twofold meaning. In the first place, as van der Veer points out, specialist historical work has led scholars to limit themselves to the nation-state unit (1), while the comparative framework provides an escape from it. As he puts it, comparative studies transcend the national(ist) space, both geographically and ideologically, in terms of "a reflection on our conceptual framework as well as on a history of interactions that have constituted our object of study." (13) For instance, India and China provide a viable comparative model because of their huge societies with deeply rooted cultural histories that have both united large numbers of people over vast territories and over long periods of time, and their current nation-forms are both a result of their interaction with Western imperialism (2). This particular formation of modernity serves to enrich the scholarly discussions on globalisation, by showing the different pathways to modernity of two nation-states in a global context, and such comparative framework goes beyond methodological nationalism.

Moreover, the comparative framework revisits existing concepts regarding epochal changes, including "spirituality", the "secular" and "globalisation". Van der Veer shows that the association between secularity and modernity and the concept of the spiritual were produced simultaneously and in mutual interaction. "Spirituality" as a modern invention, refers to the opposite of materiality as distinctive from the body, as distinctive from both the religious and the secular. It is part of nineteenth century globalisation, a thoroughgoing political, economic, and cultural integration of the world (36). According to van der Veer, the secular metaphysics of the economy is basic to modern social science and policy-making, (43) and science itself comes to be seen as a transcendent spirit of the time (44). In this sense, the secular framework is just as metaphorical as the religious one that preceded it (42). In relation to the notion of "globalisation", this book has indeed facilitated studies on forms of transnational interaction that by definition escape the comparative frame of nation-states. However, forms of globalisation vary, and they shape societies in very different ways, ways that need to be investigated under a comparative framework. For instance, imperialism shaped Britain and India simultaneously in an early period of globalisation, but in quite different ways, and the differences and similarities call for comparative analysis (12). Furthermore, comparative study allows us to see how social and cultural stereotypes are reinforced in globalisation, for instance the impression of a "spiritual India" is a modern product of Western imaginaries, as is the "Orient", which nonetheless in turn provides a model of resistance against the homogenising forces and assumptions of globalisation.

Admittedly, the comparative framework proposed in this book is not flawless. For instance, to what extent can we view a comparative study on China and India as representative of the whole Asia? At the same time, in order to establish a comparable parallel, the researcher will have to, inevitably, pin down some essential "defining" characteristics for different cultures and societies, which may counter the comparative spirit of the framework itself.

Second, the focus on the "spiritual" aspects of modern nations constitutes another distinctive aspect of this book, which provides an alternative other than the emphasis on economics and politics on the one hand, and facilitates a lens to examine these aspects on the other. As van der Veer points out, spirituality is in fact a crucial term in our understanding of modern society.

It has been generally accepted that the social ethos in many societies, in particular the "secularised" Western countries, is guided by "instrumental rationality" as interpreted most famously by Max Weber,[1] who further develops the notion of "secularisation" in terms of a gradual process of "disenchantment", a phrase which was originally used by German philosopher Friedrich Schiller.[2] For Weber, disenchantment was connected to the "rationalization of the world"[3] by eliminating magic and instead, promoting a new techno rational order that he claimed to be characteristic of modern societies in the West, in which "rationalization" was seen as a historical drive towards a world where "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation".[4] Within religion, intellectual rationalisation resulted in the systematisation of religious values; at the same time secular spheres of value (political, economic, kinship, aesthetic, intellectual etc.) also undergo the same process of intellectual rationalisation and are themselves organised into logical systems based on their own immanent laws, *internal and lawful autonomy* of the individual spheres. There results a struggle for dominance among all the rationally organised orders – the most important of which for the present discussion is that between rationalised religious values and the various rationalised institutional orders of the world. It is this rationalisation of thought, born by intellectuals, which is responsible for the disenchantment of the world. For Weber, political power was secularised as the state took on functions that had formerly been the sole preserve of religious institutions. As the public legitimacy of religious institutions was eroded, religion also became increasingly to be defined as a matter of private conscience.[5] The notion of modernity in the West that was established upon models such as these, was therefore defined by a radically new settlement of nation-states negotiated not just between new voting publics and elites, but also between the state and the churches.

Yet, as van der Veer observes, in both India and China there is a stream for reworked traditions, which transformed traditions into nationalist soap operas, not to mention the popular genre of martial arts films (*wuxia*), which can be regarded as enchantment at the heart of modern secular entertainment (128–9). While many rationalisation movements aspiring to modernisation try to purify thought and action from the irrational, popular beliefs are resurfacing in a very prominent way (ibid). And the Chinese secularist destruction of huge numbers of sacred places and ritual paraphernalia, may have had the contradictory effect of invoking and staging the very magical power that it sought to destruct (129).

It is in this sense that van der Veer defines what he means by "spirit", a concept which for him can only be understood through its centrality to the modern project, which in turn shows the extent to which secularity is deeply involved with magic and religion (7). For this reason, he coins the phrase "syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality", emphasising the interdependent relationship among these four components, denoting a nationalist imagining of modernity (9).

       Van der Veer is correct in saying that spirituality vaguely alludes to German *Geist* and to mysticism, and this ambiguity in its own meaning is magnified in its translations in Chinese or Hindi, for instance in the confusion with existing religious concepts such as gods and souls, or more general terms such as the essential characteristics of things, *Jingshen* spirit (35). In the gesture of avoiding the definition of spirituality, which is "notoriously hard to define", van der Veer turns to the formation and usage of this word, that is, how it is produced as a concept that bridges discursive traditions across the globe, in opposite of materiality, distinctive from the body, from both the religious and the secular (36). At the same time, while the concept travel globally, its trajectory differs from place to place as it is inserted in different historical developments (ibid.). What van der Veer refers to as "cognitive globalisation", is a process of contextual response and resistance to hegemonising global capitalist system, which inevitably produces nationalistic counterparts.

       Tracing the origins of this word, we have Greek words *pneuma* (πνεύμα): a noun for "spirit" and its adjective derivation *pneumatikos* (πνευματικός), which means wind, breeze, breath, ghost.[6] Its verb derivation *pneoō* (πνέω), denotes the meaning "inspire",[7] which suggests an active engagement that is also conscious. According to Henry George Liddell's *Greek-English Lexicon*, *pneuma* is identified with

    1. Breath of life, living being;
    2. Spirit of men;
    3. Spiritual or immaterial being.[8]

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon for New Testament also acknowledges the meaning of *pneuma* as

1.   The spirit, i.e. the vital principal by which the body is animated;
    a.   the rational spirit, the power by which the human being feels, thinks, decides;
    b.   the soul.
2.   A spirit, i.e. a simple essence, devoid of all or at least all grosser matter, and possessed of the power of knowing, desiring, deciding, and acting.[9]

       Hence, the etymological root shows that the antiquity of "spirituality" was not so much related to a transcendent reality, but immanent human quality instead. It does anticipate the meaning of "new spiritualities" regarding the "inner forms of the sacred" and a spirituality that lies within which can only be experienced by the self.[10] "Spirituality" in English academy was then frequently used in the description and translation of Hinduism and Hindu culture as opposed to Western materialist culture in the nineteenth century.[11] In this sense, "spirituality" was and is used to construct a fantasy by the Western imagination of an "Eastern mentality" or worldview, in comparison to and for the purpose of criticising Western materialism by Western scholars and also for criticising Christianity by "post Christians". The critical analysis of the etymology of spirituality above shows that it contains an important level of meaning which denotes *immanent intellectual qualities of humanity*. This level of meaning merged with the meaning regarding *religious piety* in Middle English, and has gradually become marginalised, as we have seen from the development of the usage of this term. Moreover, during such development, "spirituality" has been used to denote different things in different contexts employed by different authors, and each usage takes "spirituality" to be an enduring and stable foundation upon which an explanation for religion can be erected. Yet, because spirituality changes under different religious, ecclesiastical and even political inquiry, this foundation is therefore an unstable one. This examination of the fluidity of usage and the vagueness of meaning denoted to each usage, leads to my argument that spirituality that might productively be treated not as a given and natural fact but rather as the product of discourse.

       The notion of discourse that I refer to here mainly derives from Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which Foucault argued that discourses function according

to rules and procedures, which are in turn products of ideology, for selecting and discriminating between truth statements.[12] In the light of this, the global appropriation of spirituality, not only indicates a shift of power dynamic in social operations, but also in academic ideology. The formation of the meaning of spirituality globally is effectively a distribution and struggle of power and ideology. As Gandhi and Tagore in India and monk Taixu in China respond to the transformation brought by imperialist colonizers to their own country, their writings on the comparability between Eastern and Western spirituality can be seen as a quest for cultural, political and personal composure.

In addition, van der Veer also points out that Weber's historical sociology occupies a Hegelian philosophy of history which assumes an East-and-West dichotomy, according to which personal and collective rationality (Spirit) develops in the West and cannot develop in the East because of a lack of individuality in India and China (p.23). In China it is the overwhelming power of the state that prevents the formation of individuality, while in India it is the caste system. This dichotomised understanding of East and West and the differences between China and India prevails even today, as we can see from the scholarly debates on the social and cultural conditions for democracy.

However, it remains problematic to say that the Chinese concept of belief originated from the religious influence from India. Van der Veer speculates that concepts of belief in Chinese may be derived from Buddhist thought and thus from Sanskrit *shraddha*, which gives doctrine and the act of believing a central place in religious discipline (3). For van der Veer, if we recognise this Indian influence, we may understand that the notion of belief might be much more important in Chinese religious practice than is often assumed by those who emphasize orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy in Chinese religion (3). Yet, as we can see from *The Analects,* "The Master said, "A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients, I venture to compare myself with our old P'ang"" (述而不作，信而好古), denoting an acknowledgement of the transcendence by means of not only belief but also communication with the ancients who are beyond this world. As *Shuowen Jiezi* states, *xin* 信 in Classical Chinese can mean "admonish". This suggests the possibility of a concept of belief prior to the influence from Buddhism. Hence a more thorough investigation of local knowledge might shed new light on the "syntagmatic chain" of "religion-magic-secularity spirituality", in order to reach a deeper understanding of an increasingly interconnected yet differentiated world.

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[1] See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), ix.

[2] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (London: Social Science Paperbacks, 1966), 270.

[3] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans.* Talcott Parsons *(New York: Dover, 2003), 117.*

[4] Weber, "Science as Vocation", in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Wills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1948), 139.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Robert Beeks (ed.), *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010), 1213.

[7] Ibid.

[8] http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=pneu%3Dma, last accessed 25 May 2014.

[9] http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/pneuma.html, last accessed 25 May 2014.

[10] Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 1.

[11] See Ursula King, "Indian Spirituality, Western Materialism", *Social Action New Dheli* 28 (1978), 62-86.

[12] See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1974), 49.