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Philo, C., Cadman, L., and Lea, J. (2011) *The New Urban Spiritual? Tentative Framings for a Debate and a Project*. Working Paper

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Deposited on: 5 September 2014

The new urban spiritual?

Tentative framings for a debate and a project

The New Urban Spiritual? Working Paper No.1
(only available for quoting/citing with permission of the authors)

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Summer, 2011

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### **Secularisation and ‘new-spiritual revolution’?**

The religious landscape of contemporary Britain, and arguably of much of the contemporary West, is being radically reshaped. The reference to ‘landscape’ here is meant as more than merely metaphorical, as will become apparent later, but – taken overall, albeit with important caveats about particular religions, peoples and places – survey after survey reveal that “we” are becoming progressively less ‘religious’, if by ‘religious’ we mean belief in, adherence to and regular contact with the tenets, instructions and organised forms of worship set within an institutional (‘Churched’) framework (eg. Crabtree, 2007; Tearfund, 2007).<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny the continuing (if dubious) centrality of Christianity in its various forms to the putative ‘national life’ of Western states, including the clear influence, especially of more ‘fundamentalist’ versions of Catholicism and Protestantism, on electoral politics and judicial decision-making. It is to acknowledge, though, that in the warp and weft of everyday living, the extent to which the majority of people are actively engaging with organised religion, or indeed seeking here a moral compass for ‘how to live’, is undoubtedly more limited than was true of earlier times. Intriguing claims are made about how evidence of declining church attendance may not necessarily mean a proportionate loss of *faith* in the established religions, and Davie’s ‘believing but not belonging’ and ‘vicarious religion’ theses are striking in this respect (Davie, 1994, 2006; cf.

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<sup>1</sup> The comprehensive Tearfund (2007) survey revealed that 4.9 million (c.10% of the population) and 7.6 million (c.15%) UK citizens attended church at least, respectively, once a week or once a month. The report sought for hopeful evidence of religious sentiment in ‘Christian Britain’, but still admitted that these statistics left around two-thirds of UK citizens ‘out of touch with the Church’. The focus here was principally Christian churchgoing, with only 6% of the 7,000 surveyed respondents identifying as believers in ‘other religions’.

Bruce & Voas, 2010; Voas & Crockett, 2005)<sup>2</sup> – as well as about how the substantial ethnic recomposition of Western societies, with dramatic influxes of immigrants and their descendants for whom religious (but non-Christian) belief is widespread, may mean that organised religion *per se* is not on the wane in the West, only its Christian variants.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, there is much to commend what has long been termed the ‘secularisation thesis’, unsurprisingly connected to assertions about modernity’s rationalising imperative and the march of Western ‘scientific’ understanding, which has been around in diverse guises at least since Max Weber (1976; cf. Jenkins, 2000) posited the ‘disenchantment’ of the modern world. Peter Berger, Steve Bruce, Thomas Luckmann, Bryan Wilson and many other authors can all be cited as arguing, with differing emphases and from different theoretical premises, that Religion cannot but retreat, certainly in its traditional guise as purported ‘guardian’ of the Truth, in the face of a complex battery of modernising pressures (economic, political, cultural and intellectual) arising in the West (eg. Berger, 1967; Bruce, 1992, 2002; Luckmann, 1967; Wilson, 1966).

In parallel, though, a new set of claims have begun to emerge about how, in the West generally but most obviously in certain regions of western Europe, the eclipse of organised (Christian) religion as a key *presence* in everyday life is being accompanied by – possibly in part caused by – a very significant turn to *alternative* forms of religion or, better, spirituality. For this reason, if surprisingly to some, secularisation has not straightforwardly led to a ‘secular society’ but rather to what some have instead characterised as one that is ‘post-secular’<sup>4</sup> (Molendijk *et al*, 2010; also Wilford, 2010 [see below]). The broad assertion is that very many people – millions of people in fact – have not suddenly become secularised, wholly devoid of anything that might be cast as a ‘religious’ sensibility, but rather have begun to channel or to realise such a sensibility in quite other ways than, say, conventional churchgoing. For such people, intimations that there is *more* to life and living than just the material features of the world continue to *matter*, but they no longer suppose that ‘answers’ about such *more-ness* can be found in the texts, buildings and pronouncements of organised religion. They *may* suppose that ‘answers’ can be found in alternative belief-systems or they may suppose that there are no decisive ‘answers’ to be found anyway, if not then taking such a supposition as warrant for abandoning the *search* for either ‘answers’ or simply better ways of formulating suitable ‘questions’. The most

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<sup>2</sup> To over-simplify, the claims are that many people still hold religious *beliefs* but do not *belong* to organised religion, in the sense of attending and worshipping ‘at church’, and that many such people relate to their religion ‘vicariously’ through their knowledge (and approval) of the performance of religious belief by an ‘active minority’ acting, as it were, on their behalf.

<sup>3</sup> “If current trends continue, the UK will become a Muslim country by 2050” (Religious Tolerance.org, 2008, no pagination).

<sup>4</sup> “A postsecular society is [one] which combines a renewed openness to questions of the spirit with the habit of critical enquiry” (Anon, 2010).

obvious manifestation of this development is perhaps the upsurge, during the 1980s and 1990s, of 'New Ageism', complete with a complexly integrated web of Pagan, NeoPagan, Wiccan and many more, conceptions of creation, linked to a maze of diverse – and, to many commentators, often chaotic and incommensurate – practices, practitioners, teachers and followers (eg. Heelas, 1996; Hope & Jones, 2006). But there have arguably been many other elements here, not least the rise of interest in Eastern (but not God-centred) religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and their variants, as linked to the dramatic upsurge of participation in activities such as yoga and meditation, all of which are often configured as 'spiritual pathways' towards 'enlightenment'. It is true that the latter practices – sometimes grouped alongside all manner of 'therapies' spanning from, say, the psychoanalytic to the use of 'crystals' – may reflect a primary concern for individual physical-and-mental wellbeing, but they evidently can, but need not, entrain a willingness to entertain aspects that, for want of a superior term, can be deemed 'spiritual'. David Voas coins the term 'fuzzy faithful' to describe those people who appear to possess no great conviction in any specific (religious) belief-system, indeed in any particular God, but who nonetheless retain a spiritual orientation as opposed to being straightforwardly secular (in Heelas & Houtman, 2009. p.83; also Pigott, 2008).

In the influential interventions of sociologist of religion Paul Heelas (esp. 1996, 2002, 2006, 2008), all of the above is cast, even if with some hesitation, as seeds of a 'spiritual revolution'. In a series of studies, Heelas has sought to unpack the many ingredients of the New Age, widening out into a (theoretically and empirically) rich elucidation of a crucial transformation from, to adapt his terminologies, an 'outer-directed' *religious* orientation – the traditional questing for the 'word of God', as an *external* being, and attending to the sites and statements of authorities sanctioned as 'His' emissaries on earth – to an 'inner-directed' *spiritual* sensibility – an openness to the 'beyond' or 'unknown' within, the *internal* resources and possibilities for enhancing the self, maybe aided by but not dependent upon the instruction of earthly others. Interestingly, the latter openness may surface in belief-systems which posit external beings, other worlds, other levels of creation, and the like, thus retaining some *external* reference-points, but Heelas's argument appears to be that, first and foremost, the impetus is towards *self*-realisation, meaning the development of the self (into a 'spirit', 'soul', a 'consciousness', whatever) from materials, as it were, *immanent* to and within the self. Such a self may overcome its immediate corporeal limitations, at death or possibly in how it is enabled to commune (or resonate) with others temporally and physically distant, but what is strikingly absent, Heelas continues, is the envisaged presence, command and indeed judgment of a *transcendent* master deity ('God', certainly any singular, masculine, omniscient 'God'). Put like this, it might be replied that such a spiritual sensibility, hesitant about the external status of 'God', is also part of the Christian heritage, and such a possibility is readily acknowledged by

Heelas. Indeed, in their deconstruction of the RAMP survey,<sup>5</sup> Heelas and Dick Houtman (2010) are taken by the numbers of respondents – even those who can be plausibly categorised as ‘religious’ – who favour a sense of ‘a God within’ as explicitly counterposed to the more conventional Christian ‘God without’. While Heelas and Houtman are cautious in this respect, such evidence can be gathered in support of some ongoing transition *from* religion *to* spirituality, one that is even occurring at the apparent heart of Christianity itself (which is hence cast here as ‘detraditionalising’; see also Versteeg, 2006).

For all of these reasons, therefore, Heelas reckons that “we” are not really talking about ‘religion’ any more, given what this term has tended to mean in the history of the West, but instead about ‘spirituality’.<sup>6</sup> And, more specifically, he identifies new ‘spiritualities of the self’, ‘spiritualities of life’, ‘inner-life spiritualities’, ‘subjective life spiritualities’ and other combinations of terms,<sup>7</sup> and in so doing he creates a vital new framing for a more nuanced discussion about secularisation and the fate of the spiritual in the countries of the modern West. His proliferating claims about ‘new spiritualities’<sup>8</sup> – brilliantly illuminated in his Kendal study with Linda Woodhead and others (2005), about which more presently – have enlivened numerous recent inquiries with a narrower optic, our own included. It is easy to see how the likes of yoga and meditation, with their very obvious dimensions of ‘working on the self’ to improve the energetic articulations of mind-and-body, can be cast as ‘new spiritualities’, and indeed in precisely this cloth they are frequently mentioned by Heelas himself (eg. Heelas, 2008, 5, discussing “yoga in Chennai or yoga in San Francisco”). Browsing through recent issues of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, moreover, it is fascinating to find papers reporting on the ‘new spiritualities’ to be located in phenomena as diverse as particular forms of electronic dance music cultures (eg. Beck & Lynch, 2009), the teaching of ‘conscious dying’ techniques (eg. Lee, 2007) and a ‘symbolic paradigm of expressivist art’ dating its Romantic beginnings (Goode, 2010).<sup>9</sup> A question does perhaps

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<sup>5</sup> This is the ‘Religious and Moral Philosophy’ survey carried out by a team of researchers in 11 European countries during the later-1990s.

<sup>6</sup> Some critics object that he is merely confusing, conflating or, alternatively, artificially holding apart the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ (Heelas, 2008, pp.56-58), and it is interesting that he also talks about the distinction between ‘inner-life spirituality’ and the ‘spiritualities of life-as religion’ (or ‘life-as religion-cum-spiritualities’). In other words, he *does* fully acknowledge a variety of ‘spirituality’, as something based on looking within even as a supposed basis for communing with the without, as a feature *of* the Christian tradition (even as practised within its traditional, theistic guise). For an intelligent exploration in the geographical literature of the inherent instabilities in terms such as ‘religion’ and ‘sacred’, see Ivakhiv (2006).

<sup>7</sup> The proliferation of terms can be a little unnerving, and it is not always clear the extent to what is at stake in the subtle differences; and there may also be a window here on certain shifts in Heelas’s own thinking, notably from ‘self’ as his keyword to replacing that with ‘life’ (esp. Heelas, 2008, p.26).

<sup>8</sup> We use the term ‘new spiritualities’ as a catch-all for all of the ‘alternative’ spiritualities (those not straightforwardly enacted in the organised *Western* religions); they are far from *new* outside of the West, where they have often been part of widely-prevalent religious belief systems, and indeed in some cases have been known about in the West for centuries. Insofar as they do appear to be a relatively recent phenomenon with any widespread currency or participation in the West, the term ‘new’ is just about warranted.

<sup>9</sup> The latter paper underlines a genealogy of Romanticism’s concern for the immanence of creativity and

start to intrude, however, about the extent to which such applications of the Heelas thesis end up extending its basic logic and reach further than he himself would prefer. Importantly too, in his vision, and despite constant allusions to *practices* which are found in the grain of everyday life, there does remain the impression that, at bottom, such practices should only be regarded as new spiritualities where there is a measure of *consciousness* about them as practices entwined in the making of *new* selves with *new* spiritual foundations or ramifications. In short, as perhaps both a strength and a weakness of Heelas's position, practices *without* an express(ive)ly self-acknowledged spiritual dimension, however minimal, hesitant or inarticulate, would not be admitted as new spiritualities but rather cast as 'mere' lifestyle choices. (We will return shortly to this argument with respect to how Heelas seeks to *defend* his own position on, we might even say his own 'faith' in, new spiritualities.)

Arguably, then, we detect here a facet of Heelas's thesis which chimes with the fierce critique to which his (and related) claims have repeatedly been met: namely, that the new spiritualities under discussion are nothing but, or at best little more than, *mere* lifestyle choices – a matter of style over substance, of practices over or uninformed by beliefs. Such a critique is to be expected from some quarters, most obviously the conventionally religious, hostile to what from this stance cannot but be seen as practices emptied of 'proper' religious content, or worse as dangerous heresies flirting with 'false' (even demonic) religions. Here is one Christian commentator noting:

... the growing realisation that most people today see themselves as 'spiritual' rather than in any sense 'religious'. There has been a rise in awareness of all things spiritual including a Godless spirituality with many adopting a 'pick 'n' mix' approach to their spiritual lives (Barley, 2007, pp.1-2).

Another line of argument, shaped by the likes of Anthony Giddens's (1991) theories about the modern 'reflexive self', bemoans the self's obsession with *itself*, with its own capacities for self-fashioning, and this is a theoretical coordinate commonly encountered in scholarly work on contemporary religion, secularisation and social change (eg. Hope & Jones, 2006; McCloud, 2007). In this perspective, Heelas's new spiritualities readily appear as symptoms of the *self-indulgence* of the contemporary West; or, via a Marxian inflection, as just another set of consumption possibilities, often aligned with allegedly therapeutic ones like counselling, beguiling the unwary (paying) consumer of (late-) modern capitalism's sprawling commodification of the self. Such arguments are most thoughtfully combined in Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's (2005) account of 'selling spirituality',<sup>10</sup> but a notion

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expression within the self, in effect locating new spiritualities as actually quite an 'old' position taken at the heart of (one strand within) the overall intellectual 'project' of the West. In fact, Heelas is himself clear about just such a genealogy (esp. Heelas, 2008, Chap.1).

<sup>10</sup> Carrette and King (2005) identify eight problematic characteristics of what they term 'capitalist

of ‘the spiritual marketplace’ is one with a deeper pedigree (eg. Roof, 1999), as explained by Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (2006), and Heelas (esp. 2008) himself is in no doubt about how readily ‘consumptive capitalism’ (or ‘soft capitalism’) is able to convert new spiritualities into either objects of consumption or tools for enhancing certain business practices. To underline, then, the objection becomes that people are indeed doing little more than adopting an eclectic, inherently shallow approach to religion (and, indeed, spirituality), experimenting with a bit of this and a bit of that, a dash of New Agey-ness with a few sessions of yoga, before perhaps heading off to the gym, supermarket, pub or club. They are buying into – and sometimes literally buying – an incoherent package of ‘spiritual goods’, with scant thought about whatever deeper ideational roots (if any) the goods might possess and whether or not such roots might be compatible. In their *self-preoccupation*, so the argument goes, these people are thereby missing any ‘bigger picture’ of what ‘it’ might all mean, signify, imply, sanction, decree ...

*Heelas’s defence: towards a geographical vision of ‘new spiritualities’?*

It is instructive to consider Heelas’s responses to some of these critiques, not least because, to our minds, his responses begin to signal the value of a *geographical* awareness in addressing the whole problematic of new spiritualities. In his 2006 paper, Heelas succinctly characterises what he terms ‘the infirmity debate’, identifying the two specific lines of attack – as opposed to the more general ones outlined above – purporting to expose both the ‘infirmity’ of his own position, its own intellectual shakiness, and the ‘infirmity’ or even ‘malaise’ of new spiritualities themselves. On the one hand, there is ‘the existentially vacuous argument’, claiming the apparent absence of ultimate, coherent meaningfulness in a life-spiritual questing whose only anchorage is the unique experiential satisfaction of the individual self. On the other hand, there is ‘the socially precarious argument’, claiming the apparent inability of individualised life-spiritual questing to amount to anything approaching social solidarity, commonality of purpose and broader patterns of activity and conduct. These two objections are in effect two sides of the same coin, and Heelas’s counter is, in various ways, to assert that new spiritualities are actually highly *relational*, always linking beyond the individual – always being *more* than just the individual’s own self-preoccupations – not least in that a widely shared theme is a readiness

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spiritualities’: atomisation (a focus on self rather than society); self-interest (seeing ‘profit’ as primary motivation for human action); corporatism (a prioritising of corporate success over likes of welfare); utilitarianism (treating others as means not ends); consumerism (unrestrained pursuit of self-ish desires); quietism (accepting rather than challenging social injustice); political myopia (pretence to neutrality and failure to detect any ‘politics’ in spirituality); and ‘thought control’ (use of ‘psycho-physical techniques that direct attention to the self as locus for anxiety-reduction, away from critique of [dis]stress-inducing wider social inequities). Interestingly, their approach also includes a modified Foucauldian angle, alert to how technologies of the self may serve wider structures of governance. Elsewhere, we will explore further what Foucault may have to tell us about the making of new spiritualities.

to engage with others, to aid in their ‘growth’ spiritually and, quite possibly, more practically as well. Such reaching out is here configured as different from the conversion-based missionary impulse of (some) conventional religions, with their almost inevitably judgmental tone, however muted in more recent times, as fuelled by their underlying sense of knowing ‘superior’ routes to *Truth*. It is nonetheless seen as a reaching out which can still be spiritually informed, articulated by people concerned with their own inner spiritual life but also alert to how others will possess, or wish to cultivate, their own spiritual lives as well (according to the lights of their own personal experiences). New spiritualities thereby offer a kind of connective tissue bonding people together in a manner that, while not akin to a dutiful church congregation, is arguably ‘healthier’ (not more ‘infirm’) through entailing creative, negotiated exchanges with the capacity to embrace, and maybe productively to synthesise, an array of differences. Mobilising a wealth of detail – of people from varied new-spiritual persuasions encountering one another, socialising, discussing, sharing ideas and ‘tips’, and being in many senses a ‘community’ – Heelas (2006, 2008) stresses that new spiritualities have the capacity to be strongly *associational*, and as such amount to much more than the atomistic splitters of (religious) society projected by some critics.

Tellingly, in rehearsing these claims, Heelas returns repeatedly to the Kendal study of undertaken with Linda Woodhead and others (Heelas *et al*, 2005; also Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Seel, 2001), since it allowed a convincing empirical documentation of *relational* and *associational* new spiritualities at work.<sup>11</sup> Through the ‘mapping’ (a word used by the researchers) of all activities, deliverers and sites that could sit under this umbrella,<sup>12</sup> coupled to a in-depth questionnaire survey of over 200 new-spiritual participants involved in a bewildering range of possibilities, from Buddhism to Paganism, astrology to aromatherapy, circle-dancing to peace-dancing, yoga to foot massage, and so on,<sup>13</sup> Heelas *et al* were indeed able to get under the skin of how a given collectivity of

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<sup>11</sup> The study actually concentrated firstly on what the researchers called ‘the congregational domain’, wherein they ‘mapped’ attendance at all of Kendal’s churches and, through participation and interviewing, sought for the ethos of certain churches selected as case studies. More eye-catchingly, the study also strive to probe what the researchers called ‘the holistic *milieu*’, wherein they ‘mapped’ the activities, together with participation in and attitudes towards such activities, comprising what they configured as ‘alternative spirituality’. In addition, they undertook a ‘street survey’ of others who appeared to have no obvious regular religious-spiritual dimension to their lives. A helpful outline of the project can be found on-line

<sup>12</sup> “In Kendal, or within 5 miles of Kendal, there are some 62 groups who consider their activities to have a spiritual dimension. These include 23 yoga groups; 7 Tai Chi groups; 7 dancing, singing, drumming or arts and crafts groups; 5 healing groups; 4 groups with an earth-based spirituality; 4 syncretic or interfaith groups; 4 therapy of self-discovery groups; 4 women’s groups; 3 Buddhist groups; and several other specialised groups such as Bahai and Sai Baba groups. Spiritual teachings and practices are the main purpose of some of these groups. In others, the spirituality is enmeshed within health, fitness and artistic activities. But in all groups ... , a language of spiritual growth as explicitly used within the group itself, or the leader or facilitators of the group said they considered spirituality to be an important aspect of their group’s purpose” (*Newsletter No.2*, p.1).

<sup>13</sup> Importantly, respondents (practitioners and clients) were asked whether they perceived a ‘spiritual’ dimension in the activities concerned, and it is notably how many people *did* indeed perceive such a



people with new-spiritual leanings operated on a daily basis. Its routines and events, its personnel and personalities, its entangled socio-spiritual dynamics, its shared joys and worries, its hopes and fears: all of these elements came to the fore, providing an empirical evidence-base clearly licensing Heelas to dispute (certain of) the critiques laid at the door of new spiritualities. While rigorously social-scientific in its survey components, the Kendal study can be cast as an anthropological ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), as well as entailing a richly *geographical* study because the specificity of Kendal and its immediate region as the worldly context for the birth and sustenance of a new-spiritual community – one possessing a density of numbers (of people involved), activities, outlets, sites, venues, and so on – was not lost on the researchers.<sup>14</sup> The evocative term *milieu*, with its deep resonances in academic geography through its centrality to the Vidalian tradition (Buttimer, 1971), was central to the project (see Footnote 14), and Heelas (2008, pp.34-45) subsequently wrote about “the holistic *milieu* of Kendal and environs – where around 100 spiritual practitioners provided mind-body-spirit activities during the autumn of 2001 – is a subjective wellbeing zone.” Another intriguing attribution was that of Kendal as a ‘spiritual laboratory’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), and the conclusion has to be that, if remaining little-acknowledged and under-theorised, the researchers appreciated that to talk about the relationality and associationalism of new spiritualities was *necessarily* also to take seriously their unavoidably ‘placed’ (located, situated, context-dependent) character.

This said, there are moments elsewhere where the ‘generalisability’ of the Kendal findings is arguably over-stated, as when Heelas (2006, p.228) reflects – moments after stating that his response to the ‘infirmity’ critiques will draw upon the Kendal project – on how, “[g]iven that the holistic *milieu* is very similar – whether it has developed in the UK or the US, Australia or Sweden – the discussion is (hopefully) of relatively general significance.” A point that we would stress, as geographers, is that Kendal will be in many respects *unique*, even if it is possible to identify other ‘counter-cultural’ places in the UK and beyond where not entirely dissimilar ingredients are stirred together. Some places may share with Kendal features of rurality, scenic surroundings, relative isolation (today if not in the past) from major arteries of economic and political power, mystical-historical associations, and the like, and it should be noted that geographers Julian Holloway (1998, 1998, 2000, 2003a, 2003b) and Janet Conneely (2003) have both ‘mapped’ the complex historical and cultural contours of Glastonbury as the UK’s ‘New Age capital’ (and see

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spirituality, even in something like ‘counselling’.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to hear the researcher’s account of ‘why Kendal?’: “On the practical side, Kendal is close enough to the university to make such a study feasible, and is the right size, large enough to be interesting and have a wide range of activities going on, small enough to be covered by the project team. Kendal has a church attendance rate slightly above the national average, and is also something of a centre for alternative spirituality, offering us an ideal place to explore some of the key questions in current religious studies debates” (*Newsletter No.1*, 2001, p.1).

below). Other places, such as Brighton, may be rather different, however, in being more urban, with a different (coastal) environmental context, much more current political-economic clout, little by way of deeper historical-mystical roots, and so on, although – as we will show in our project – an equivalent new-spiritual ‘community’ has definitely arisen here. A deeper drawback with the Heelas position may now swim into view, however, because his response to critics *does* end up narrowing around rather fewer people than the headline notion of a ‘spiritual revolution’ ostensibly entrains. Notwithstanding some speculations to the contrary, the people who eventually appear as the ‘bearers’ of Heelas’s vision are indeed likely to be resident in or regular visitors to new-spiritual ‘communities’ such as those hosted in Kendal, Glastonbury and Brighton, which then leaves the impression of a highly uneven *geography* to new life-spiritualities spread across a modern Western nation-state such as the UK. As it happens, we wish to resist any confident specification of this geography, not wanting to reduce it to a banal account of the Kendals of this world as new-spiritual oases surrounded by secular deserts, nor wanting to lapse into simplistic assumptions such as ‘you will not find new spiritualities in Northern ex-mining or textile towns or the regimented cul-de-sacs of the suburban South’. That there *will* be a geography, though, one with many complicating factors and countless ramifications for Heelas-type claims about a ‘new-spiritual Britain’, is undoubted. One ramification, moreover, might be that Heelas himself risks an unnecessary retreat from the thesis of a ‘spiritual revolution’ *if* his response to critics sanctions a narrowing of its application only to *both* certain people – some posited minority of ‘authentic’ new-spiritual practitioners (and Heelas arguably voyages close to such a construction: see below) – and certain places – this handful of ‘authentic’ new-spiritual islands. It may well be that we have to *accept* that some narrowing (socially and spatially) is required to evade the opposite trap of over-extending the Heelas thesis, but it may also be that considerable empirical openness needs to remain on such matters, at least for the moment.

*The tyranny of coherent and conscious religious/spiritual selves: towards a geographical critique*

The secularisation and new spiritualities debates provide the principal substantive horizon for our own research, and we owe a great deal to all who have participated to such debates. There are nonetheless dangers in the constructions central to these debates, in part because – even given nuances and caveats occasionally present here – they risk obsessing with the *coherence* of the human subject as *consciously* alive to how all of the ingredients of his/her life combine to create a singular identity; as someone knowingly alert to how all parts of their lives are infused by guiding principles of one kind or another. Many spheres of social theory and cultural studies are now familiar with the complaint about a deep-seated humanism which cannot but project upon the human subject a *demand* for it to display a

‘unity’ which can readily be identified, circumscribed, categorised and, as it were, conceptually ‘policed’. Within human geography, such a complaint is utterly commonplace – if not without riposte (eg. Smith, 2006) – fuelled by feminist, post-colonial, psychoanalytic, phenomenological and, more broadly, post-structuralist critiques which cast into doubt the viability of such a unified, thought-full self as *the* causal or reflective agent of socio-spatial change. The unity of the self who is untouched by his/her ‘place’ in the world has been repeatedly challenged, leading to diverse proposals for what a ‘mapping’ of the self across spaces and places necessitates theoretically, methodologically and ethically (eg. Pile and Thrift, 1995), and even more provocative claims have been heard about a post-humanism wherein the human subject becomes reconfigured as itself a spatially distributed socio-natural-technical assemblage (eg. Whatmore, 1997, 2002). While we draw but lightly on such insights in the present research, their cumulative weight greatly influences the arguments and study that follow.

Within studies of religion, however, the complaint about the coherent self is arguably muted, perhaps because it is indeed hard for researchers studying religious identity – not least if they possess their *own* religious orientation – to escape an embracing assumption that an acknowledged religious, or possibly spiritual, identity *should* infuse all aspects of an individual’s life-world (thus generating the aforementioned coherence). Indeed, given that issues of belief, faith and Truth are so deeply implicated, it is perhaps unsurprising to find a prevailing (or at least lingering) sense that people *should* at bottom have coherent beliefs tracking through every pore of their being. This argument has been compellingly pursued in a recent paper by Ruth Illman (2009), striving to expose ongoing difficulties in shifting from an ‘either/or’ logic to a ‘both/and’ (or ‘thus-and-otherwise’) approach in intellectual treatments of religion. As Illman (2009, p.158) describes her deconstruction of ‘a logical approach to religious difference’, “[m]y aim is to show the insufficiency of traditional interreligious theories, with their heavy emphasis on truth claims and the intellectual problem of coming to terms with difference.” The hegemony of the ‘either/or’ logic is obvious in studies of established religions, revealed by the difficulties experienced in, for instance, dealing with phenomena such as ‘Catholic Jews’, where it is apparent that a certain ‘horror’ results when the seeming purity of one identity (say, Catholic) is ‘contaminated’ by the ideas-and-conducts associated with another (say, Jewish). Yet, it arguably continues to feature in the secularisation and new spiritualities debates: “you” are either religious or secular, or “you” are either religious or spiritual, or “you” are either spiritual or secular – a triangle of interlocking binaries. For many, like the Reverend quoted earlier (Barley, 2007), there is dismay at any suggestion that the religious might be infected by the secular or even by the spiritual, if the latter is taken, with Heelas, as a ‘spirituality of the self’ not an orientation to divine address from without. But even for Heelas’s position, a challenge arises from intimations that the spiritual might be infected by

the secular, as when evidence admits the possibility that, in many times and places, ostensibly spiritual practices (notably the likes of yoga and meditation) are actually, *in practice*, denuded of spiritual lea(r)ning. It is on precisely these grounds that critics can debunk new spiritualities as for the most part *not really spiritual at all*, because they are really/ultimately secularised bastardisations of the spiritual. And, as indicated just now, there is the suggestion that, in the face of such a criticism, Heelas does himself risk narrowing his ‘revolutionary’ account around those people for whom their practices *are* indeed transparently ‘authentic’ new-spiritual.

To us, then, a sizeable problem here is the continuing hegemony of inflexible prior grids of intelligibility, in effect denying ‘wobble-room’ for incoherence. Instead, the coherence or otherwise of the people involved – their practices, beliefs (if present) and overall life-ways – should arguably remain an open question, not saddled with ‘essentialist’ notions of identity nor, for that matter, theoretically over-determined by an appeal to Giddens, Marx or whoever. This is precisely *not* to hypothesise that people are *mere* incoherent ‘pick ’n’ mixers’: they *may* be, but they may *not* be, and even if they are ‘picking ’n’ mixing’, they may be doing so in a self-conscious manner that implies, if not the coherence of classical humanism, at least a rationale which quite likely cannot then be simplistically judged as *aspiritual*. It is to hypothesise that people may well be running together the ‘religious’, the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘secular’ in complex, perhaps unexpected ways, throwing into doubt the purity of the very terms/depictions in the first place, which is why they are marked in scare-quotes immediately above, and suggesting new hybridities that escape even the richness of the Heelas vision (of new spiritualities). And it is, to reiterate, to leave open the extent to which empirical inquiry will or will not reveal coherencies in how people are doing what they do and think what they think – although, quite minimally, it is to insist that, whatever *is* revealed, it needs to be treated with a respect, and possibly a non-judgmentalism, that cannot easily be guaranteed if the obsession with coherence (and all that then follows) persists. It is also to insist on the value of a thorough-going *spatialisation* of empirical inquiry, a readiness to see differences in how religious-spiritual-secular balances are struck dependent on both the scale of local context – in another vocabulary, the unavoidable time-space situatedness of place and region – and that of the exact sites (homes, streets, offices, factories, shops, social centres, churches, gyms and so on) where people find themselves in the course of pursuing their daily, weekly and longer-term time-space routines. Such a spatialisation can play a crucial role in disrupting the simple *a priori*s of much intellectual work in the field of religious studies, a point to be elaborated further when reviewing existing work on geographies of religion and spirituality.

An additional dimension of our critique revolves around the centrality in religious studies of human subjects who are basically *conscious*, as in self-consciously, knowingly aware of

how their identities are formed, of what materials and with what implications. Again, such a construct of the sovereign, autonomous, self-possessed human subject has come under sustained fire elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities, and in human geography it is possible to find psychoanalytic objections to the notion of a self who is ‘transparently’ (all) present to *itself* (eg. Rose, 1997) as well as non-representationalist objections to prioritising the role of human cognition – consciously processing, ordering, making sense of the ‘sensed’ world – over “our” supposedly more immediate, embodied, engaged, even ‘animalistic’ responses to the world-as-it-comes-to-us (eg. Thrift, 2000). An interest in ‘emotional geographies’ also starts to intervene on this terrain, stressing the importance of emotions, as felt, registered and to an extent self-acknowledged influences on “our” human state-of-being, but as in many respects evading, resisting or simply *differing* from the more logical processes of ‘rational’ thought (eg. Anderson & Smith, 2002). Given that religious belief or spiritual sensibility surely *depends* ultimately on (what might be conventionally designated) an *irrational* leap of faith, it is perhaps surprising the extent to which decisions about religion or spirituality are still portrayed as akin to ‘rational choice’ decision-making (another theme explored in Illman, 2009). Moreover, a certain irony arises when it is recognised just how many religions base themselves upon notions of individuals ‘losing themselves in or even being possessed by God’, maybe including extreme positions celebrating individuals acting ‘madly’ – talking in tongues, falling over, writhing, and so on – in a manner apparently driven by passions, emotions or, more broadly, sensations beyond or without thought. The implication is that forms of academic religious study resistant to taking seriously such ‘experiences’ will arguably miss much that *is* at the heart of religion and spirituality, even in its mainstream variants; which, in passing, is possibly why an interest in religion and spirituality *can* be found prefigured in some recent work by geographers inspired by emotional and non-representational geographies (eg. Conradson, 2002; Dewsbury & Cloke, 2009). We borrow from such insights in the present research when exploring the embodied intimacies of yoga and meditation as taught and received, but also when conjecturing that the body’s experiences of such practices – its ‘recollection’ of poses, movements or stillness; its ‘intimations’ of the spiritual-through-the-bodily – can leak out of the specific moments of practice to release affects in other domains of an individual’s daily living.

This perspective deepens the critique of the coherent self, since it introduces realms of the self that defy neat coherence, and it also keys into our geographical focus upon the moving (human) body, entering into and responding to specific time-space situations, while carrying experiences, learning and impulses across many more such situations, but never in a manner straightforwardly available for being self-consciously reported as, say, a

comprehensive ‘map’ of a (spiritual) self-in-the-making.<sup>15</sup> We also emphasise this matter here because it feeds into an additional line of, highly sympathetic, critique of Heelas’s take on new spiritualities. It is fascinating to follow Heelas’s insistence on speaking of *practice and life*; indeed, he goes to great lengths to draw away from the meta-discursive organising frames of the established religions, notably the ‘big books’ of scripture and instruction with their codification of divine commandment originating *externally* to the individual. Instead, he talks about practices, the *doing* of practices that might be described as ‘spiritual pathways’, implying that, while for some participants such practices *will* be heavily freighted with spiritual (even religious) meaning full of historical, cultural and ideological reference-points, for many others such freight is entirely *under-determining* in its influence on what they, *themselves*, derive from the practices. Furthermore, he also talks about life, sometimes in a narrower sense of ‘spiritualities of life’ directed at improving a person’s *physical* wellbeing,<sup>16</sup> but often (and increasingly) in a more encompassing sense of life as *everything* about being-in-the-world, thus voyaging towards a holistic vitalism (cf. Dewsbury & Cloke, 2009) where *mental* and *physical* wellbeing (to restate the Cartesian mind-body dualism) – and possibly as synthesised in some higher-level *spiritual* well-being – all become indexed by the deceptively simple term ‘life’.<sup>17</sup> The parallel with academic geography’s own recent turn to the horizons of practice and life is marked, another reason why we are excited by what Heelas can bring to the table of researching new-spiritual geographies. And yet, there are nagging doubts, not least because Heelas appears reluctant to jettison a residual allegiance to the (human) self as a source of *consciousness*, and more strongly of *subjectivity* understood as *conscious* reflections upon – and, yes, attempts to detect ‘immanent’ order and meaning in – the raw materials of (embodied) experience. There are moments throughout his corpus when the likes of practice and life end up, once again, being relegated to a secondary position, with the issue becoming how experiences of practice, of being alive, become translated into the registers of conscious reflection, discursive re-telling and even ideological re-scripting. Nowhere does this seem more apparent than in the following passage, with its slippery, if understandable, elisions of

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<sup>15</sup> It might be argued that our methodology of in-depth interviewing, building upon the time-space diaries and the ‘blog’-like reflections that we have asked our diarists to provide, *is* starting to effect just such self-reportage and (to an extent presumably retrospective) self-assembling.

<sup>16</sup> Where ‘life’ is equated with the corporeal body.

<sup>17</sup> Heelas also talks at length about *immanence*, about what is seemingly ‘immanent’ within the self and its own worldly experiences as *the* resource for elaboration into a spiritual realisation, orientation or sentiment, setting this *internalism* against the *externalism* of more orthodoxly *transcendent* religions (with their sense that ‘answers’ lie in the transcendent Other before and beyond). Of course, this picture becomes muddled, as Heelas acknowledges in many places, since many spiritual tracks lead to a notion of *immanent transcendence*: transcendence of the self but on the basis of the self’s own experiences, resources and potentialities. Heelas traces such thought-and-practice in the lineage of an *expressive* Romanticism, artistically expressing its interior qualities, as opposed (if closely related) to Enlightenment *analytics*, scientifically abstracting quantities. In a whimsical moment, we ponder how the whole history of academic geography could be (re)written through these kind of lenses (to an extent, it perhaps already has been so written by the likes of Denis Cosgrove).

consciousness, subjectivity, activities and practices:

The life-itself dimension only comes to matter when it enters into consciousness. To be a spiritual being, by nature, whilst not experiencing this spirituality, is of little value. Hence the importance attached to *activities* or *practices*. Ranging from yoga (relatively long-standing in Western settings) to spiritual aromatherapy, these enable participants to make contact with, and thus *experience*, the spirituality of life-itself – thereby making a difference to their *subjective-lives* (Heelas, 2008, p.33, emphases in original).

Heelas will likely disagree, but we wonder if this kind of manoeuvre – arguably a back-tracking on a more ‘revolutionary’ stance – is prompted by what we hinted at above: namely, that he does wish to *protect* new spiritualities from the challenge that they are devoid of spirituality; and that, in so doing, he ends up reconvening a (more) ‘authentic’ spiritual self who is subjectively *self-aware* of his/her own spiritual questing and, indeed, likely to be arriving at a relatively coherent sense of his/herself as an evolving spiritual person. To do so is arguably to foreclose on what elsewhere Heelas *does* leave as a more open empirical question, meaning what, exactly and in situated instances, are we to make of how real people, in all of their variety and more-or-less spiritual knowingness, *are* encountering practices with (*under*-determined) spiritual content. In effect to reiterate, here is precisely where we find our own research problematic, as well as an injunction to keep *real* practice and *actual* life to the fore, even as ‘worded’ to us on paper or in interviews, rather than allowing them to become conceptually dissipated back into stale disputes about the coherence or otherwise of religious, spiritual or secular selves.

### **Geographies of religion, spirituality and therapy**

While arguably never quite shaking the impression of being a minority field<sup>18</sup> of geographical inquiry lacking in clear identity (cf. Kong, 2001), work on geographies of religion has been widely conducted for many years now, adopting a variety of conceptual and methodological guises mirroring broader shifts in the practice of human geography, and entertaining both historical and contemporary religious subject-matters.<sup>19</sup> A Geography and Religious Belief Systems (GORABS) Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers has long been active in the US, producing a regular newsletter (often containing essays and reviews) since the late-1970s and also an online journal (of the same name) since 2006, while a Geographies of Religion, Spirituality and Faith Working

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<sup>18</sup> The argument is sometimes made that ‘secularisation’ has itself eroded the likelihood of academic geographers regarding religion as important, serious subject-matter: “[This] reflects the march of secularisation through much of the English-speaking world, encouraging many academics to downplay the possible significance of religion as a major influence on the day-to-day existence of many people” (Park, 2004, p.3).

<sup>19</sup> The study of ‘geography and religion’ has arguably been a more prominent strand within non-‘Anglo’ geography, and, for instance, an irregular German journal-cum-monograph, *Geographia Religionum*, was from the 1980s to the mid-1990s (in fact, it also included papers in English such as Kong, 1996).

Group of the Royal Geographical Society has just been founded (as of 2010).<sup>20</sup> Substantively, attention has alighted on the regional distributions of world religions, in part shaped by a Sauerian cultural ‘origins and dispersals’ lens, linking into the tracing of overall global patterns and movements of populations, ethnicities and nationalities (with geographies of pilgrimage being a lively subfield). Interest has been shown in what has sometimes been termed the denominational or congregational geography of worship, examining the sub-national distributions of professed adherents of (usually different creeds and schisms of) Christianity. At the urban scale, such an interest has translated into the social areas and everyday lived social geographies of religious groupings, such as ultra-Orthodox Jews coping in the modern city or the territorial attachments and boundaries of, say, Protestants and Catholics in the ‘sectarian city’. Consideration has been lent to the manifestations of religious belief in the material landscape, including settlements established and infused throughout by religious belief, but most obviously meaning specific religious sites such as cathedrals, churches, monasteries, mosques, synagogues and related phenomena, notably shrines, cemeteries, retreats, missions, schools and even processions. Scholars have wondered about the physical forms created, their location, occupation, catchments and (on occasion) contestation, as well as about their symbolic qualities – ideologically implanted by religious authorities – as interpreted and perhaps acted upon by their ‘ordinary’ users. A particular focus, meanwhile, has been so-called ‘sacred spaces’, indexing both natural and created spaces that come to embody the doctrines of a religion or, less precisely, become imbued with a sense of ‘holiness’ intimating the presence of the divine, a deity or its acolytes. The ‘sacred spaces’ offering for study encompass the likes of churches and shrines, of course, but have also included all manner of places from almost unvisited mountain wildernesses to prayer rooms in hospitals, and an important debate has been the extent to which ‘the sacred’ can be spatially carved out from ‘the profane’ (on varying time-scales from the momentary to the eternal). We have not referenced individual studies here – it would be hard to know where to start and certainly how to stop in selecting examples to cite – but a decent impression of the field can be gained from three textbooks (Park, 1994; Sopher, 1967; Stump, 2008), by tracking the insightful critical reviews drafted over two decades by Lily Kong (1990, 2002, 2004, 2010) and through the introductory papers and contributions to theme issue or sections of *Social and Cultural Geography* (Holloway & Valins, 2003; Yorgason & della Dora, 2009) and *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Proctor, 2006).<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, work on the geographies of religion has not said much about those

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<sup>20</sup> See the GORABS website home page and also the links through to its newsletter (with electronic copies available back to 1989) and its online journal.

<sup>21</sup> A very substantial bibliographic source has also been compiled under the auspices of GORABS, which can also be linked from the GORABS home page (in the bibliography below as GORABS, 2010).



key challenges to the contemporary Western religious landscape with which we commenced this paper: namely, secularisation and new spiritualities. This is not entirely true; indeed, in the course of her seminal 2001 review, Kong opened the discussion of how to understand the ‘politics and poetics’ of religion against the horizon of a modernity routinely associated with the secular. Underlining that boundaries between the sacred and the secular are often more fluid than our conceptual systems allow, thereby acknowledging “the simultaneous, fluctuating and conflicting investment of sacred and secular meanings in any one site” (Kong, 2001, p.212), she shifted attention from the ‘officially sacred’ spaces of (organised) religion towards the more contingent (unstable, sensuous, contested) spaces of religious practice arising “as the secular becomes ‘less obviously secular’” (Kong, 2001, p.228). The embedded quote here is actually from (Heelas, 1998, p.3), indicating – along with more explicit remarks earlier in her paper – Kong’s supposition that modernity has *not* produced (or, better, never maintained) the sharp dividing lines between the secular and the sacred (nor the comprehensive triumph of the former over the latter) that a simplistic version of secularisation theory might imply. She stresses “the intersection of sacred and secular forces in the making of place” (Kong, 2001, p.212), moreover, and the ensuing sensitivity to “urban contexts where the sacred and the secular and, indeed, varieties of the sacred, frequently exist cheek by jowl” (Kong, 2001, p.212) is definitely one that energises the approach taken in our Brighton study. A city pockmarked by all manner of spiritual sites, some thoroughly spiritual but others entailing spiritual-secular hybrids and others again being, at least on the face of it, barely-spiritual, but all as inescapably bound into the differentiating impulses of modernity (see also below): such an impression, hopefully reinforcing claims already made about the Heelas thesis, is central to our own endeavour.

James Proctor (2006, esp.pp.166-167) devotes part of his introduction to the *Annals* theme section to ‘secularisation’, referencing the Berger-Wilson arguments about the decline of (organised) religion, but also wondering a current trend of what he terms, a shade ironically, ‘deseccularisation’, entailing the rise of new forms of ‘sacralisation’ (or making sacred) whose geographical lineaments are as yet much less clear. Importantly, these threads are all picked up, comprehensively and critically, in the very recent paper by Justin Wilford (2010) designed to illuminate the ‘sacred archipelagos’ that are necessary features within ‘geographies of secularisation’. Wilford’s main ambition is to recover secularisation theory as a vibrant intellectual vehicle for debating contemporary religion – not so much because of evidence that “we” now inhabit a ‘postsecular society’ that is uncertainly either religious or secular; not so much because the over-simplicity of secularisation theory as ‘subtraction theory’, only accenting what a loss of religiosity *subtracts* from “us” culturally – but more because serious engagement with what the theory claims about *differentiation* can be the lodestone for understanding the geographically uneven impress of secular modernity. The argument – differently inflected and developed with more-or-less nuance

by different writers – is that secularisation does indeed remove (organised) religion, along with widely-accepted and practised religious belief, worship and practical application, as the singular organising core of many (if not all) modern societies.<sup>22</sup> As a result, different specialised domains of social activity – broadly indexed by terms such as “state politics, market economy, civil society and religion” (Wilford, 2010, p.330) – are produced, more-or-less divorced from any central religious axis. Such an understanding, with its demand to excavate the complexly articulated spatial surfaces comprising those varied domains,<sup>23</sup> is hence the vital opening for explaining why all kinds of ‘sacred spaces’, far from being obliterated, continue to exist or even thrive within the particular niches left for them in this “broad socio-religious ecology” (Wilford, 2010, p.329).<sup>24</sup> These niches are constituted as much by the fissures of the secular as by the schisms of the religious, and what Wilford’s paper entertains is a geographically-sensitive macro-sociology of religious change *as* propelled by processes of secularisation-as-differentiation, albeit with hints at a similarly geographical micro-variant paying attention to the textures of everyday lifeworlds.<sup>25</sup> In faint echo of Kong (2001) on the secular and the sacred in the city, Wilford (2010, p.337) paints a picture of individuals coping with “the radical pluralisation of lifeworlds produced by advanced levels of social differentiation,” and maybe – but also maybe *not* – turning to whatever versions of religiosity (or, we might add, spirituality) are ‘relevant’ to them locally.

Interestingly, paralleling their concern for secularisation, both Kong and Wilford have

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<sup>22</sup> In Berger’s 1967 work, the upshot is the shattering of an older ‘*sacred canopy*’, generating a lifeworld for most of “us” which, in its differentiated complexity, is not over-ruled by any one set of guiding principles (religious or otherwise). It is a geographically-fuelled play on ‘sacred canopy’ that leads Wilford to speak of (myriad) ‘sacred umbrellas’ or, indeed, of ‘sacred archipelagos’

<sup>23</sup> It is relatively easy to see how such a vision squares with earlier accounts, notably Louis Worth’s (1936) famous claims about the segmentation of (rationally-ordered) urban life as opposed to (morally-sanctioned) rural life. Crucially, therefore, it is easy to see the compatibility with any account that insists on regarding differentiation (under secularisation) as necessarily spatially played out, with different social spaces (large and small) coming under the sway of different (if still probably contested) local guidance ‘systems’, ‘subsystems’ or ‘social worlds’.

<sup>24</sup> “For the majority of secularisation theory’s proponents, this differentiated patchwork leads not to a decline in religious belief and practice *tout court*, but rather to their fragmentation and privatisation” (Wilford, 2010, p.335). In certain spaces/niches, specific manifestations of religious belief – most obviously perhaps, evangelical Christianity in the US ‘Bible Belt’, with its individualised, often materialistic focus – are able to thrive, arguably exploiting precisely the secularising forces that might otherwise be depicted as their undoing. Quite specific (but highly water-proof) ‘sacred umbrellas’ are thereby created, ostensibly global in their ‘mission’ perhaps but clearly also (primarily) concerned with “local *religious* strategies directed inwards, so to speak, towards mapping and maintaining local religious community” (Wilford, 2010, p.342).

<sup>25</sup> See also two excellent recent papers by Banu Gökariksel (2009), on how secularisation and religion collide in producing the (veiled) bodies and subjectivities of pious Muslim women in relation to veiling practices, and Nicolas Howe (2009), on how secular forces seek (and sometimes fail) to ‘purify’ public space of religious icons. Both papers in effect work through the problematic identified by Wilford, albeit at those more everyday levels which remain somewhat marginal to the broad (macro-social) thrust of his arguments. Gökariksel (2009, p.658), invoking Kong (2001), also writes that she “take[s] the religious and the secular as mutually and contextually constituted. From this perspective, the religious and the secular do not simply compete with one another but also intersect in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.”

something to add about new spiritualities in their respective papers. Work over the years on ‘sacred spaces’ has sometimes considered forms of spirituality *other* than those of Kong’s ‘officially sacred’,<sup>26</sup> and Martha Henderson (1993) explores the use of the term ‘spiritual geography’ by two popular authors (Griffin, 1992; Norris, 1993), concluding that – as well as some concern for the organised religious traditions of a region, alongside a deep investment in specific particular physical/scenic environments – ultimately the term reflects a deeper “human need and ability to legitimise the unknown through the construct of place” (Henderson, 1993, p.472). In effect, therefore, the more that notions of spirituality surface in writings on the geographies of religion,<sup>27</sup> the more that the field cracks open its prior closure around the world’s organised religions, opening itself to *all* that potentially crowds in for attention if Henderson’s ‘definition’ is even a rough approximation of what equating the spiritual and the geographical might release. The ‘*and spirituality*’ in the title of the Holloway and Valin’s (2002) theme section is very significant,<sup>28</sup> therefore, as too is the inclusion of ‘Spirituality’ (and, another potentially all-encompassing term, ‘Faith’) in the title of the new UK Working Group (see above). Kong’s 2001 paper once again stands as a leader here, partly because it embraces “works that attempt to capture the ‘spiritual essence’ and poetic quality of religious places through descriptions of their religious folklore, symbols, craft and food” (Kong, 2001, p.219), and specifically because of what it then says about the ‘poetics’ of ‘new religious movements’ as encapsulated in the example of making Wiccan sacred places (referencing Hume, 1998). Wilford says less directly about new spiritualities, but does reflect on how “the loss of an overarching spiritual canopy [see Footnote 22] has provided room for countless variations

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<sup>26</sup> And it should be noted that a very substantial body of writing (by academic geographers, anthropologists and scholars of religions) can be traced on the spiritual geographies of ‘sacred space’ (and ‘sacred places’) *outside* of the West, particularly considering Hindu and, occasionally, Buddhist or Taoist understandings of the other-worldliness, hence the spiritual, meaningfully attached – and, for many, supposed concretely to inhere within – different sorts of locations (from mountains to monasteries, including pilgrimage routes). It is to be regretted that this work is not better known in the wider reaches of academic geography, not least because of the extent to which it can be construed as reflecting a postcolonial concern for ‘subaltern’ knowledges, and also given how much has been written in this respect by scholars of *non*-Western origin. Some works of spiritual geography also mesh, however, with the ‘folk geography’ and ‘indigenous geography’ streams of research on the margins of US cultural geography, notably in the loving depiction of the spiritual beliefs and practices sedimented into the ‘folkways’ of particular (often remote, rural) peoples, native Americans and settlers, dwelling in quite particular North American places, environments and landscapes. See the GORABS newsletters and also the GORABS (2010) bibliographic resource for many references supporting the outline claims in this footnote.

<sup>27</sup> We could say more here about the line of argument about ‘spiritual landscapes’ pursued by Dewsbury and Cloke (2009): in small measure obviously inflected by claims about spirituality being much *more* than, say, religious belief in a deity, and hence open to Heelas-type positions on new spiritualities, Dewsbury and Cloke are nonetheless *here*, in this paper, chiefly concerned to explore (post-phenomenological) epistemological reformulations of how ‘to think our being in the world’. The ‘our’ here is initially that of the researcher, the academic geographer, although they evidently intend it to be something resonating with how all of ‘us’ deal with “a performative presencing of some sense of spirit” (Dewsbury & Cloke, 2009, p.696).

<sup>28</sup> In line with the more developed arguments of Kong and (especially) Wilford, Holloway and Valins (2002, p.6) discuss how declining patterns of churchgoing in the West are, nonetheless, paralleled by “increased interest and participation in ‘alternative’ spiritualities and fundamentalist forms of belief.”

on new and old forms of religious expression,” including the rise of *both* “New Age beliefs and a ‘spiritualisation’ of traditional religion” (Wilford, 2010, p.339).

Despite these important pointers, however, the *actual* geographical research on new spiritualities, certainly that which is more-or-less explicitly configured as such, is not all that plentiful. That said, it does include two very substantial contributions already briefly mentioned, those by Julian Holloway (1998, 2000, 2003a, 2003b) and Janet Conneely (2003), both of whom expressly ground their inquiries in the unique setting – historically, culturally, spiritually – of Glastonbury, Somerset, UK.<sup>29</sup> A supposedly unique energy-full environment (set astride the St Michael ley line and surveyed by the Tor) entwines here with a sense of ‘deep time’, “almost an excess of history in this landscape” (Holloway, 2003b, p.162), meaning a sprawling real-cum-mythological history of spiritual events, personages and processes. Attracted to this place, Glastonbury has become home to “a community of ‘like-minded’ people attempting to achieve a spiritually meaningful existence” (Holloway, 2003b, p.162), generating what one of Holloway’s respondents calls “‘a ‘cauldron’, a melting pot for allowing a new more sacred human being to emerge”” (in Holloway, 2003b, p.162).<sup>30</sup> A dazzling variety of spiritualities and attendant practices – the diverse pieces of what Holloway (1998, p.289) calls the “spiritual jigsaw” – have arisen in Glastonbury, many being far from identical, resulting in occasional spiritual disharmonies, but the overall impression is of a *shared collectivity*, a genuine ‘spiritual community’. Parallels with the findings of the Kendal study (see above) are legion, but Holloway and Conneely arguably go further – thanks to their disciplinary allegiance to geography – in teasing out the multiple ‘spatialities’ of Glastonbury as a new-spiritual centre. These spatialities inhere in the cosmologies, symbols and rituals of the New Age belief systems themselves, which both authors reconstruct in some detail, with Conneely in particular offering a remarkable participatory account of ceremonies taking place, most dramatically, after dark on hilltops or in forests. The spatialities are also tackled at the more banal level of everyday settlement spaces: on the one hand, the grocery and hardware stores jostling with the vegetarian cafés, New Agey shops, yoga studios and aromatherapy workshops, all spread along a ‘typical’ country town high street; and on the other hand, the different population cohorts of this place, with their varying new-spiritual, conventional religious and overtly secular orientations, creating a tangled social geography irreducible to the

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<sup>29</sup> See also John Wylie’s (2002, 2003) non-representational geographies of visiting Glastonbury and ‘ascending the Tor’, albeit the town (and its spiritualities) are less the *focus* here than a complex meditation on encountering, viewing and performing (however fleetingly) rather than (*longue durée*) ‘dwelling’ in landscape.

<sup>30</sup> The seeming uniqueness of Glastonbury is emphasised: “Many of the respondents spoken to consider the ‘alternative’ community [here] different, distinct and special, especially in comparison to other rural towns of a similar size” (Holloway, 2003b, p.162). Interestingly, Conneely also brings in some comparative evidence pertaining to Totnes and Hebden Bridge, two other country towns (the former in Devon, the latter in Yorkshire, both UK), but her main study site is clearly Glastonbury.

simplistic ‘social areas’ of mainstream ethnic-religious geographical inquiries. A third scale of spatiality here is that of the body, alighting on the ‘moving body’ as it shifts between sites and experiences afforded by Glastonbury, ‘sensing’ the possibilities for spiritual being-and-becoming bubbling from the natural, social and spiritual spaces inhabited, and also in some measure mimetically learning (from other bodies) how to be a member of the locality’s sensual-spiritual collectivity.<sup>31</sup>

We could elaborate these claims in various ways, but it will suffice to say that our own encounter with Brighton cannot but be steered by the examples set by Holloway and Conneely. What we will emphasise in concluding this section of the paper, though, is that these two authors, notably Holloway, are also working in the horizon of Kong’s (2001) reorientation of research on geographies of religion away from the ‘officially sacred’ to all manner of spaces (activities, events, people and so on) where a spiritually-attuned quest for the sacred may be manifested, even if only for a short time. Holloway (2000) examines what he terms, in a Latourian vein, the ‘immutable mobiles’ – a yoga video, a meditational text, a local ‘alternative’ newsletter, an aromatherapist’s calling card – that *do* serve, as it were, to stabilise (to ‘institutionalise’) Glastonbury’s new-spiritual community in time and space. In contrast, in his 2003 paper on ‘make-believe’, he focuses instead on the more transitory moments when, through small embodied actions, the sacred is (relationally) carved out of the profane (or secular). By relocating objects in a living room, by adopting a certain bodily posture on a bus, by achieving an embodied openness to silence in a street or even to the breaks in that silence: in all of these ways, and many more, Holloway’s respondents reveal to him processes of more-or-less actively *making* ‘sacred spaces’ almost anywhere at any time. But Holloway pushes these claims further, suggesting that this evidence arguably points towards an ongoing sense, for these new-spiritualists, of the sacredness “immanent in every moment of existence” (Holloway, 2003a, p.1972); in which case it is less about carving the sacred from the profane, and more about how the everyday is constantly on the brink of being sacralised, ‘spiritualised’ even, to the extent that the question becomes more about times, spaces, things and happenings which somehow remain ‘profane’ (what is it about such time-spaces that they *fail* to afford an opening to the sacred/spiritual?). Operating in a broadly non-representational frame,<sup>32</sup> Holloway

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<sup>31</sup> There are other brushes with the New Age in the geographical literature, most obviously in studies of the UK’s New Age Travellers and their apparent threat to (‘pollution’ of) mainstream settled spaces, ‘idyllic’ constructions of the rural and specific heritage sites such as Stonehenge (eg. Cresswell, 1996, Chap.4 [on ‘hippy convoys’]; Halfacree, 1996), although the new-spiritual dimensions here are very much secondary. That said, Cresswell does, in part, configure struggles over ‘hippy’ mobility, and specifically the wish to access sites reckoned to be of spiritual significance in their New Age cosmology, as a conflictual meeting of ‘the sacred and the profane’.

<sup>32</sup> Albeit engaging at length, certainly in his thesis (Holloway, 1998), with the ‘dialogical’ arguments of Mikel Bakhtin, which do still insist upon patterns of representation brought into engagement, however fragmented, with one another.

repeatedly stresses the ineffable qualities of what people experience, frequently evading satisfactory translation into words,<sup>33</sup> and as such his respondents do not appear as coherent spiritual selves fully present *to* themselves. Rather, they appear as beings whose spirituality is “actualised through being infused with affect and sensation” (Holloway, 2006, p.185), where the latter quote derives not from Holloway’s Glastonbury New Age research but from a later project concerned with the ‘enchanted spaces’ of the séance. This is not to say that words fail completely, that experiences cannot be at least partly worded, but it is to acknowledge that research on new-spiritual geographies – or, indeed, on old-spiritual geographies!<sup>34</sup> – will never be entirely successful if forgetting about the bodily realm, and about how the spiritual may be ‘something’ lodged as much in muscle, sinew and nerves, always and unavoidably ‘placed’ in real (sequences of) time-spaces, as in consciousness, cognition and cogitation.

### *Spiritual therapeutic landscapes (and geographies of yoga)?*

There is one final body of geographical literature to be noted as a framing for our own research, that offering a treatment of the spiritual within the work of health/medical geographers. The apparent importance of an overall mind-body wellbeing to human health – to avoiding or recovering from physical and mental ill-health, and perhaps even to enhancing feelings of physical and psychological health – has been a pivotal recognition, and indeed might be portrayed as central to the far-reaching conceptual shift from a *medical* to a *health* geography (eg. Kearns & Gesler, 2001; Kearns & Moon, 2002; Parr, 2002). The latter encompasses a more expansive sense of ‘health’ than arguably present in Western biomedicine, and as such necessarily builds in other dimensions of human existence, ones conceived variously as to do with emotions, meanings, socio-cultural attachments, political-economic circumstances, that a narrowly ‘medical’ focus cannot necessarily detect. In so doing, such an opening up of the subdiscipline has inevitably bumped up against notions of religion and spirituality as components contributing, for some people in some times and places, to the maintenance, improvement or (just possibly) deterioration of health.<sup>35</sup> Probably the most obvious place for this engagement has been in relation to the influential

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<sup>33</sup> Holloway bravely ‘pokes fun’ at his own attempts to elucidate satisfactory verbal accounts from his respondents.

<sup>34</sup> We insert this qualification, since, to underscore previous caveats, there *are* spiritualities – perhaps we can all them ‘old spiritualities’ – present in conventional religions: indeed, such religions are arguably, at bottom, still nothing but the spiritual yearnings of their memberships, albeit translated into a search for spiritual meaning as something ‘handed down from on high’, less immanent in the immediate.

<sup>35</sup> Living under strict religious injunctions against, say, emotional expression can arguably lead on occasion to reduced (mental) health, even to the production of mental ill-health, as was considered in research on the geographies of mental health in the Scottish Highlands (eg. Parr, Philo & Burns, 2005). Of course, if the many wars and acts of violence, persecution and condemnation conducted over the centuries in the name of ‘religion’ are considered in this light, then religion, if not spirituality, has often been highly detrimental to human health (physical and mental).

concept of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ introduced by Wil Gesler in the early-1990s, which, from the outset, entrained an alertness to how the spiritual registers of given places might just play a role in the health status of occupants and visitors. Seeds of the concept surfaced in Gesler (1991), itself a founding text in the above-mentioned shift from medical to health geographies, but it was in his 1992 paper, followed by substantive exemplifications such as the 1993 and 1996 papers, that Gesler really captured the idea of therapeutic landscapes as sites, situations, localities, regions and environments reckoned, through their physical, social and symbolic properties, to be conducive to healing people of diverse physical and mental afflictions (impairments, sicknesses, malaises of all kinds). Tellingly, he occasionally injected ‘spiritual’ as a fourth property alongside the physical-social-symbolic triad, and certain of his examples – the Greek sanctuary of Epidauros, the French pilgrimage site of Lourdes<sup>36</sup> – clearly told of people electing to visit sites of religious-spiritual significance, whether associated with ancient Greek gods, the Christian God of Catholicism or other deities, wherein acts of healing might be sought and witnessed. In his Epidauros study, for instance, he wrote of needing to investigate sites with “an enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental and spiritual health” (Gesler, 1993, p.171); and it is revealing that other authors, when summarising Gesler’s *oeuvre*, can couch his prime focus as “exceptional places – places of pilgrimage, therapy and treatment, like *holy spaces*, spas and hospitals” (Wakefield & McMullan, 2005, p.299, our emphasis).

The therapeutic landscapes concept has mutated in various directions since Gesler’s opening statements, as Gesler (2005) himself happily reflects, not least in that – while the centrality of *healing places* (Gesler, 2003), including the ‘exceptional places’ just listed, undoubtedly remains – the optic has now widened to incorporate places that are both more everyday, city streets perhaps, and less about healing *per se* than about simply maintaining healthy equilibriums. More specifically, some researchers have sought to develop the spiritual connotations of the concept, in which regard Alison Williams (2010) has recently made key claims about the possibilities for researching what she terms ‘spiritual therapeutic landscapes’. She details a sizeable evidence-base from sociology, anthropology, epidemiology and elsewhere suggesting that “spirituality can have both a protective effect on overall health as well as a healthy impact in the context of illness” (Williams, 2010, p.1634), but admits that “[v]ery little work has addressed spirituality using the therapeutic landscape framework” (Williams, 2010, p.1633). She then offers a case study of what might be termed an ‘old-spiritual’ therapeutic landscape, in the sense explained by Footnote 34, since she uses participant observation and documentary sources to recreate something of the spirituality insinuated in the spaces and rituals of the popular pilgrimage site, one resonant with healing stories, known as St. Anne de Beaupre Shrine in Quebec, Canada. In

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<sup>36</sup> Gesler’s interest in sites of pilgrimage of course immediately flags a link to that long-standing and extensive concern for pilgrimage central to work under the GORABS umbrella (see earlier discussion).

an earlier paper, meanwhile, she had touched upon the spirituality seemingly inherent in the varieties of mind-body construct pervading the ‘therapeutic’ ambitions of holistic medicine centres (Williams, 1999), hence reaching out to the new spiritualities of prime interest for our research, and in her 2010 statement she also mentions the work of David Conradson (2005, 2007) on the spiritual implications written into the phenomenon of ‘retreats’ where the first objective is attending to unwell bodies and minds.<sup>37</sup> Leading from work on voluntary community ‘care’ centres of different kinds, including ones occupying spaces where there can be a lingering spiritual ‘atmosphere’ associated with other (religious) uses to which the spaces are put (Conradson, 2003a, 2003b), Conradson has probed the complex ‘ecologies of place’ comprising these retreats, entailing inter-lacings of natural (often rural) environs and scenery, social dynamics running between guests and staff, and a more intangible reworking of distance/separation and interaction/solitude. Significantly, he has come increasingly to concentrate on *stillness* as a momentary state-of-being for guests, itself produced by the set-apartness of these spaces from the hurly-burly of busy lives,<sup>38</sup> reinforced by the possibility of remaining highly solitary while resident at the retreats. It is most obviously here, in this being apart and to an extent alone as an individual self contemplating *itself* and its ‘place in nature’, that an intimation of the spiritual may be felt, either as a feeling that arises and then vanishes or as one held for longer – a bodily sensation or a conscious reflection – perhaps carried home by the guest.<sup>39</sup> While the defining feature of ‘retreat’ is its marked separation from the space-times of everyday life, work and struggles, Conradson also stresses the connections *back* to this everyday realm, expressed in the likes of an individual discovering (*à la* Heelas) “new dimensions of self-hood” (Conradson, 2005, p.346), and in so doing he anticipates our own ideas about how new-spiritual spaces arguably have a capacity to ‘resonate’ with other time-spaces of an individual’s lifeworld.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Williams also briefly mentions studies with an explicit therapeutic landscape orientation that explore how the ‘sacred geographies’ of indigenous peoples necessarily embody a fusion of place, spirituality and healing (eg. Dobbs, 1997; Madge, 1998; Wilson, 2003). Again, these are studies that appear in the GORABS territory, being referenced in GORABS (2010).

<sup>38</sup> Often vexed lives, given the physical ill-health with which guests have to cope in the course of their ‘normal’ everyday lives, often demanding carers of various kinds to be continually intruding on their privacy and intimacy of their home-worlds.

<sup>39</sup> At the Holton Lee rural respite care centre, a building called Faith House – named after Lady Faith Lees, one of the centre’s original founders – numbers ‘spirituality’ as one of its four functions, alongside the environment, the arts and disability: it includes a ‘quiet room’ for reflection (see Conradson, 2005, Footnote 2, p.344).

<sup>40</sup> Usefully, Conradson (2005, p.341) discusses “a relational continuity by virtue of an individual’s ongoing internal [imagined, felt] connections with people and events in other places and times.” This notion of ‘relational continuity’ – considerably less spatially stretched-out than in the case of a retreat – is one that can illuminate our own research, since we are precisely concerned with the character of the flows, the relational continuities, leaking out from the spaces of new-spiritual practices (the yoga studios/sessions and the meditation rooms/classes) into the other time-spaces (activities, conversations, deliberations) of our participants’ lifeworlds. This is, of course, also a core theme in the work on a yoga retreat conducted by Jen Lea (2008).



Intriguingly, we have even found a study addressing the geographies of yoga *and* framing its concerns through the lens of Gesler's therapeutic landscapes. Unsurprisingly perhaps, very little has yet been written by geographers on the subject-matter of yoga, except insofar as it receives occasional mentions as one ingredient within Eastern spaces of pilgrimage, and it is only very recently that scholars have taken yoga seriously as a phenomenon with a *geography* worthy of note in its own right. Anne-Cécile Hoyez, a French geographer, has completed a PhD thesis on the 'world-space of yoga' (Hoyez, 2005), reported in a paper of 2007 (also Hoyez, 2006), where the principal objective is to trace the 'globalisation' of yoga as an amalgam of replicable (if adaptable) teachings and practices, identifying historical stages in yoga's diffusion out of India to the wider world, and also discerning consistent imaginings of an 'ideal' yogic place that in effect reach back to India (with India being configured as the yogic heartland to which serious practitioners remain forever attuned if never having actually visited). Hoyez also studies the global spread of a yogic therapeutic landscape,<sup>41</sup> meaning the countless attempts to create viable yogic spaces that can, however minimally, approximate the ideal of the *ashram* as a resident community of yogis living in tranquil and scenic natural surroundings – purified, rendered sacred – with plentiful micro-locations for intense yogic practice. It is worth quoting at length here:

These [ideal] elements recall, on the one hand, the divine nature of the world's construction invoked by most religions, and, on the other hand, are associated with an idea of wellbeing consistent with yoga practice. Transferred to urban yoga centres, that idea leads to a series of modifications of the built form of the place: there can be a photograph of Himalayan peaks, or of the Ganges, and there is a particular attention given to the warmth and quietness of the place (Hoyez, 2007, p.116).

This passage tells us that Hoyez interprets yogic spaces as, at bottom, spiritually (even religiously) infused, and elsewhere she states that “[a]ll places where yoga is practiced are attracted to specific lifestyles, often recalling Hindu thought – or at least some interpretation of it” (Hoyez, 2007, p.122).<sup>42</sup> Of course, she acknowledges that the spaces are designed to accomplish ‘an idea of wellbeing’, and as such can readily be cast as Gesler-esque therapeutic spaces, and as such they are ones where spirituality and therapy are usually supposed to be spliced together, mutually supporting one another.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> She considers different yogic spaces spread across the world, in part using interview and questionnaire data but supplemented by documentary work on the likes of yoga centre advertising on the internet. In her 2007 paper, she provides brief descriptions of the yogic therapeutic landscapes found in: Rishikesh, north of New Delhi, India, an old hill station that has evolved into a global hub of yogic activity, configured as both a ‘spiritual haven’ for yogis and, partly in recognition of its touristic identity, a ‘supermarket of yoga’; Yogaville, US, a purpose-built and –run settlement, in part originating as a place for applying yoga as a drug treatment therapy; La Mercy, Durban; and Dhanokosa, Scotland.

<sup>42</sup> Oddly perhaps, Williams (2010) does not mention or even reference Hoyez's work, even though it can easily be enlisted as an excellent example of research on a ‘spiritual therapeutic landscape’.

<sup>43</sup> Which is not to say that all practitioners of yoga in these spaces will be spiritually inclined, and the impression is that there was indeed some variation in the levels of spiritual involvement – of preparedness to

passage also indicates that, as “the practice of yoga results in a re-appropriation of the place and the landscape” (Hoyez, 2007, p.122), so all manner of ‘modifications’, small and large, cannot but be made to the ideal, especially in the case of small and cramped urban yoga studios competing for a niche in the city fabric, but that efforts will commonly still be made to allow in glimpses of ‘nature’ and to foster a local environment of ‘warmth and quietness’. This brief summation cannot do full justice to Hoyez’s contribution, but it is evidently a key reference-point for our own research, as well as nicely illustrating how yoga sits at the cross-section of (new) spirituality, therapy and space.

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follow the yogic path beyond its corporeal dimensions to its spiritual layers and origins – with one instructive contrast being that Hoyez’s research participants in India were *always* ready to sit down for in-depth interviews directly *after* a yoga session, whereas those in France were *always* too busy after sessions, needing to rush on to their next appointment or commitment (and hence had to be tracked down for interviews, if at all possible, at a subsequent date).

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