

# Spirituality on the way to globalisation

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People gathering in New York City's Times Square to salute the sun at the summer solstice. Ancient spiritual teachings such as yoga are very popular in the western world. But many of its spiritual elements and ideas have disappeared on the way to modernity. © Corbis

(Phys.org) -- Spirituality is not what it once was – that much is certain, according to anthropologist Peter van der Veer. Working at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, he has examined the significance of the spiritual and its transformation processes in modern societies using the example of China and India. He has found that contradictions to the concept of spirituality are part of this and have by no means stood in the way of an international career. However, many of the modern trends contradict the original idea of spirituality.

Recently, when several thousands of people gathered in Times Square at

the summer solstice to salute the sun, it was very clear just how much yoga has become a Western mass movement. But Peter van der Veer doubts whether such events in fact have anything to do with the original ideas of [spirituality](#): "The critical elements, like those to be found in the spiritual ideas at the beginning of the 20th century, are missing."

For Peter van der Veer, spirituality, along with other secular ideas of nation, equality, the middle class, democracy and justice, is one of the core elements in the history of modernity, which were directed against the traditional social systems and moral concepts. "The spiritual and secular arose at the same time in the 19th century as two related alternatives to institutionalised religion in the Euro-American modern age", is one of the Holland-born researcher's core theories. With this, he also rejects the commonly held view that the cradle of spirituality lies in India, in the realm of modern myths. "There isn't even a word for spirituality in Sanskrit", he adds.

Nor was there any mention of Hinduism, Taoism or Confucianism in Asia prior to the encounter with Western imperialism. They only changed to an "-ism" as a result of the intellectual interaction with the West. Van der Veer is convinced that this flourishing spiritual exchange between East and West is a key element in the development of modernity in general and its spirituality in particular. "For me, it is part of a process that I call interactional history", explains the Director at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen.

In fact, the exchange of the new revolutionary ideas is not restricted to just communication between the US and Europe. In the search for alternatives to the institutionalised religions, Western intellectuals, artists and other social progressive thinkers had, at an early stage, turned their attention to the traditions of the East. The list of those who referred in their works or letters to Indian progressive thinkers reads like a Who's Who of the European intellectual world, ranging from Voltaire, Herder,

Humboldt, Schlegel and Novalis through to Schopenhauer and Goethe who, among other things, incorporated special theatre techniques from Sanskrit in his Faust.

Ideas came from India as the centre of spirituality and mysticism, and the birthplace of ancient philosophical traditions that can fill the gaps that had arisen for many since the Enlightenment. "These, in turn, also led to fertile ground in India itself ", explains the researcher about the reciprocal dynamics of the streams of thought. Religious movements primarily in India adopted the Western discourse on Eastern spirituality. Soon, political undertones also entered into the discussion. "Many emphasised that Hindus are the true Indians whose civilisation is threatened by decline due to Muslim rule", the Göttingen-based anthropologist says, describing the burgeoning national feeling that has become part of the debate. Others saw the West and in particular British colonial power as dangers for Hindu culture and civilisation, and turned to spirituality to recover or safeguard their own identity.

As the different concepts of spirituality show, they combine a series of contradictions and contrasts. In this vein, spirituality appears as a universal thought which, at the same time, can be linked to national concepts. As an example of this, van der Veer cites the leader of the Indian independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi. "According to Gandhi, no one who was born into a certain tradition and civilisation should be evangelized or converted", explains the researcher. Instead, each person should seek the truth in his own traditions. In this sense, Gandhi was able to argue for a spiritual nation that overcomes international religious differences. "In view of the fact that the tensions between Muslims and Hindus are part of the biggest problems facing the Indian sub-continent, the idea of such a universal, all-embracing spirituality is of exceptional political significance", says van der Veer.

Gandhi's interpretation of spirituality is also interesting in another

respect, as its basic characteristics can apply to the total concept. Again he considers the ideas a good example of the fact that spirituality is in no way the opposite of secularity. "Gandhi's spirituality was very much linked with it when he argued that all religions should be treated equally and the State should have a neutral attitude towards them." These spiritual principles still apply in India and demonstrate the continuity between the colonial and post-colonial situation. "This could be termed Indian secularism", in van der Veer's opinion.

Nor does van der Veer see a simple opposition of spirituality and materialism. "In fact, they often imply one another", the researcher has observed, using developments in China and India. Only as the result of liberalization of liberalising the economy under the influence of global capitalism have traditional spiritual ideas and practices such as tai chi, feng shui and qi gong again become socially acceptable in China, a country that replaced Confucianism with an aggressive secularism that had vigorously attacked religions, temples and priests. This linking of spirituality and materialism in the wake of economic globalisation can also be seen in India. In the case of India, the impetus came from the well-educated middle class which, in the 1970s and 1980s, had gone to the US in search of jobs in the medical and technical professions. "There, they were confronted by the aggressive marketing of Indian spirituality that was offered in a market for health, sports or management training", reports van der Veer. It did not take long before this practice was also imported to India.

The researcher in Göttingen considers the perhaps most interesting part of the link with neoliberal capitalism to be the global business practices in which spirituality is a means for increasing chances of success. Certainly China's isolation between 1950 and 1980 delayed the introduction of Chinese spirituality onto the world market, but in the meantime they have followed up the global massive success of yoga with tai chi, qi gong and feng shui.

Evidently, meditation techniques and spiritual experiences fit in extremely well with the lifestyle and zeitgeist of the modern working population on the path to self-optimisation for the market and the economy. Experimental styles of having a spiritual life offer an alternative to the many secular and religious lives that appear empty. "Looking at it from the outside, they allow people within disciplining institutions to pursue their goals in their career and life without undue stress or depression", van der Veer believes. Instead of dealing with the challenges of their own life, they manage comfortably with the spiritual experience, produced in many different ways.

However, if yoga, tai chi or qi gong today serve as products of the wellness industry of a body culture to increase the efficiency of a disciplined, well-balanced workforce in a capitalist society, the movement oriented in its beginnings against established churches or against colonialism or capitalism proceeds ad absurdum.

**More information:** Spirituality in Modern Society, Social Research 76: 4, 2009, 1097-1120. Translated into Chinese by Dan Smyer Yu, *Northwestern Journal of Ethnology*, no.75, Spring 2012, pp.115-124.

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