



# ENGAGED *Spirituality*

Spirituality and social transformation in mainstream American religious traditions



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Spirituality and Social Transformation in  
Mainstream American Religious Traditions

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*Preface*

With funding from the Governance and Civil Society unit of the Ford Foundation, the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture conducted interviews with 77 exemplary individuals who embody an engaged spirituality—a connection between spiritual practice and a commitment to social justice. These individuals in California, Pennsylvania, New York, and Washington, D.C. represented diverse faith traditions (Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu) and a variety of social causes. The sample included 34 women and 43 men. Open-ended interviews explored the connections between social engagement and the experiences, feelings, and practices associated with spirituality.

This report summarizes findings from the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture’s research project “Engaged Spirituality: Spirituality and Social Transformation in Mainstream American Religious Traditions.” A more thorough discussion of the findings from this project will be published in a forthcoming book written by Gregory C. Stanczak and published by Rutgers University Press. For additional resources on engaged spirituality, visit [www.usc.edu/crc](http://www.usc.edu/crc).

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“Oh, pray, Sister, that nuclear weapons will be eliminated.”

Well, I do of course. But I don't pray that God will eliminate nuclear weapons. God didn't make them. We did. We can eliminate them tomorrow.

— *Sister Joan Chittister*

Jewish optimism is rooted in the profound contempt for life as it is...Because you can imagine the way of life different from the one you live in, that's optimism... Dissatisfaction about which you do nothing is the source of impoverishment but dissatisfaction about which you do something is the source of all human progress.

— *Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman*

## *Introduction*

Spirituality, for some, evokes thoughts of a private quest for individual enlightenment and a modern day marketing barrage of books, CDs, lectures, and crystals. But this is a one-sided perception of spirituality. What we discuss here is spirituality as a powerful and underexamined resource in the lives of people working for social change in the United States. While spiritual practice is nothing new for social activists, social scientists have largely ignored personal spirituality as a significant motivator for change. Surprisingly, faculty members in seminaries and rabbinical schools have also overlooked the social role of spirituality, even though they commonly acknowledge that religious institutions are potential agents of social change.

The task of this report is to examine the various ways that change agents experience spirituality in their lives, and the potential impact that this has for creating a more just social order. The rich texture of our interviews may be found in the forthcoming book mentioned in the preface. This report is simply an abstract of our research, but it does identify a number of categories and analytical frameworks that are important in understanding spirituality as a resource for social change.

In order to fully understand the relationship between spirituality and social change, we must discuss spirituality in ways that are more complex than the stereotypes of individual transcendence or reflection. We must rethink spirituality as an integral part of everyday life among people who are dedicating themselves to social service. As an integral aspect of everyday life, spirituality is a feeling, an experience, a relationship, a connection of intimate practices that, much like other feelings or relationships in our lives, takes on the

texture and color of what is going on around us. For some people, this means that spirituality must address the injustices that they perceive at work, the poverty that they see in their communities, or the global disparities that are so apparent in health services in developing nations. In light of moral issues such as these, spirituality can be a consoling relief to the troubles of everyday life, but it may also function as a powerful and sometimes disruptive force that acts back upon these moral injustices. This is the spirituality that we discuss here.

To understand this active spirituality — this engaged spirituality — we must look at the ways that individuals act upon their spiritual lives or, in other words, the way that they engage in the act of constructing meaningful practices and actions. We must also understand that these experiences and actions are always engaged within the social constraints and opportunities of the world we live in and the interpretations that we carry around with us. Finally, we must acknowledge that individuals feel engaged by spiritual experiences in transformative ways that can change the way that they see their world and creatively change the way they act back upon it.

### *Definitions*


The following terms are used throughout these pages. These definitions are based on the experiences and interpretations of the individuals we interviewed.

**Spiritual experience:** personal or collective experience that is interpreted by the individual to connect him or her with a socially constructed yet subjectively meaningful ideal, entity, or higher power.

**Spiritual practice:** any act, ritual, or attempt at communication or communion with this socially constructed yet subjectively meaningful ideal, entity, or higher power.

**Spirituality:** a collective term for the experience, practice, interpretation, and implementation of this phenomenon.

**Engaged spirituality:** action in society that is motivated by transcendent moral values and is supported by regular practices that seek some connection with God or the sacred.



Biography, Behavior and Belief

## *The Sources of Spirituality*

**A**n overly simplistic analysis of the reasons that religious and lay leaders engage in social service might be summed up in the statement, “That’s what religious people *do*.” Yet, if we are to understand spirituality as a resource that sparks and sustains these actions, we must consider the ways in which this connection was established. Throughout our conversations we noted four main categories that describe how individuals develop a spiritually motivated commitment to social change: inherited engagement, learned engagement, social encounters, and spiritual epiphanies. As these suggest, spiritual commitments to change are not always found in the church, synagogue, or mosque, but they can emerge in unexpected places and at unexpected times. These different locales suggest places where these connections might be encouraged and fostered.

#### INHERITED ENGAGEMENT.

Connections between social and spiritual commitment can be derived from family practice or long-term involvement within religious institutions. For example, the foundation of Rabbi Leonard Beerman's lifelong commitment to justice was his family's experience during the Great Depression. To individuals like Beerman, the combination of social commitments and spirituality is the only way to express faith that is deeply fused with one's sense of identity.



#### LEARNED ENGAGEMENT.

There is a widely held assumption that education is a transforming “secular” experience, but examples such as Brother Ed Dunn's experience suggest it can be spiritually transforming as well. The pluralism and diversity of collegiate independence can open many religious options, such as new ways of practice, histories of social engagement, or new philosophies about spiritual commitments to social change.

*As a child, Rabbi Leonard Beerman learned of the historical struggles, the great sense of compassion, and the integral role of peace in the stories of his Jewish heritage. During the Great Depression, the stories told at intimate family meals took on a different tone. Financial ruin hit the Beerman family hard and crippled their neighbors, some of whom harbored prejudices against the handful of Jews in town. During this time of economic struggle, the Beermans' weekly Sabbath became a celebration, albeit bittersweet, of a particularly American identity, shared with their non-Jewish neighbors. This identity, while still drawing respectfully from Jewish tradition, also incorporated the new unifying challenges of economic struggle and injustice.*

*As a student, Brother Ed Dunn took a course on liberation theology with Gustavo Gutierrez at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas. The course “absolutely blew my mind,” said Dunn. “It was one of the classes I would run to every morning, because he was giving me words for some senses...that I had had about who God is and what the options for the poor are and how you put your faith into practice in the social realm — he gave me a vocabulary for it that I never had before.”*

**SOCIAL ENCOUNTER.** The connection between spirituality and social engagement for others may occur during or after a particularly salient social experience. Such moments are what Emile Durkheim described as universally fundamental building blocks of religious sentiment and meaning. In the case of Alice Linsmeir, witnessing community solidarity and faith against the backdrop of palpable life and death circumstances fused social and spiritual commitments. On a more local level, volunteers who assume that they will make a difference in their communities often come away from the experience having learned that they were the ones most dramatically transformed.



**Alice Linsmeir recalled the time shortly after being hired by Jesuit Refugee Services in the 1980s during the war in El Salvador.** She was horrified by the war, but amazed at the resiliency of those hardest hit. At the time, Salvadorans were organizing themselves while still in refugee camps, mobilizing displaced communities and setting plans for repopulating their massacred villages even without official approval from the government to return. When asked what sustained her in the face of such dire conditions in the refugee camps where she stayed for six years, Linsmeir replied, “The community was so solid, unified, full of faith.”

**P**entecostal Pastor Richard Ramos described in detail the day that a social mandate was spiritually placed before him. Lying alone in a hotel bed, Ramos had a vision. “I knew I was dreaming,” he explains, “but I also knew that I was very conscious and very awake and very cognizant of what was taking place in this vision.” God, sounding like rushing water and thunder, called to him saying, “Thou man of God.” Ramos saw a finger extending toward him and he was knocked to the ground. Ramos asked, “What do you want me to do with my life?” At that point in the vision he was transported to a café and was now seated across from God. Smiling, God said, “I want you to kick the devil’s butt. That’s what I want.” Immediately the scene changed and Ramos saw himself, a poor Latino from East Los Angeles, being introduced to city leaders who recognized him and warmly shook his hand. Over time and through his work with gang rehabilitation Ramos suggests, “I began to see the fulfillment of this vision, the vision of the future.” Today Ramos is well known in his town and has in fact shaken the hands of many city leaders.

**SPIRITUAL EPIPHANY.** Visions, dreams, voices, or an overwhelming sense of clarity and direction constitute the most transcendent and experiential connection between social action and spirituality. The basis of these transformations is perceived as undeniably “other-worldly” or transcendent. Pastor Richard Ramos described the day when he heard the voice of God and gained a vision for his life.



As these few examples illustrate, some accounts, such as Ramos' vision, sound particularly religious while others, such as Dunn's education through liberation theology, are moments of political awakening to the social injustices of the world. Looking at these experiences as either religious or political, however, misses the social agenda that is inseparable from the spiritual dimension. These points where spirituality and social action come together are difficult to classify as public or private, religious or secular, or individual or collective. We argue that they are all of these. Connection occurs at the boundaries, blurring the lines between what is public action and private belief. In this in-between position, engaged spirituality allows for creative innovation between private experience and public action or between religious faith and social activism.





Acting on Faith

## Social Roles *in Expressing Spirituality*

**I**n order to understand the way that individuals act because of their spirituality and to understand what to expect from spiritually motivated individuals, we must further look at the possibilities and constraints of everyday life. In other words, spirituality is not an all-powerful force but must contend with the mundane practical realities of life. There are multiple ways that people carry out their spiritual motivations in their professional and private lives. Some have brazenly challenged governmental authorities while others have quietly given aid to their neighbors. However, looking across our span of interviews, we see five spiritually informed social roles for social action. These roles are not static—many of the individuals we spoke with held different roles at different times of their lives and moved in and out of certain roles throughout the course of their day. Each social role affects the way spirituality is funneled or employed, and spirituality has, in turn, the potential to reshape these social roles and change the way they are carried out in the future.

**THE GOOD NEIGHBOR.** The Good Neighbor attempts to change the world one person at a time through small acts of kindness or by promoting spiritual transformation in others. While focusing on individual acts and the potential for sharing one's faith, this is by no means a primarily Christian or evangelical framework. In nearly all examples, spiritual motivations were internalized rather than externalized as expressive testimonies meant to change someone else's religious path. Stopping to have a conversation with a mentally challenged homeless person is one place where the voice of God can be heard. It is these small gestures that sustain individuals and incrementally produce local changes.



### THE COMMUNITY

**VOLUNTEER.** In some ways, the Community Volunteer is a structured embodiment of the Good Neighbor. The Volunteer works within his or her community providing direct services or aid as part of an organized form of social service and, although spiritually motivated, may or may not publicly express this spiritual motivation. The conventional modern American image is the soup kitchen volunteer, which for many persons is their first introduction to social service work.



### THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

**PROVIDER.** The Professional Service Provider holds a paid leadership role in a religious, political, or nonprofit organization and organizes her own spiritual motivations and the motivations of others in ways that increase service distribution or program efficacy. While some interviewees had to create professional roles for themselves outside of conventional religious or secular organizations, most worked within mainstream institutions and pushed at the boundaries, sometimes gently and sometimes with force. The Professional Service Provider, because of this public role, has at her disposal a variety of resources including financial resources, authority, social networks, trained and experienced staff, and often times an established constituency, not to mention the allotted time that may be devoted to such endeavors. A creative spirituality directed toward change, along with the resources with which to carry this out, makes the Professional Service Provider, and the next two categories particularly dynamic.



### THE MORAL ADVOCATE.

The Moral Advocate focuses his spiritual motivations on public education of particular issues and/or attempts to initiate changes in social policy or community development. Advocates are the instigators, the educators, and the mouthpieces for particular platforms or social causes. Advocates can work either within or outside of institutional channels. They may be Professional Service Providers for whom advocacy is part of their daily responsibilities (e.g. as watchdogs for government systems or corporate responsibility) or they may be weekend activists who devote their free time to raising issues in the public consciousness.



### THE VISIONARY PROPHET.

The Visionary Prophet sees the world not only as it is but as it could be. Often the visionary acts in ways that disregard seemingly insurmountable odds. Visionary Prophets may imagine dramatic scenes of the destruction of the world (e.g. the rapture), but just as often, visionaries may have images of a society with less poverty and injustice.

While the resources and opportunities of some roles affect the scope of their social actions, these categorical roles should not be thought of as completely defined by these resources and opportunities. Family, community, religious institutions, occupational position, educational training, and friendship networks, just to name a few, can all influence the shape of these roles or the way that spiritual motivations function to make a better world. In fact, most of the individuals we spoke with continually challenged their roles in life. Both formal and informal roles were pushed, pulled, stretched, and manipulated in ways that more closely correlated with their newfound or ongoing subjective spirituality. For the Community Volunteer, in a time when apathy and individualism in American civic culture appears rampant, organized participation and civic responsibility are enhanced by a transcendent mandate. Because of her spiritual practice, the Professional Service Provider redirects resources or reconceptualizes her job description; the Moral Advocate finds passion; the Visionary Prophet creativity; the Good Neighbor responsibility — none of which might be experienced or acted upon without the resource of spiritual practice in their daily lives.



## Keeping the Faith *in Action*

**W**hile spiritual sources often act as catalysts that ignite spiritual and social commitments, and social roles provide frameworks through which they are enacted, ongoing spiritual practices reaffirm those commitments over time. This is no small task in the world of social change where burnout rates are high and successes at times seem few and far between. The contribution of spiritual practice to social action can be conceptualized in terms of its functions, its forms, and its feelings.

### Functions

Simply carving out the space and the time in daily life or weekly routines to practice spirituality has benefits that were consistent across interviews, faith traditions, and distinctive modes of spiritual practice.

- > First, nearly everyone describes leaving behind everyday concerns, worries, individual drives and agendas. While not always successfully achieved, this ego-adjustment is typically a first step in spiritual practice.

- > Second, once divorced from the harried pace of life and the egoistic impulses, people turn over their intentions to a higher power and wait to receive direction, energy or peace of mind. They open themselves up as a vessel for transcendent insights. “When the mind is at peace,” said Doctor Pujya Swami of the Hindu Swaminarayan Temple, “the power of God can work through us and we can serve people in a better way.”
- > Third, spiritual practice acts as a touchstone, regularly reminding individuals of their sense of purpose for taking this spiritual impulse and acting upon it in the world.
- > Finally, spiritual practice provides a renewed physical, emotional and spiritual energy that fortifies individuals in concrete ways as they return to their work, their families, their communities and their volunteer associations. Sustainability is a form of renewing the energy needed to continue on. As one Buddhist monk suggests, “When we are mindful there are a lot of things that we can handle.”

### Forms

For the individuals interviewed it was important to find spiritual activities that were personally resonant. Everyone we interviewed seemed to have different forms of practice that felt right for them, but in general we can discuss five categories or forms of practice, even though individual collections of practices rarely conformed purely to one category. Instead personal patterns were composites of several different strategies or forms of practice. What’s more, some of these forms seemed to connect directly to social action while others did so only tangentially through shared community networks or implicitly through moral reasoning.

**DAILY PRACTICE.** For nearly everyone in this sample, spiritual practices were regimented parts of everyday life and often occurred at scheduled times or in patterned ways. The five daily calls to prayer at the core of Islamic religious life or the resurgence of the Daily Office among Christians are notable examples of collective daily practice. These strictly scheduled practices connect each day with an otherworldly source.



*The Rev. Altagracia Perez, an Episcopal priest with a remarkable record of public service in diverse issues from HIV/AIDS advocacy to immigration reform and worker rights, finds that the gym is one place for improvised spiritual connection. She explains, “I work out five days a week and that’s very spiritual for me. To take that half hour to an hour—to be about another thing—just to be lost on a different level; my mind free to wander, to listen to music. That nourishes my soul.” Through improvisation, the gym is transformed into a space in which she can physically and consciously reorient herself to the spiritual purposes in her life that sustain her work.*

**ECLECTIC IMPROVISATION.** Whereas the daily practitioner typically follows fairly structured patterns, the Eclectic Improviser emphasizes adaptation and novelty. Informal conversations with the divine and “trying out” practices from different traditions add variation, and innovation cobbles together new practices that sacralize everyday modern life as it happens. For some, these improvisations integrate practice more fully into their lives and social commitments than do traditional practices. They allow spirituality to flow into the crevices of everyday life in ways that are tailor-fit to individual experience. The Rev. Altagracia Perez, for example, includes physical exercise on her list of spiritual practices.

**ORGANIZED WORSHIP.** Still others find spiritual connection directly from communal and organized forms of worship or religious services. Weekly mass, spiritual retreats, and meetings with a spiritual advisor fit this category well. Other informal efforts at gathering with others on a regular basis also describe this category. Brother Dunn, for example, sits down with one of the community members or immigrant rights organizers with whom he works, usually someone different each week, and seeks spiritual inspiration through their words, experiences, and faith in action. Dunn says that hearing the stories of faith and hope from these communities is more beneficial than what might be otherwise thought of as conventional spiritual disciplines.

**COMMUNAL MYSTICISM.** Spiritual connections also powerfully emerge from interactions with members of one's own community or, more specifically, members of the community that is being "served." However, more often than not this distinction between who is being served and who is serving is intentionally ambiguous in ways that reveal the spirituality associated with communal mysticism. Those who see the divine in the struggles of their communities feel as if they are the ones actually being served through the work they do. Bill Doulos, for example, says that he sees the "eyes of Christ" in the homeless with whom he creates relationships as they venture down the path toward economic rehabilitation and freedom from substance abuse.



**SPONTANEOUS CONNECTIONS.** Spontaneous connections produce spiritual experiences in a variety of settings and through a variety of unexpected or non-traditional spiritual activities. Whereas the person who improvises is the active agent in making the spiritual links, through spontaneous connections the individual interprets their experience as brought on by the in-breaking of a transcendent force. Pastor Lee DeLeon said that the true strength of his "gift of tongues" is manifested when his attempts at spiritual practice are no longer sufficient.

*“There are sometimes points in my time of prayer where I no longer know what to say and I maybe don’t listen and I need to express what’s in my heart, and when we run short of words... That’s when the gift [of tongues] kicks in,”* says Lee DeLeon, a Pentecostal pastor. *At times, practice does not follow form, it is not organized or scheduled; it is intimately personal and spontaneous.* DeLeon admits, “I don’t really understand it, but there’s something going on and I know it’s very pure worship. That’s probably the purest worship you can ever experience. Because then it’s just you and God and it’s your soul and your spirit and God just really communicating.”

Understanding spirituality means understanding more than simple feelings or specific practices. As these forms indicate, spirituality can be a very diverse and fluid set of practices. From this perspective, mandating an organized type of practice may be useful for certain organizations, but encouraging a broader repertoire keeps spirituality fluidly connected to the textures of everyday life and protected from routinization. This fluidity is particularly useful when facing the unpredictable barriers that spring up within organizations or institutions working for change.

### Feelings

If we are to fully understand the role of spirituality and social change we must also consider in detail the role of emotions. Just as social roles affect the shape of our actions, social norms affect how we feel. Each of us has internalized throughout our lives the emotions appropriate for different situations and the degree of emotion that is permissible. These “feeling rules” guide our social emotional life at all times, from daily social interactions to life crises. Feeling rules are learned through our interactions with others and especially through social institutions such as religion. This emotional “management” affects the types of feelings that spiritual practice generates, especially related to the courage, strength and comfort required to deal with the circumstances of everyday life. Yet while feelings are often something spontaneous or even irrational, and are subject to influence by organizations and social institutions that seek to suppress, control, or privatize them, they are the fuel and energy for creating change and are the core of spiritual experience.

There are three broad families of feeling: feelings of community, feelings of empowerment, and feelings of transcendence.



### FEELINGS OF COMMUNITY.

Communities—both “real” in terms of one’s friends, family, or religious congregation, and “imagined” communities (i.e. an historical lineage of others who have engaged in similar endeavors for millennia), or the greater communal body of the faithful around the globe—create connections to a tradition that provides cultural roots, affirmation and validity for socially enacting one’s spirituality and in doing so generate feelings of solidarity, love, trust, respect, unity and belonging. In this sense, even when no one else is around, spiritual practice is not experienced alone. What’s more, these feelings of community often connect with a strong sense of purpose and responsibility for continued action. Compassion, sympathy, outrage and indignation emerge as emotional authorities concerning social behavior and responsibility.

“I think there’s something that happens to us in being faithful to [the community practice of the divine office]. Even though I may go there and sometimes I don’t realize a word I’m saying—I’m just saying the words—there’s an authenticity there I think because I’m coming together in that routine and I think that routine has a transforming effect.”

— Sister Dorothy Stoner



*J*im Ortiz is the current and founding pastor of My Friend's House Assemblies of God Church in a poor, urban and predominantly Latino neighborhood southeast of Los Angeles.

One of the primary goals of the ministry is to provide a safe, embracing alternative to the streets for the many latchkey kids attending the two schools that flank the church within several blocks. When asked about his own spiritual practice, Ortiz first and foremost discusses relationships. "Relationship with God is like relationship with anyone else. God is a person. And as a person He engages us on personal levels."

*S*andie Richards is a Methodist pastor and advocate for immigrant labor in Los Angeles. Her drive comes from the combined feelings of compassion for the disenfranchised workers and passionate indignation about the resistant stance of certain corporate bureaucracies. For Richards, the Ten Commandments are "about allegiance to one another in God's name. **God is saying I'm your God and there's no other god. And what I, your God, am telling you is you better take care of each other.**" When Richards does not see this compassion being enacted—even once it is made clear to those who are violating these basic codes of moral conduct—it can be infuriating. Moral feelings, culled from a deep reading of sacred texts, wield an undeniable emotional authority.

#### FEELINGS OF

**EMPOWERMENT.** Other individuals feel empowerment directly and literally as an embodied manifestation of a palpable physical force. This force might be articulated through feelings of courage, strength or energy, but it is typically experienced first physically. The Buddhist Reverend Man Yee Shih, for example, had to defuse a situation of a mentally ill homeless man in their temple. Reluctant to call the police for fear the man would not receive adequate treatment, Man Yee recited the name of the Bodhisattva of compassion and claimed, "The energy was in me at that time." As Man Yee recounted this story she swept her hands across the front of her body in ways that conjured a feeling of energy and strength that consumed her at that moment.





*F*ather Michael Kennedy finds spiritual imagery very useful in making the ancient sacred texts emotionally connected to the twenty-first century reality of life in the Los Angeles Juvenile Hall. Kennedy has constructed an entire series of meditative lessons based upon Saint Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. *By imagining oneself as part of the stories, "[The Gospel] would become real and the movements of the spirit would be realized or actualized at that moment and there would be a deepening of knowing a person of Jesus, simple as that,"* Kennedy explains. He guides the young participants toward feeling the desert heat on their faces, hearing the sounds of the ancient markets or bazaars, smelling the stone ovens, seeing Jesus and his other disciples, all of their clothes billowing in the occasional breezes. By applying the human senses of sight, sound, taste, smell and touch to these scenes, the stories become more than musty texts of archaic cautionary tales. They become intimately felt and sensually experienced. "There's a reality that's just as real as me talking to you," Father Kennedy says.

*“D*on't let Glenda go on retreats or she'll come back with something else for us to do.” This running joke at San Francisco Network Ministries is based in time-tested truths and never keeps the Reverend Glenda Hope from her retreats. Each year, twice a year, Hope embarks on spiritual retreats away from the sirens of the Tenderloin and the constant ringing of her office phone. *She goes into nature—in the fall to the ocean and in the spring to the mountains—in order to listen for God's voice.* Not long ago, while on retreat, Hope inexplicably felt that the ministry was going to build an apartment building. This was completely “ridiculous,” she says. “What did we know about construction? We had nothing for collateral. We didn't know anything, but here it is.” With a sweep of her arm she motions to a recently opened, award-winning, multi-purpose facility and apartment building. “It's astonishing. You just decide, ‘Do you really believe this is what God is calling?’ You just don't wait to get all your ducks in a row. You just start. You just start and say, ‘This is what we're going to do.’”

#### FEELINGS OF TRANSCENDENCE.

Through all of these stories there is a common thread of otherworldliness which infuses individuals with power. These individuals continually and solemnly refer to moments that could not be “rationally” explained, quantified or calculated. They did so without paradox or disjuncture from their day to day realities and practical responsibilities. Supernatural imagery in terms of dreams, visions and voices are some of the most conventionally illustrative and visual components of spiritual meaning and emotion. Supernatural imagery can produce powerful feelings of awe and wonder. Similar feelings of transcendence can emerge in the quietness of contemplation when overwhelming feelings of calm, certitude and assuredness envelop the practitioner. These moments are times of existential clarity and often emerge when people are struggling with decisions that involve a great deal of internal conflict. At other times they may be points of novel inspiration and revelation and can provide an enabling sense of efficacy through spiritual practice and for social action.

“Love is what transforms us.” This simple statement was the way that Father Kennedy summed up his work and that of his religious community. Love is undoubtedly one of the common emotions that runs through our interviews, along with compassion, unity, wonder, humility and even power, strength, and conviction. Taken purely as human emotion, we consider these as innate capacities that wax and wane throughout our lives depending upon circumstance. But more than merely human capacities, emotions are also social constructions that are “carried” and transmitted socially. These affective components of spirituality—beliefs, feelings, and passions—are shaped by various influences including family, peers, faith traditions, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, politics, and ethnicity, not to mention academics, social policy and activist claims. The answers to questions such as, “To whom do we extend our sympathy and compassion, and against what do we direct our indignation?” are found in part through the channel of social institutions as well as the vocal claims-makers who grab our attention.



## Fields of *Engagement*

**J**ust as engaged spirituality varies according to individual experiences, sources, practices and roles, so does the degree to which individuals actively engage their social worlds. These differences relate to both practice and social action.

First, spirituality is practiced along a continuum from interior, contemplative, and reflective practices, such as silent unscripted prayer, solitary meditation, and feelings of centeredness, to collective practices that are externalized, community-based and connective, such as group worship or collective prayer. Various practices fall at different points along this continuum. For example, *salat*, or the five Muslim prayers, and the Daily Office are both forms of relatively silent and internalized conversations that follow regulated patterns and are imagined to take place (and sometimes do) with a greater community of others. These examples are neither wholly individual nor always collective and, depending upon the particular circumstance, will fall at different points along this contin-

uum. Worshipping in a large mosque with hundreds of others differs from praying alone in a hotel room at 5 a.m.

Second, spirituality is acted upon along a continuum from practices that are engaged in solely for their benefits to the individual practitioner, such as personal enlightenment or individual salvation, to practices which see no separation between spirituality and global change. These involve activist spiritualities that are concerned with improving conditions for everyone and everything in society as an expression of spirituality itself. As with spiritual practice, spiritual connection to social change also varies along this continuum. A Pentecostal minister relies upon a very individual and emotional form of spiritual practice but still feels compelled to help those around him because of his interpretation of the scriptures.

While most of the people we interviewed spent much of their lives within “engaged” practices, occasional time spent in “disengaged” practice also provided crucial incubation periods during which they developed the spiritual energy and relationships necessary for acting.

So what are we to make of this complex array of spirituality and social change? If spirituality can be applied to all things in social life then how is it best applied for change or how is this connection encouraged or maintained? One answer is that this connection must be struck individually and experientially and until that happens little else can make it so. While this is true, there seem to be social levers that foster this connection. Specifically, creating and sustaining the connections between spiritual motivations and social change is strengthened to the extent that four interrelated influences are present.



*E*very summer Reverend Wendy Taylor attends a Buddhist monastery in the mountains for a week at a time. Each visit is a silent retreat in which she says she is “allowed to listen.” The experience for Taylor is profoundly different from her everyday life working with immigrant and migrant farm families along the Northern California coast. An over-achiever and constant worker, Taylor suggests that those weeks are times where “I can really check with God and make sure things are going the way they’re supposed to be going and I can just soak in it.” Engaged spirituality cannot only be articulated through serving those in need or storming at windmills. While often it is, at other times it appears to simply, and profoundly, be about finding meaning, finding a place, and sometimes even silent, peaceful comfort.

*“If [understanding spirituality and Judaism] is just an intellectual thing, it doesn’t go too far. If you can tie it into a meditative practice, chanting practice, some kind of ongoing daily spiritual work, then I think you really transform the individual and the individual can go out and transform the world.”*  
— Rabbi Rami Shapiro



- > First and perhaps most obviously there must be some form of individually felt transcendent purpose or perceived spiritual connection to a social commitment to make the world—even if only on a very specific and local level—a better place. This social commitment must truly be social in that it is acted upon rather than only contemplated or believed. Simply acknowledging that this social commitment can be created in various locales, from the family to higher education to the synagogue, increases the possibilities of connection.
- > Second, maintaining an engaged spirituality relies upon some form of spiritual practice that renews or connects one to the emotional motivations and sense of purpose for the work they are doing. While the strength of networks and generating social capital are important considerations, what individuals do in their private practices is also a significant contributing variable for seeking out these networks in the first place and sustaining them over time.
- > Third, engaged spirituality is not merely a set of actions or beliefs. It transcends these through an internalization of spiritually informed action as an element of personal and social identity. The degree to which this spiritually engaged identity becomes central to the individual increases the degree to which it will be acted upon consistently over time.
- > Finally, reliance by others—both individually and collectively—upon the actions of engaged spirituality strengthens commitments, actions and this internalized identity. In other words, while individuals or communities may come to depend upon the afternoon school program that the local church provides, the volunteers may rely upon each other for sustaining motivations and commitments.

## What will the *future* hold?

Spirituality has become a buzzword that is easily tossed around but rarely analyzed in public. We want our politicians to be religious but not to go into too much spiritual detail about what that means. We understand that some people are motivated by spiritual feelings but do not want to hear those discussed in depth publicly. This love and hate relationship with spirituality in the public sphere has kept the sometimes creative, sometimes subversive, and often unpredictable power of transcendent feeling out of many conversations about organizing, politics and education. However, dismissing these emotional connections does not mean that they do not exist. They keep connecting, but do so out of our line of sight, limiting their creative potentials for a wider audience and sometimes leading to socially destructive consequences. Indeed, while we have considered the service side of spiritually motivated action—and by this we mean reducing suffering among the poor, feeding the hungry or providing medicines to the sick—spiritual connections to social change also blow up clinics, spray paint slurs on synagogues, and wage wars

in the name of spiritual revelation. These regressive and irrational actions in the name of spirituality have tainted the constructive connections for social change. However, when understood as a constructive resource, spirituality is a personally relevant motivation, validation, and source of energy and sustenance for ongoing social commitments that, when coupled with viable social and organizational networks, has substantial potential for positive change. The obvious question at this point is what the future holds and how might others foster the utilization of this resource?

### **Religious Education**

The dialog of a renewed spirituality and a spiritually informed social service is already occurring across campuses and will continue with or without the involvement of seminary and rabbinical schools.

However, tapping this source of subjective meaning and involvement would revitalize recruitment, reshape the classroom, and redefine the parameters and options of ministry. While spirituality is already applied within some courses in religious education, the creative and individual appropriations that are taking place on campuses are not institutionally reflected. One model may be the politicized classroom. Feminist contributions across disciplines have made substantial inroads to radically revising classroom dynamics, power relationships, and the very words we use to express social thoughts and relationships. A similar approach to decentralizing spirituality, while linking it to broader social processes, discourses, and structures, would change the way it is discussed as a concept and as an experience. Liberation theology, for example, made the most recent and significant contributions toward engaged spirituality.

In similar ways, we suggest incorporating an active debate of the role of spirituality as social critique across political persuasions and social issues. For example, in what ways is spirituality embedded within structural forces and what effect might this have on individual experience, service applications, and social critiques? Secondly, formal institutional recognition of the active use of engaged spirituality among students and faculty would foster connections within and across seminaries, denominations, and religious traditions. Acknowledgement, let alone connection, between individuals or programs that utilize spirituality would begin to counter the perceived marginal or solitary status that some involved in spiritual programs currently experience.

### **Religious Institutions**

The perceived divide between spirituality and religion has had significant effects on the nature and organizational structure of the past generation. Much of what has been taking place within mainline Christian denominations reflects the experiential nature of spirituality with the reorganization around small fellowship and prayer groups. Incorporating spirituality would further decentralize the traditional hierarchy of church leadership and authority. However, this need not be seen as problematic or threatening to tradition. As we have discussed, the historical and cultural roots that are tied into many spiritual experiences strengthen that experience in profound ways. Religious institutions have the opportunity to foster spiritual relationships with tradition and ritual in ways that result in subjective meaning for the individual and deepen their commitment to a religious cultural lineage.

The benefits of spiritual practice outlined above may also be used as ways to direct and encourage individual spiritual practice and

development. These benefits, once experienced by members of religious institutions, hold the potential to work as resources, allowing parishioners, congregants, or members of mosques to actively and creatively explore the ways that their spiritual development directs changes within their institution as well as within local community participation efforts. Connections between educational centers and individuals with strong commitments to spirituality as well as strong commitments to social transformation would open up dialog in ways that currently do not exist.

### **Social Movements, Organizational Development and Policy**

Spirituality has not been fully explored as a significant spark in the shift in perspective toward personal and collective efficacy within social movement organizing or social change in general. Engaged spirituality is a distinct element apart from other institutional religious resources commonly considered in social movement literature (such as communication networks, leadership roles, and membership mobilization). For those to whom religion is important, spiritual experience is both a motivation and a sustaining element that provides a continually emergent social mandate. Additionally, through spiritual experience, individuals often interpret a sense of efficacy, confidence, or internal control of external circumstances that is different from other forms of experience. Motivation and subjective turning points in the perceived feasibility and success of social change are central to contemporary analyses of social movements. When individuals can see the world for what it could be rather than only for what it is, new actions previously thought out of reach can appear quite possible and even necessary.

Furthermore, as with religious education, an increased network of individuals and organizations engaged in similar work and following a spiritual motivation would provide support, a network for sharing resources, and a visible community of common objectives. The particularizing effect of engaged spirituality (individual appropriations and intimate, emotional experiences) may spark the desire for collective action in some individuals but not in others. This is true within denominations and religious communities. However, finding connections with others, either within one's own faith tradition or beyond, who are spiritually motivated around the same social action could lead to innovative collaboration and new forms of community. While numerous organizations exist that are devoted to spirituality, a greater profile must be created for those who also make the connections between their spirituality and social transformation.

Institutionally, applying a holistic approach to organizational development and interpersonal relationships boosts morale, values integrity, and provides sustainability to difficult work. Creating an environment that acknowledges and supports individual spiritual practice among its members allows for the full utilization of this resource. Whether organizations schedule specific times within the workday routine for reflection or spiritual practice, or whether organizations allow room for open and respected contributions based in spiritual foundations, the outlet for spiritual motivation becomes a viable option.

## *Conclusion*

These areas of implementation of engaged spirituality offer alternatives for individual, local, and organizational change as well as ways in which we as a society can incorporate spirituality into our cultural dialog. While each of these recommendations may be taken individually, the possibility of a much broader and systemic approach is implicit. For example, changes within religious education would be strengthened if changes in job opportunities, either within religious congregations or in social service organizations, allowed for challenging and spiritually inspired career outlets. Similarly, the changes in religious education could send out a new cohort of religious leaders effectively transforming religious institutions or organizations from within, especially if a changing public dialogue preceded or paralleled these leaders in local communities.

Systemic change is slow and contingent upon many other social, cultural, and economic factors. Based on our research, however, we believe that grassroots foundations are currently in place within the social and religious sectors across the country. Public dialogue can begin by providing sufficient tools for creating moral connections and framing issues in a spiritual way, but what is missing is leadership to tap this energy, as well as the institutional or organizational outlets and networks for individuals already motivated by their spirituality. The difficulty in implementing this variable within organizations lies in making engaged spirituality available for those who want to take part while not alienating or offending those who do not. A second barrier for broader implementation of engaged spirituality is the danger of falling into patterns of institutionalization. Heavy handed attempts that over-bureaucratize ventures in spiritually moti-

vated social service run the risk of routinizing this resource or politicizing its potentials in ways that diminish its experiential roots and subjectively powerful effects. To help guide public policy decisions on ways to utilize and fund spiritually motivated social service, more research must be conducted on the organizations that are currently utilizing this resource effectively.

At the level of the individual social activist, dichotomies between internalized spirituality and externalized action are blurring. Engaged spirituality — the opposite of navel-gazing, narcissistic self-actualization — results from people being motivated by a transcendent force or power that awakens their social conscience and motivates them to live for others rather than simply for themselves. In the very act of serving others, these individuals often experience profound joy, a deep sense of purpose, and an overriding humility that they are not self-sufficient. They attribute their personal energy and the good that may result from their actions to a transcendent power which, in many religions, is identified as God. The task of human existence in their view is to align themselves with this creative, transformative force within the universe. Typically, this force is not impersonal; it is experienced in highly personal encounters, sometimes alone, and sometimes in corporate moments of worship. It is also experienced in the mundane, the intimate, the iconic, and the unexpected. Engaged spirituality empowers individuals to act upon the palpable tension between the current state of the world and the way they believe it should be.

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