

Hop-on Hop-off Spirituality

From Consumerism and Entertainment to Learning

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 VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
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In contemporary spirituality-related thought and behaviour in Estonia (as well as in a number of other regions), a phenomenon can be observed that I call hop-on hop-off spirituality. This means testing and tasting of various forms of contemporary spirituality (via techniques, courses, lectures, books, etc.) out of curiosity or for fun or just because a friend said that this or that teaching has changed their life. Such experimenting can sometimes result in deeper spiritual involvement or change in worldview but often doesn't bring along anything that could be defined as deeper spiritual or religious commitment or belonging. Based on interviews, questionnaire responses and written life-history narratives from Estonia from the 1990s to 2020s, I will analyse how the suggested term fits into the context of already existing definitions and terms related to "spirituality", and how such "hop-on hop-off" participation can be still seen as a learning process that influences one's values, meaning-making, coping models, and lifestyle.

Introduction: definitions of spirituality and the Estonian situation

Some authors have expressed the realization that because of its multi-faceted forms and vague borders, defining the core of spirituality has so far been unsuccessful, and it is indeed impossible to find a definition for a field with such an enormous diversity (e.g. Hense 2014, 2; the same conclusion about New Age spirituality in Sutcliffe 2014). Therefore, several researchers have sug-

gested using the plural form "spiritualities" instead of the singular form "spirituality" (e.g. Jespers 2014, 197; Turner 2009, 196). My understanding, based on the Estonian empirical material from recent decades, is that it is more appropriate to talk about a continuum of spiritualities to convey better the situationality, fuzziness, and partial overlap of the outputs of this phenomenon (see a similar thought by Lied 2012, 196; cf. the concept of folklore-popular culture continuum in Narváez and Laba 1986). Moreover, it seems unnecessary to try to find a single proper definition to describe all spirituality-related thought and practice – it is more congruent to use a continuum of definitions and terms to come closer to the core of this polyvalent field.

The complexity of definition has only increased with the movement of spirituality-related topics into the mainstream arena. I agree with authors who conclude that with the "mega-trend" of spirituality (Bucher 2007, 3) or virtual omnipresence of its various forms on the internet and on the contemporary self-development and business arena, spirituality has moved well beyond the boundaries of the alternative spiritual milieu (e.g. Wolfe 2005; Aupers and Houtman 2006, 201), having become "popular spirituality" (Knoblauch 2009).

This widening of the visibility and reception of spirituality has triggered researchers to coin a number of terms to describe its contemporary essence: terms like “do-it-yourself religion/spirituality” (Janssen and Prins 2000; De la Torre 2021), “pick-and-mix spirituality” (Hamilton 2000), “consumer spirituality/religion” (Possamai 2005; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), “mediatized spirituality/religion” (Hjarvard 2012) have been used that all cover some relevant characteristics of today’s spirituality-related outputs. My article tries to add a more overarching nuance while proposing the term “hop-on hop-off spirituality” as well as some discussion about the dynamics of contemporary spirituality that this term tries to convey. I will analyse how such participation in the spiritual-religious milieu that can be at least outwardly superficial and consumeristic can at the same time still be viewed as a learning process that influences one’s values, meaning-making, coping models, and lifestyle.

Empirical material for the conclusions arrived at in this article comes from interviews (c. 50) that I made for a book (Hiie-mäe 2019) where each of the hundred chapters describes one spiritual or religious teaching in Estonia accompanied by personal experience narratives. Also interviews (around 200) conducted by Estonian college and university students as homework in the frames of my lectures on vernacular beliefs in today’s society (2017–23), responses (around 20) to my questionnaire about the recent use of protective rituals (2023), and written life-history narratives (around 50; 1990s–2000s) are used as basis for my interpretations.

But before continuing the discussion of my terminological suggestion against the backdrop of already existing terms and definitions and offering some case analyses of my empirical material to exemplify my

viewpoints, let me give a very short overview of the developments that have resulted in the recent extremely heterogeneous spiritual environment in Estonia. The collapse of the Soviet Union – and thus its atheist propaganda – in 1991 brought an abrupt widening of the religious and spirituality-related arena, eliciting experimentation with variations of Christianity as well as new forms of spirituality (meditation techniques, tantristic practices, Silva mind control, neo-shamanistic camps, etc.) and amplifying the quick movement towards a pluralistic spiritual environment. However, outputs of pluralism existed in Estonian society already more than hundred years ago (e.g. expressed in openness to esoteric trends of that time, such as spiritism, clairvoyance, anthroposophy) and continued covertly even in the Soviet era, and the twenty-first century spiritual life in Estonia seems also more diverse than in many other Western countries (see more on the topic in Hiie-mäe 2020; Ringvee 2015). Spirituality-related topics are publicly quite visible through a multitude of media outputs. Local witches, clairvoyants, miracle-healers, etc., teach small rituals that they themselves often call “practical self-help” via various means from personal consultations advertised in the media to yellow, women’s or esoteric magazines (e.g. *Naisteleht*, *Kroonika* (published weekly), *Tervendaja* (monthly), *Naisteleht Müstika* (yearly)). Examples of such advice would be shamans and healers offering magical recipes with a psychological touch, such as a herbal “self-control bath” from the shaman Anu Pahka for a successful diet and for getting rid of bad habits, published in an article of an online women’s magazine that at the same time advertised Pahka’s book “Wisdom from the Witch’s Kettle” (2017, originally *Nõiakatla tarkuseterad*), or TV-programmes like “New Beginning with

Ants Rootslane” (originally *Uus algus Ants Rootslasega*) that focused in every episode on one person’s quick healing journey from a very problematic situation to happiness and balance with the help of Rootslane (a self-proclaimed therapist combining psychological and esoteric healing methods).

Such teachings and interventions brought to the public by various media and respective courses can have multiple functions and usages from a particular user’s viewpoint: they can entertain but also make people aware of alternative balancing or meaning-making options in the case of various problems (e.g. health, identity, purpose of life, improving one’s financial situation) for which a person hasn’t found solutions through other means. One phase of participation in such a mediatised information flow can be called “stand-by spirituality” (Hiimäe 2020, 226) – when a person attends a course or reads a book or media coverage of a given teaching and considers it generally acceptable, but it doesn’t bring along an immediate change in worldview or behaviour, yet the semi-latent knowledge obtained may become active in certain crisis situations, only to be put on stand-by again for use later. Participation can also vary from serial-practitioners – i.e. persons who experiment with a dozen or more spiritual practices at a time or simultaneously – to one-time practitioners; from cases of “finding one’s spiritual path” to remaining on the level of casual hop-on hop-off behaviour. However, as this article tries to exemplify, in many cases there is still a movement from the level of an idea to the level of action and perceived learning observable. Such a learning is frequently expressed in conversations about mental and physical health that contain references, such as: “[The Estonian healer] Luule Viilma also said [in her book] that hip pain refers to your inability to make decisions in

life. I have learned a lesson from it, and it has helped me to heal” (woman 51, 2022). Thus, even mediatised, apparently superficial forms of spirituality can act as triggers for various gradations of participation or sometimes even decades-long devotion – or not; and a certain learning value can be asserted in both cases.

Interactions of concepts and real life

As the above short discussion about difficulties with defining “spirituality” has made clear, it is not possible to translate subjective experience into objective measurements and researcher categories. Thus, respective terms and definitions can only be aids that help us to understand, describe, and interpret, but not to cover the entirety of spiritual thinking models and experiences once and for all in a few words or sentences. Even more important than definition seems to be the question of why and how a certain belief or practice is relevant or not relevant to the ongoing existence of a community (cf. similar notions by Turner 2009, 194). Thus, I don’t expect the proposed term “hop-on hop-off spirituality” to replace existing definitions or terms; it will be described as just one possible conceptual tool that seems suitable for characterizing some relevant aspects of the phenomenon of spirituality.

There are various emphases and foci observable in already existing terms and definitions. Some of them view development of a person’s spiritual worldview as a rather *mechanical* one-sided construction. For example, “pick-and-mix” or “do-it-yourself spirituality” hints at consciously combining forms of spirituality into personal packages according to one’s taste and preferences. But it doesn’t convey the learning moment, which may result also in the discarding of teachings or techniques that are no longer relevant, have not met

expectations or have been downright disappointing. Thus, the term “pick-and-mix spirituality” would be more comprehensive if it also included the episode of “drop” but even this would be somewhat misleading because the inferences and perceived lessons derived in relation to “picking” and later “dropping” a teaching nevertheless remain with the person. Additionally, “pick-and-mix” and “do-it-yourself spirituality” refer to certain conscious choices, but spiritual engagement can sometimes start just with a random chance that enables the first contact with a teaching or practice. The term “hop-on hop-off spirituality” suggests more clearly that a spirituality-related opportunity can arise just randomly in the spontaneous course of life, often by merely seeing an advertisement of a course on a bulletin board or leafing through a book or magazine in a book shop or library, and someone just follows the information until it benefits them.

Terms like “consumer spirituality”, “spiritual supermarket” (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Lyon 2000), “commodified spirituality” (York 2001) or “selling spirituality as capitalist ideology” (Carrette and King 2005) emphasize the *commercial and consumer* aspect – choosing and using religious or spiritual teachings in the position of a superficial consumer based on their perceived utilization value in meeting particular needs or for fun. However, these terms seem to leave out how even a commodified participation can contain a perceived learning value. Acquiring new information can be a learning process even if it is simultaneously entertaining, has a strong consumerist aspect or is even borne by brutal capitalist marketing ideologies. Thus, “even when mind-body-spirituality activities or provisions are consumeristic, they could be enabling more than the passive consumption of ‘mere’ pleasure” (Heelas 2008,

11). Additionally, a participation that has markers of consumption can sometimes – depending on the background and receptiveness of the person – nevertheless offer experiences that can be described as “resacralization” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). For example, Leighanne Higgins and Kathy Hamilton (2016), who researched the marketplace dynamics of the Lourdes pilgrimage, found that even seemingly consumerist involvement could have therapeutic as well as transformative and magical qualities. Even more, there are authors (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989) who claim that consumption may be one of the vehicles for experiencing the sacred.

Some terms accentuate the *mediatization* aspect, for example the phrase “banal forms of religion/spirituality” (Hjarvard 2012, 28) is used to describe mediatized outputs of spirituality for entertainment and self-development. There are authors who have pointed out that a significant percentage of people today get their initial exposure to religion via popular culture, especially film (Caputo 2001, 78–90), but this statement need not be judgemental, as it sometimes is. A guardian angel depicted in a cartoon can be the first contact with the supernatural for a child, and as it is visually beautifully packaged, the first, though passive, interest and acceptance can be initiated, after which further, more experiential contacts can follow. Sometimes also extravagant or entertaining representations of some spiritual practices in the media may act as encouragement or as a perceived legitimization for some individuals to cross the threshold to their first spiritual attendance – or just the contrary, for deciding not to do so.

A few authors point to *individualistic uniqueness* as a characteristic of contemporary spirituality. For example, Steve Bruce notes that the social impact has

no power to override individual preferences in modern spirituality (Bruce 2002, 99). However, empirical material shows that a socially sanctioning and reinforcing effect is nevertheless observable in individual spiritual practice. Several authors also conclude that contemporary spirituality is remarkably less eclectic and incoherent than is typically assumed and its individualistic authenticity is actually a socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced doctrine (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 202). Already at the end of the twentieth century, Paul Heelas deduced that beneath the heterogeneity, there is remarkable consistency (Heelas 1996, 2), and one of the recent studies (Kapusta and Kostiřová 2020, 187) finds that contemporary spirituality is profoundly social and effectively socialized despite being glocal and inventive. Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out that a way to satisfy identity-related dreams and fantasies is found in buying ready-made components of an individual style (Bauman 2000, 83). Anyhow, as pointed out above, a reservation must be made that such ready-made does not need to be absolute. Even when participating in the same spiritual course, following the instructions of the same guru, and using the same spirituality-related vocabulary, the individual destinations of learning may vary for various persons from, for instance, developing into a more loving person, overcoming traumas, coping with daily nuisances or finding the purpose of life to a pursuit of wealth and fame (cf. Hiimäe 2020, 225).

Many definitions stress the relevance of *sacrality* and *transcendence* in contemporary spiritual participation. However, based on my empirical material, the argument that “the binding doctrine in the spiritual milieu is the belief that in the deeper layers of the self, one finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, ‘unpolluted’ by culture, history, or

society” (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 204) does not need to be unambiguously valid. The same applies to the – albeit more inclusive – defining attempt: “Spirituality means following intuitions that can lead to fullness of life” by “actively striving for their realization” (Hense 2014, 5). Especially in cases when spirituality-related interventions are tried out in the attempt to solve certain practical life problems, there is no following of a “deeply felt quest” (Redden 2016, 241), search for a true self nor using intuitions observable, but the trigger can be just the feeling of panic or a desperate attempt to regain control of a situation. In the vocabulary of spiritual teachers and their advertisements, the statements related to the sacred and true self and transcendent journeys surely occur but the actual manifestation of these aspects in practitioners varies.

This argument can be exemplified as a scale where normal life builds the zero point. With very pressing personal problems (e.g. relatives who disappeared; see more in Kõiva 2014, 159, or involuntary childlessness; see more in Hiimäe 2017) the most urgent aim of a person using spiritual (or any other) means is to reach the zero level while approaching it from the direction of the minus end. Only when the immediate pressing problem is overcome will some move more consciously towards the plus end of the scale to also explore the transcendent dimensions. In other cases, and especially if the spiritual philosophy of the technique used was not internalized, contact with the given teaching may be limited to a one-off practical use. Such a dynamic is expressed in the following rather trivial example. Lately when my cat ran away, I heard from several acquaintances that, when facing the same problem, they had turned to a clairvoyant. One of these people allegedly found her cat while using

the information obtained from the clairvoyant, but she never used such a source of information afterwards nor did she become interested in the personal transcendence aspects of spiritual approaches. Another woman also found her cat after consulting a clairvoyant but perceived it as proof of the effectiveness of spiritual approaches that she had already used before and then continued to explore.

My terminological suggestion of “hop-on hop-off spirituality” uses the analogy of a ride on a hop-on hop-off tourist bus to emphasize *the intermingledness or imbricatedness of all above-mentioned aspects in the contemporary spiritual involvement plus a certain learning value contained in such an exposure*. The term stresses that forms of spirituality can be practised one by one, but can also be combined – like a visit to several sights during one stop of a hop-on hop-off tourist bus. By sights in a tourist destination (as with forms of spirituality), the first superficial contact may be in mediated form – it may be through an advertisement or photos on the internet, in a book, magazine, or popular film. Some tourist sights (as well as spiritual approaches) can be discovered again later or exist as a memory in stand-by mode that can be activated at some later point. Various people start the journey, leave the bus, and come back to it again at various stops, some visit a sight-seeing marker for a longer and some for a shorter time. Some just collect experiences, memories, and emotions but others obtain souvenirs in the form of physical objects (whereby a tourist interest as well as a spiritual interest often results in purchasing physical objects with spiritual meaning, e.g. amulets, masks) or buy books to delve into the backgrounds of what they have seen and experienced. Some people start their journey in a group, some share their experiences with others whom they

have just met on the journey. Some people get robbed of their money in a destination (or during a spiritual involvement), others gather deep insights – but both outputs can be described by the experiencers as a lesson that brings changes and revisions into their behaviour and thinking.

Although the choices of experiencing a tourist destination seem endless, the bus goes in a circle and the number of stops is limited. Similarly, the contemporary internet-era spiritual offer seems endless, but a closer look reveals that the selection is quite repetitive, consisting, in some sense, indeed of “ready-made components” (Bauman 2000). There is also a time component: destinations change over time as do the spiritual teachings that are available or in fashion. Additionally, the word “journey” itself has a multi-faceted meaning with applications in both spheres – it is frequently used as a symbol for an “inner path” of development or a shamanistic imaginative journey between the worlds to gather wisdom, but it can also be an actual journey to some geographical destination. Moreover, specific forms of contemporary spirituality that have emerged in Estonia mainly in the last decade join both these meanings – namely spiritual tourism with self-development retreats that take place in mostly exotic and beautiful places that have been branded in the media as spiritual destinations, for example Bali, Mexico, or India (cf. more on spiritual tourism Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Heintzman and Reisinger 2013; Higgins and Hamilton 2016).

Hop-on, hop-off spirituality as a learning process

Researchers’ approaches to participation in forms of spirituality as a learning process vary. Marian Souza (2016) views spirituality as a unifying concept that has the

potential to be meaningful in its application to the lives of children and young people in areas of learning and well-being. Kirsi Tirri (2009, 245) finds that “spiritual intelligence” should be consciously developed in the educational framework in a dialogic way, and other authors (e.g. Wane, Manyimo and Ritskes 2011; English 2003) are of the opinion that integrating spirituality into youth as well as adult education would create a more holistic, transformative educational process. Some authors also see similarities between the concept of lifelong learning and learning from various spiritual approaches – in both cases “opportunities for learning are to be found everywhere and at all time(s)” (Uggla 2008, 212). Moreover, Hanan Alexander and Terence McLaughlin claim that openness to spiritual approaches goes along with qualities needed for any successful learning, such as trust, non-arrogance, being more aware of motivations, or having more respect for oneself, others, the world, and life (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003, 360). And contrarywise, every learning event also enhances spiritual development (Vella 2000, 7).

Other authors, on the contrary, don't see any learning value in spirituality but claim that “contemporary spirituality makes us stupid, selfish and unhappy” (Webster 2012). Noteworthy too is the approach to spirituality and learning in the Estonian mass media (but also in the media of other regions) where people who are interested in forms of spirituality or alternative medicine are generally viewed as stupid and opposed to science and education (Hiimäe and Utriainen 2021). Yet, there is research that sees connecting points between even superficial forms of spirituality and learning, and I agree with authors who find it necessary to raise the question of whether a

spiritual involvement can be commodified or superficial and meaningful at the same time (Redden 2016) and find it possible that spiritual exposure can enable co-creation of authentic spiritual as well as non-spiritual meanings and lessons based on a variety of sources, local and global, and sacred and profane alike (cf. Rinallo, Scott and Maclaren 2013). Emic perceptions and ways of describing resonate with the above-mentioned positive researcher conceptualizations of learning. Empirical material shows that people who become interested in a spiritual teaching use social media and internet forums to learn about its positive aspects as well as about related criticism and risks to make their evaluations and decisions (where it can even include a phase of temporarily getting stuck in the critic-free echo-chambers of the likeminded). Below is a comment from an Estonian popular women's forum where a woman describes how she used an alternative semi-spiritual healing treatment while believing in its effectiveness but later realized that it was harmful and had additionally been advertised by using certain manipulative marketing strategies, so she wanted to share her important lesson learned with others:

Please do not make a liver flush with citrus juice and oil. This is complete nonsense. Yes, there are pictures on the internet where some green pebbles came out with the feces, but in reality, these pieces are nothing more than lumps of oil that have hardened with citrus. I read that a skeptic collected these pieces and took them to a lab to find out what they contain, and indeed, it was just oil and lemon juice in a slightly modified form. Unfortunately, I also went through this stupidity myself before I started

researching further and regretted it. Don't repeat this mistake! (Liver 2017)¹

In the family forum perekool.ee, a user shares this post a few years later (in 2017), adding her comment "Seems clever". So, it makes up a pertinent example of the dynamics of hop-on hop-off spirituality, including evaluating its learning value. The concept of the subjectivist value-relativism as a key of New Age spirituality, expressed in the belief that there are many possible routes towards experiencing the truth and every person has their own right to try them out (Redden 2016, 238) comes close to the ways of perceived learning that I'm trying to point out here.

The following examples will similarly highlight the ways the experiencers of spiritual approaches themselves have analysed their learning value. Of course, it is necessary to make here a distinction between a practitioner's self-identification and a researcher's observation of the same situation. Many spiritual practitioners themselves feel that they "follow their unique personal path". Yet from the viewpoint of a researcher, already the spiritual vocabulary contained in this very description has a social character and is obtained through social sharing (e.g. in sharing circles of spiritual courses) that has a certain homogenizing impact, embedding specific ways of speaking. On the other hand, such sharing can be regarded as one of the ways of learning. The specific vocabulary, such as phrases like "spiritual lessons", "seeing every situation or person as a learning experience", "learn to ask and you get answers", "all information that you need comes to you", "learn to listen to your body" contains

1 Translations from Estonian sample texts are by the author.

numerous references to learning, often borrowing concepts from formal learning and pedagogy, corporative motivation training and positive psychology. Tanya Luhrmann points out that knowledge gained from a teaching or technique leads to "an interpretive drift" expressed in "the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity" (1989, 312). Thus, it can be viewed as a learning process where participants learn new ways of looking at situations and if the answers that they get are not satisfactory, they find a new frame of reference from the continuum of the available spiritual offer.

Spiritual learning described by individuals participating in spiritual practices contains the same key components as Etienne Wenger (1998, 212) lists in his social theory of learning – meaning (learning as experience), practice (learning as doing), community (learning by belonging), identity (learning as becoming). However, part of such learning in "hop-on hop-off spirituality" is often a "hop-off" or unlearning through leaving some beliefs or techniques behind after their learning value has been exhausted but still keeping the useful lessons. Here, similarity with elements in an educational ideal proposed by Aranye Fradenburg and Eileen Joy (2016, 155), promoting experience through a wide range of disciplines and methodologies that "include critique *and* creativity, analysis *and* immersion, learning *and* unlearning", leaps to the eye. In experiencers' descriptions unlearning is frequently viewed as a meaningful part of the learning process as a whole – thus, weaving constructively together learning and unlearning as in the integrative model proposed by Max Visser (2017, 52; see also a comprehensive polemic related to the use of the term "unlearning" in Howells and Scholderer 2016).

Such learning and unlearning, often accompanied by narratives of evaluation and revised meaning-making, can be observed even in fields that have been seldom associated with learning at all (e.g. conspirituality, or spiritual manipulation). For example, it is generally unacceptable for the societal sense of justice and morality when spiritual teachers turn out to be exploitative and manipulative towards their students to get either power, sex, money, etc. However, if we look at particular cases from an experiencer's point of view, the views may be more varied. In the autumn of 2023, a so-called "crisis of spirituality" broke out in one of the oldest of Estonian spiritual eco-communities, when some former students began to publicly accuse its founder and leading teacher figure of abusing their power and harming the mental health of followers, where accusations were partly related to cases that had occurred decades ago. Media reflections of the scandal led to a burst of secondary narration, and many former participants of the courses and retreats of this spiritual teacher shared their experiences in online article comments. It was possible to observe how the crisis divided the participants into distinct groups: those who had learned their lessons from how bad this teacher was, and others who had learned from how good he was – but the learning aspect was stressed in both cases. As long as it is not a criminal case, it is not up to an outsider (or even a researcher) to decide which approach is more adequate, but it is to be expected that the disappointments and doubts may sometimes be perceived as having a greater learning value, leading to a "hop-off". For example, as one reaction to this scandal, podcasts with "lessons learned" were advertised from a 29-year-old man with the pseudonym "Avenue of the Moment" (Hetke Puiestee), who had tried out many

spiritual teachings over the past few years to find a solution to his anxiety problems but then realized that these were "lies" and one should trust only one's own self, while "kicking the guru's ass" (Jürman 2023).

Accidental contacts with spiritual approaches as a trigger for "hop-on hop-off spirituality"

As already shown, snatches of mediatized reflections of spiritual approaches can act as a signpost for various gradations of experimenting and participation, where the first contact with a spiritual concept can take place on a very superficial level, for example through an entertaining quiz on social media or reading an advertisement. On the other hand, the information that one comes into contact with is not entirely "accidental" as spiritual concepts and teachings tend to have a wave character based on their popularity that changes over time. In the esoteric vocabulary, the understanding of the concept of "non-accidentality" is put in yet another context, framing the understanding that everything happens in life with the purpose of offering the person the best lessons. Anyhow, waves of respective information can trigger experiments in trying to get contact with supernatural helpers or broadening one's existing experiential limits through spiritual techniques. In the next passage from an interview, it becomes clear that the woman interviewed acquired information from reading a random book, but tried to bring it to an empirical level through directed imagination, yet at the same time tried to gain contact with yet another supernatural being from another belief system.

Woman: I have tried to get in contact with my spirit-animal but I haven't succeeded.

Interviewer: But how do you know that such a contact is possible at all?

Woman: I read a book about voodoo magic and there was a description of making this contact but for some reason I haven't got in contact with my spirit-animal. However, I managed to get in contact with my protective angel. (Woman, 29, 2018)

Even in teenagers' accounts the constant flow of various spirituality-related information is reflected in co-existing or fluctuating personal beliefs and micro-rituals that may have a temporary character, depending on new attractive information becoming available:

I wear a chain with a cross around my neck and I'm also baptized, and I have a protective angel who protects me, but my soul-animals are surely the horse and the dog. (Girl, 16, Võru, 2018)

As might be expected, a process that is framed as spiritual learning by a practitioner can combine elements from both science and mysticism as both discourses are present in the continuum of information publicly available. For example, in the next sample text a woman who was dealing with nutrition professionally from an academic viewpoint describes how a random reading on the internet opened for her a spiritual approach to the same topic that led to deeper self-reflection and spiritual self-development.

I came to Saint Hildegard thanks to spelt wheat. I had to make an academic presentation about spelt wheat, and that's how I got information about Hildegard's name and activity for the

first time while searching about spelt wheat on the internet. After that, Hildegard came to me several more times through my work. I started reading more about her, listening to her music, and became very fascinated by her life and activities. For me, she is a symbol of wisdom, balance, modesty, and activity. I always have a picture of Hildegard with me and sometimes, when life is a little difficult, I look at this picture and think that it was much more difficult in her time, and she accomplished so much in that regard. I have wondered who she would be if she had lived in another era and another place. If she had lived in Estonia several hundred years ago, she might have been a wise woman. Or if she lived today, she might have won a Nobel Prize in some field. Although I have a scientific worldview in many ways, I am not at all bothered by the fact of how Hildegard got her knowledge – through God's revelations. (Woman, 50, 2018)

The interest in the spiritual sphere often starts with a material output in the form of objects that can be treated as just adornment or spirituality-related souvenirs but also as having magic protective qualities or influencing one's "energy level" and intuitions – and again the viewpoints can change over time. In the following example, runes are seen as symbolic objects and as carriers of esoteric wisdom. However, after experimenting with a runic pendant, the experimenter concludes that it didn't have "spiritual value" for him, however, and later he added that he had also experimented with a pendulum and energy therapies, and lessons learned from these approaches were more lasting.

When I went to Belgium in the 1990s, they sold all kinds of pop rock and lifestyle gadgets – wearable chains and pendants. The symbols were a mix of Norse mythology and esoterics and just fiction. Runic pendants were also sold there. Then I bought a runic badge from there and wore it a bit, but it wasn't a systemic thing. I have later wondered if when people use runes, do they really get some spiritual value from it. The esotericists I know all have runes, of course, because they feel it is right to use them, no further justification was needed, everything was on an intuitive level. (Man, 41, 2019)

Interesting are the contacts with “hop-on hop-off spirituality” by persons who identify themselves as sceptics. The following account is a vivid example of negotiation between the identity of a “sceptic” and bodily experiences that seem to challenge this identity. At least this personal experience narrative frames the negotiation so that a sceptic remains a sceptic even after believing. Here also the initial willingness to become involved in a spiritual approach is solely related to a burning personal psychological problem, and reading an advertisement of a healer leads to a visit that brings the desired solution but doesn't bring along a deeper spiritual conversion.

I once got help from [the healer and hypnotherapist] Albert Stepanjan. The problem was psychological. It had lasted for about ten years and was very disturbing and disruptive to life. I absolutely did not believe in any healers. But since I had already visited all kinds of psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, and who knows what other doctors, there was nothing to lose. I only thought that I wouldn't

take any magic drugs and I wouldn't let myself be touched. And so it went. The whole procedure made me laugh. Dim light, a candle, music. I was lying on a surface and mysterious movements were made with hands above me. Later I was additionally instructed to do some witchcraft with eggs at home, I don't remember exactly. The problem disappeared within a few days. That's how it was and that's a fact. I still don't believe someone else's mystical stories, I'm a complete sceptic. But I still must believe what happened to me. (Woman, 40–50s, 2010, women's forum delfi.naistekas)

Serial practitioners

It became clear from the interviews and life histories that some practitioners try out more or less deeply a plentitude of spiritual teachings. The practitioner in the next sample text uses vocabulary analogous to the concept of “hop-on hop-off spirituality” while describing “trying out” practices but “not sticking to them”. However, he makes analytical-empirical comparisons between various methods to decide on their value for his personal development:

I tried out Silva's [mind control] method but didn't stick with it because it seemed terribly technical to me, everything was just for getting something. In this sense that you want a better memory – let's do this exercise, you want to get a solution to your problem – drink a glass of water, save your problem in the water, take it in and the solution will come ... At the same time, there are still some things with which a person can develop his nature – which should actually be the opposite of technical approaches, but somehow it was a kind of nervous, it worked much

through counting numbers, like 10, 9, 8 – while counting, the frequency of your brain slows down from the alpha level to the beta level and from there even deeper to the sleep level, although at the same time Silva's method impressed me more than transcendental meditation, because transcendental meditation, in this sense, means being in a very dim and blurry consciousness. (Man, born 1973, 1999)

It turned out that the same man experimented with even more esoteric techniques, mainly on a superficial level but he developed, according to his own description, from all these an intact spiritual worldview of "love". Thus, his serial "hop-on hop-off" participation altogether brought along a more lasting spiritual identity.

The narrator of the next example can be also described as a serial practitioner, but he is also able to point out the starting point of his interest: a random invitation on the street that leads to semi-latent standby interest and later to devoted spiritual tantric self-discovery. Although having found a type of teaching that suits him best, the practitioner continues experimenting also with other teachings for "expanding his spiritual horizons".

I think it was after my army service, I was about twenty-five years old then, I was walking in the direction of the Tartu townhall square, and a young couple came, strangers, they said that they had such a venture coming – tantra evening. I, a shy country boy, politely refused. Five to six years passed, I started to search more consciously. Then there was not much information, I understood that it was not the right time yet. Another year passed, then information began to

trickle out. There were various esoteric evenings in Tartu on Hurda Street, there were tantra-themed gymnastics, exercises – very innocent, everyone was wearing clothes. I then joined the website Vikerkaaresild [Rainbow Bridge, a website publishing advertisements of esoteric courses] where there was already a lot of information. There was the course "Sex – highway to God". After passing this I was flying a month like in clouds. After that I became addicted to participating in this course, I guess I participated seven times in total. And there have been many more courses, I have become so much more knowledgeable with my body and more respectful to others. Sometimes such work with energy is so hard that you get a headache. But you also get gratitude and other warm feelings beyond all limits. (Man, born 1967, 2019)

Some authors (e.g. Styers 2004, 196) have viewed frequent attendance at spiritual courses or use of magic techniques as a form of addiction and a compensatory mechanism for looking away from real problems in one's life and creating the illusion of self-development. However, the findings related to the correlation between neurotic or unstable personalities and heavy involvement in spiritual teachings vary, and many authors have found it worthwhile to focus rather on a practitioner's subjective well-being (see related discussions in Kay et al. 2009; Unterrainer et al. 2010) that depends much on how the value of such participation has been narratively and experientially constructed and assessed by the practitioner. In my empirical material, the personal learning value gained from spiritual involvement pointed out by practitioners was often one of the

relevant markers in such subjective evaluation, helping them to decide if a teaching or practice was suitable as “equipment of living” (Burke 1973, 304).

Conclusions

Potentially, “hop-on hop-off spirituality” can bring endless layers of experience and perceived lessons from the continuum of spiritual approaches available, whereby the first impulse to gather information about a technique or teaching often comes from a random book, advertisement or yellow magazine article. Thus, borders between “transcendent”, “mediatized”, “unique” and “consumeristic” experiences are fuzzy but often related to vernacular definitions of “learning” and the use of the vocabulary related to learning, even when the contact with a particular teaching is short. In the majority of cases, spiritual participation is related to emotional loadedness – people can refer to their experiences as “life-changing”, “an important lesson”, “special”, also “funny”, “weird” or “terrible” and such an emotional-sensory processing often seems to build a more deciding part of perceived learning than purely intellectual learning and analysis of information, whereby unlearning in the form of disappointments and resulting corrections in spiritual interests, behaviour, or beliefs is often described as an integral part of the process. Yet, in public polls such persons may not identify themselves as spiritual or religious at all because their participation is mainly expressed through multi-sensory doing and experimenting, and not belonging.

The mass media have without doubt a multi-faceted role in spreading information about contemporary spiritualities, for example through advertisements, entertainment, creating curiosity and excitement through interviews with spiritual

practitioners, ridicule, and exaggerating moral panics when presenting examples of dangerous spiritual engagement. Thus, the public presence of spirituality-related topics provides for individuals (for both, the ones not yet involved or already involved in spiritual approaches) a primary source of information. However, the use of such information by an individual is usually not mechanical but a complex “hop-on hop-off” learning process that can besides emotional-sensory facets contain also sacral, symbolic, psychological, narrative, consumerist, and other aspects. ■

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Reet Hiimäe, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum, Estonia. Her main research areas are the psychological aspect of folk belief

and belief narratives, especially protective and coping mechanisms in folklore, and the general impact of past and present vernacular beliefs on people’s lives. In 2020 she spent her post-doctoral year at the University of Turku with the project “The Dynamics of Belief-driven Fears and Protection: From Mass Hysterias to Subjective Wellbeing” (funded by Estonian Research Council). She has written numerous academic (more than fifty peer-reviewed) and Estonian-language popular articles and books on folklore as mental self-defence as well as on gendered rituals. She has also edited collections of research articles and special issues of academic journals, for example in 2020 a special issue Health & Pandemic in the journal *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore* that compared the reactions to the Covid-19 crisis in various countries.

List of references

Empirical data of the article

Interviews about experiences with religions and spiritual teachings (c. 50; conducted as source material for the book Hiimäe 2019); interviews (c. 200) conducted by Estonian college and university students as homework in the frames of Hiimäe's lectures on vernacular beliefs in today's society (2017–23); responses (c. 20) to Hiimäe's web-questionnaire about the recent use of protective rituals (2023) – preserved in author's personal archive and available on request in anonymized form.

Written life-history narratives (c. 50; from 1990s–2000s) – preserved in Estonian Cultural History Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum.

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