

## Embracing Complexity

### The post-secular pilgrimage of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt

In the summer of 2009, I visited Santiago de Compostela—not as a pilgrim, but in order to take part in an international conference in the field of the sociology of religion. For a researcher of religion visiting this widely popular destination for religious travellers, the issue of pilgrimage nevertheless seemed topical and thought-provoking, and I therefore decided to take part in a conference session entitled ‘Pilgrimages Today’.

During this seminar, I was introduced to an international research project called ‘The Pilgrimage Project: A study of motivations and experiences in sacred space’, headed by Dr Miguel Farias at the University of Oxford. Within this interdisciplinary project, Christian and pagan pilgrims in Europe were compared. The researchers had collected questionnaires and conducted interviews with persons taking part in pilgrimages, either to the predominantly Catholic sites of Lourdes in France and Fátima in Portugal, or to the neo-pagan sites of Stonehenge and Glastonbury in England. A particularly interesting aspect was the discussion on spirituality in this vast empirical material. It turned out that a majority, both among those taking part in traditional Christian pilgrimages and among those participating in the neo-pagan rituals, preferred to call themselves spiritual rather than religious.

So far, the research team had not made any further analyses of how the term spiritual was applied in the material and if, perhaps, there was a significant difference between the ways in which spirituality was understood within a Christian frame of reference and within a pagan one. What was clear, however, was that the persons who undertook pilgrimages placed great value on personal development, emotional experiences of a divine nature, holistic health concepts uniting body, mind and soul and—more generally—of finding oneself and finding a deeper meaning in life. The physical and ritual process of becoming a pilgrim seemed to satisfy the need for a comprehensive experience linking age-old traditions with personal development and uniting a bodily and spiritual effort into a tangible and meaningful experience.

Such perspectives are often recognised as characteristic for the post-secular culture we are said to live in, where the notion of spirituality is gaining in popularity over the traditional language of religion, including institutional leadership, doctrines and formal organisations. The description of the contemporary spiritual seekers awoke my immediate interest as I could sense a kinship with the worldview and existential outlook of a person whose spiritual journey I have lately been following closely: the novelist and playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt. His spiritually inspired worldview is also the result of a pilgrimage, I claim, but this travel is of a more personal nature, starting with a powerful spiritual experience during a walking tour in the desert, continuing through inner contemplation and study and ending in an authorship dedicated to spirituality, interreligious encounters and human complexity.

In this article, my aim is to elaborate further on the notion of post-secularity, the themes and trends included in its scope, and its implications for the understanding of pilgrimage today as a complex phenomenon uniting ancient traditions and contemporary spiritual currents within a more or less flexible frame of ritualised and emotionally saturated conduct. In this analysis, the biographical notes of Schmitt's personal journey towards spiritual maturity and the inter-religiously inspired themes of his current authorship function as the empirical focal point of, as well as the kaleidoscopic lens through which, the topic as such is presented.

### **Post-secular spirituality**

The forms and functions of religion in contemporary society are said to be undergoing change. Several overarching processes at social, political, economical and cultural levels have altered the way religion is understood and employed in the everyday life of practising believers, spiritual seekers and antagonists of religion alike. Among these, we find the complex phenomenon of globalisation which affects practically all spheres of society and involves a high degree of mobility, migration and urbanisation (Martikainen 2007: 375). On a political and economical level, neo-liberalism as an all-encompassing ideology is gaining ground, celebrating the individual and her subjective right to choose her own lifestyle and worldview and increasing the impact of consumer culture and various media landscapes. Taken together, these trends imply an ongoing transformation of Western societies towards a greater diversity of ideas, values and practices (Furseth 2006: 302).

For many researchers looking into the global religious landscape of today, it seems obvious that the scholarly predictions introduced some decades ago concerning the slow decline, or even death of religion through the processes of secularisation have not been fulfilled. Long-established forms of religious life—for example, traditional religious institutions advocating sets of fixed creed and conduct—are indeed showing a downward trend, but the vivid interest in and practice of religion in new, innovative ways seem to give the phenomenon a character of expansion rather than erosion. Several scholars therefore question the secularisation thesis as such and argue that religion has not, after all, lost influence and relevance in contemporary society (Barbato & Kratochwil 2008: 1, 6). The trend of revitalisation is exemplified by numerous forms of religious practice that rapidly gain in popularity today: immigrant religions, charismatic movements, new religious movements, health and body practices as well as alternative spiritualities, to mention a few.

In order to create a theoretical account of the new situation at hand, the philosopher Charles Taylor elaborates on the term ‘post-secular’. In his opinion, the grand narratives of secularisation must be disputed: not because the process has been reversed so that we are returning to the religious landscapes of earlier generations, but because ‘we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee’ (Taylor 2007: 534–5). Thus, efforts must be made to analyse and conceptualise the new religious situation—after secularisation. It is not easy to give an unambiguous definition of this condition, however: depending on the focus and interest of the researcher, many contrasting—and even contradictory—processes of change can be included in its orbit (Barbato & Kratochwil 2008: 12). Hence, the following description focuses on transformations that bear the most profound implications for the current analysis.

The notion of spirituality has gained a fairly well-established place within the discussion on contemporary culture and society as a symbolic repudiation of and counterpart to ‘organised religion’ (Sutcliffe 2003: 223). The popularity of the notion is, according to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, explained by the so-called ‘massive subjective turn of modern culture’, which is a turn away from institutional hierarchies, duties and objective roles and towards a life directed by one’s own subjective experience (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2–4). The rapid rise of so-called alternative spiritual movements during the last century popularised the idea of religiosity as a personal quest for inner transformation and of the self as a seeker in novel and fascinating inner landscapes. Spirituality, hence, developed into a concept denoting a turn towards an innovative, personalised and experiential way of ‘doing religion differ-

ently' (Sutcliffe 2003: 35, 37). Growing significance is attached to the space of personal existence: states of mind, memories and experiences. Hence, it is argued, the ideology of spirituality is to focus on so-called 'soft' aspects of culture and religion, such as emotions and relationships, and to attach greater significance to subjectivities in general.

As a consequence, the dependence on authorities gives way to a greater reliance on the ability of each individual to decide for herself how to realise her full human potential. According to Taylor, the notion of being 'spiritual but not religious' reflects a reaction against and disillusionment towards religious authoritative claims: rather than following confessional leadership, contemporary individuals strive to follow their own spiritual itinerary (Taylor 2007: 535). This development amounts to a decreasing interest in institutional religions with traditional leadership, dogmas and ethical rules, and an increasing interest in new forms of spirituality emphasising holistic experiences, inner development and subjective choices. From such a perspective, organised religion is readily dismissed as narrow, unimaginative and socially constricting, even detrimental, whereas spirituality is understood as 'open', 'inner' and 'living experience'. Defining a personal religious or spiritual position is no longer merely a question of formal membership of an organisation. Rather, a spiritual identity is formed through various different practices: by belonging to an internet community, by following certain diets and health practices, by choosing a certain form of consumer behaviour and following spiritual guides of your own liking. Conclusively, Steven J. Sutcliffe argues, being spiritual has become a mainstream activity; you are no longer dismissed as an oddball simply because you are on a spiritual quest (Sutcliffe 2003: 214–16).

### **Subjectivity, emotions and choice**

Subjective agency and unmediated experiences are key concepts within the discourse on spirituality. Hence, the move from religion to spirituality mirrors another significant change within contemporary culture and society; that is, the increasing weight and value attached to the individual. Inger Furseth describes the current transformation of the religious landscape as a move from finding truth to finding oneself. Whereas previous generations thought about their religious commitment in terms of duties and obligations, the contemporary trend is rather to 'set out to dissect every accepted norm and explore and form new ones'. According to Furseth, this shift in religious orientation discloses a turn away from others and towards the self; away from the group

and towards the unique human being (Furseth 2006: 296–7). Consequently, tradition is often spoken of with rather negative connotations, as a shell empty of true spiritual content and an obstacle to individual self-realisation and choice. Each individual is regarded as responsible for developing her own worldview—an independently formed credo of faith, experience and aspirations rendering meaning to her own existence. The language of individualism does not, however, exclude care and concern for community: ‘Personal autonomy seems to be a growing basis on which many people. . . relate to the sacred. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that community is unimportant’ (Furseth 2006: 311). Thus, the subjective turn does not seem to be as massive and uniform as is often assumed in theoretical descriptions of the post-secular society.

The focus on individualism and subjectivity elevates the element of choice to an essential guideline within the post-secular scenery. Instead of functioning as unalterable norms and codes of law, traditions and scriptures are increasingly given the role of symbolic repositories to be used and applied by the individual according to her personal preferences (Geels 2009: 21). As a growing number of people prefer personally collected and constructed spiritual solutions to the ready-made packages of creed and conduct offered by traditional religious institutions, the importance of finding and justifying your own path in the landscape of richly diversified options becomes crucial. According to Taylor (2007: 11), this is a world in which ‘the fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others.’ Such intuitions, however, may be all but self-evident to others.

We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty. (Taylor 2007: 11.)

In the contemporary realm of religion and spirituality, however, choice need not be framed as a selection between two clearly contrasting alternatives, such as sharply separated faith traditions. Furthermore, the making of a choice need not be regarded as a definitive or irrevocable decision. Rather, the post-secular situation offers possibilities to combine elements from different times, traditions and territories in a personal and tentative fashion. Faith is no longer the natural ‘default option’ of every human being. Therefore, the entire background against which the processes of choice, combination and renounce-

ment are played out is altered. In this new situation, after both religion and secularisation, not even belief and unbelief seem to provide mutually exclusive existential positions. It is rather a question of personally exploring the vast landscape opening up between the ultimate poles of fundamentalism and atheism and all the viable routes of spiritual experience found in this terrain (Taylor 2007: 4, 12, 14).

In the post-secular situation, the doctrinal aspects of religions seem to attract less interest as the demand for emotionally fulfilling experiences of faith increases. The focus of religious life seems to be shifting from theoretical claims of truth and theology to 'different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other' (Taylor 2007: 5). The end of the modern era and the consequent turn from religion to spirituality has nurtured a growing scepticism towards the strong belief in rational solutions. The interest in the emotional and experiential dimensions of religious faith is therefore appearing as an alternative to the 'religion of reason'. The spiritually inspired process of self-transformation hence seems to include a striving to reach beyond rationality by grounding one's religious outlook in personal experience (Martikainen 2007: 366). In a recent article on new spiritualities and mysticism, Antoon Geels presents a number of changes he regards (on the basis of research carried out by Liselotte Frisk) as distinctive for the current transformation of the religious landscape. This analysis also aptly ties together the threads of the discussion on post-secularity presented above (Geels 2009: 13–15):

- *From particular to eclectic.* Instead of using only one source in building one's worldview, contemporary believers increasingly regard the world religions as resources to be explored, assessed and combined in an individual way.
- *From dogma to experience.* Theoretical aspects of religion, such as truth claims and doctrinal regulations, are increasingly abandoned in favour of a more practically pluralistic religiosity.
- *From collective to personal.* Influenced by neo-liberal and consumer-centred ideologies, the individual is empowered as a competent actor in choosing and creating the personal religious outlook.
- *From a hierarchical to an egalitarian life-view.* Traditional institutional leadership and divisions of religious communities are replaced with a view of the open and unrestricted spiritual community.
- *From a theological to an anthropological dimension.* Religion as a human reality primarily defined by lived experience is advanced.

- *From life after death to this-worldliness.* The divine dimension is regarded as immanent in man and the world rather than transcendent and distant.

## Pilgrims in a new religious landscape

The trends characterising the contemporary post-secular turn of culture, society and religion present both theoretical and empirical challenges to the research on pilgrimage. In their classic study, Victor and Edith Turner pointed to the fact that the history of pilgrimage seems to be as ancient and culturally diverse as humankind itself. In their view, the religious desire to travel—to undertake a journey in search of the sacred—is an inter-religious imperative, enticing the spiritual seeker into a liminal landscape of transition and potentiality (Turner & Turner 1978: 1–3). How, then, does this ancient pattern of the travelling man—*homo viator*—fit into the contemporary context of late modernity, asks Luigi Tomasi (2002: 3): Are the motives for religious travelling still the same, or have the changes in religious outlooks brought any significantly new aspects to the pursuit of pilgrimage?

In Tomasi's view, human travel and its approaches to the sacred are always tied to a social context and historical situation. Therefore, the pilgrimages of today are profoundly different from their ancient predecessors. As the emphasis in historical times was placed on religiously stipulated virtues such as penitence, purification and redemption, current religious travellers place greater significance on inner dispositions and the transformation taking place within the self during the pilgrimage (Tomasi 2002: 13). Modern individuals seek authenticity in different ways, Tomasi underlines, and therefore the modes of religious travel have become simultaneously both personalised and pluralised. As a special form of human mobility, pilgrimage tests and sustains complex cultural constructions of self and other, group identity and social reality, geographical space and historical time—at times even ultimate reality. Along with any other given form of travel, it is thus to be regarded as 'plural, subject to dispute, and changing over time' (Adler 2002: 26–7). Hence, the turn from collective to individual, as noted by Geels, seems to be a relevant ingredient in the contemporary pilgrimage.

Even if the forms and functions of pilgrimage change, the fundamental need for sacralised experiences remains the same, Tomasi still claims: 'The desire for the sacred is by no means fading, nor has the modern individual's impulse after the Absolute diminished' (Tomasi 2002: 18–19). Therefore, pilgrimage can also in its modern form be understood as a quest for a 'sacred

centre' (Adler 2002: 26). Nevertheless, new modes of experiencing the sacred are apparent among contemporary religious travellers, one of the most significant novel trends being the inclination to mix different religious and spiritual sources—at times even stretching the limits between sacred and profane—in creating a personal travel itinerary (Tomasi 2002: 20). As noted above, assessment and choice are regarded as cornerstones of the post-secular ethos and therefore it is not surprising that creative combinations occur also in the field of pilgrimage. All forms of travel are today readily associated with a pluralistic experience of the world, moving our senses out of the ordinary context and into the 'radical potentialities of disorientation', seeking the strange and plunging into it (Plate 2009: 264; Ruf 2009: 268). In contemporary pilgrimage, therefore, traditions and influences seem to mix in a number of personal and creative ways, exemplifying the turn from particular to eclectic.

How, then, can the findings of the Oxford research group concerning the general popularity of the term spirituality among pilgrims be understood? What added value can a 'traditional believer' gain from the flourishing interest in spirituality? Even if the term in its more recent application has largely been dissociated from traditional religions, spirituality need not, however, be opposed to traditional religious institutions. Within the mystic traditions of several world religions, spirituality has historically been used for intense, holistic dimensions of devotion, where thought and emotion meet. Thus, the term has often been associated with an emphasis on inner growth and the cultivation of a deeper spiritual life within the different religious traditions (Geels 2009: 15, 17). In these cases, the spiritual experience is firmly anchored in a given tradition—widening its scope rather than moving out of it. Spirituality seems to be a growing force, not only outside the established religious institutions, but also within them (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 366). Hence, the interest in spirituality among Stonehenge visitors and Lourdes travellers alike is not surprising: depending on interpretative framework, it can become a central concept both for traditionally Christian pilgrims and for pilgrims within neo-pagan traditions and alternative spiritualities.

In my interpretation, this development reflects the turns from dogma to experience and from the theological to the anthropological which were discussed above. The inclination towards mystical forms of religiosity also underlines the embodied nature of the pilgrim experience. In a recent issue of *Cross Currents* dedicated to 'Varieties of Contemporary Pilgrimage', S. Brent Plate argues that the study of pilgrimage reveals how religion itself actually is vitally physical. In his opinion, the exposure to novel sights, sounds, tastes and smells can function as 'corporeal inspiration' for the pilgrim who enters

into the transcendent locale of a pilgrim site. Whether the travel has been undertaken for noble, pious, pure, impure or just plain curious reasons, there is something about the concrete, bodily quest itself that makes the pilgrimage potentially transformative. Therefore, he concludes, the study of pilgrimage 'brings religion to its senses' in a way that abstract studies of doctrines and texts can never achieve (Plate 2009: 263, 266).

To conclude the discussion on contemporary forms of pilgrimage, one notices that the transformative processes brought together under the heading of post-secularity also seem to be relevant within this field: pilgrims, too, experience a turn from collective to subjective, from particular to pluralistic, from theoretical to experiential. Pilgrimages are most frequently collective undertakings, but they can also be described in a theoretically valid way as individual journeys 'toward an "elsewhere" sometimes more desired than known' (Tomasi 2002: 3). From such a point of view, the journey towards spirituality and faith undertaken by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt can be meaningfully illuminated in the context of post-secular pilgrimages. The subjective and tentative way of thinking about one's personal religious commitment displayed in the discussion above is characteristic also of Schmitt, towards whose personal pilgrimage and spiritual worldview we now turn our interest. In my opinion, Schmitt's religious reasoning displays and illuminates several of the features recognised as distinctive of the post-secular pilgrim.

## Encountering the Absolute

Since the beginning of 2008, I have been involved in a research project on interreligious dialogue, focusing on novel, creative forms of encountering the religious other. Within this project, I have interviewed several artists around Europe who, in their professional work have focused on the encounter between persons of different faiths—in photography, multimedia art, music and literature. In a similar way as the embodied practice of pilgrimage, art seems to provide a popular channel for expressing and experiencing religion today, in line with the post-secular watchwords of exalting subjectivity, engaging all senses and abandoning pure rationality as a life norm. Some of these artists, who have their roots in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, move comfortably within the traditional frames of their own religion while others have given up a personal religious commitment, opting instead for the position of the distanced observer. From these rather different points of departure, the artists give their views on the question: how to live together in the religiously plural world of today?

Creative interreligious dialogue is hence the main topic of the project that brought me into contact with Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt. He has reached a world-wide audience with his symbolically dense and humorous tales of encounters between persons of different cultures, religions and ages. Especially the collection of five short fiction stories called *Le Cycle de l'Invisible* (1997, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2009) presents a researcher of religion with intriguing narratives for analysis. The characters often express an extraordinarily open attitude towards religious truth, which also reflects the worldview of the author: No religion is true, no religion is false, as one of Schmitt's characters, the Catholic priest Père Pons, claims (Schmitt 2004: 65). The following presentation of the personal pilgrimage that transformed Schmitt from a hardcore academic atheist to a spiritually inspired novelist is based mainly on an interview I conducted in June, 2008. Additional sources I have solicited include Schmitt's autobiography *Ma vie avec Mozart* (2005) and his official homepage on the internet ([www.eric-emmanuel-schmitt.com](http://www.eric-emmanuel-schmitt.com)).

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt became a writer of fiction as a result of a personal spiritual development. Born in 1960 in an atheist home in Lyon, he grew up in an atmosphere where 'it was obvious that God was dead and religions were agonising or dying' (IF mgt 2008/52). A serious illness in his youth left him depressed and questioning the meaning of life, but through theatre and classical music he rediscovered the beauty of life. After finishing school Schmitt entered university to study philosophy and earned his doctoral degree on the topic of enlightenment philosophy at the age of 27. A few years later, in 1989, a journey to the Sahara changed his life forever.

Pilgrimage is often tightly connected to our sense of identity, S. Brent Plate writes, and sometimes the best way to find ourselves on such journeys is to get lost (Plate 2009: 263). This statement seems to give an apt description of what happened to Schmitt during his travel: by losing his direction for a while, he found an inner spiritual current and a new direction for his professional life. The purpose of his trip to the Sahara was purely recreational but unfortunately—or fortunately, Schmitt comments—he got lost. For almost two days he wandered alone in the desert without sufficient clothing, shelter or food before being found again by his fellow travellers. But rather than seeing this incident as a disaster, Schmitt experienced a personal mystical awakening. Instead of being afraid, he says, he received faith:

But this. . . was not faith in the God of Christianity, in the God of Islam, in the God of Judaism. Because there was no religious structure or culture in me, I did not recognise him, God. It was a monotheistic experience, a

mystic and monotheistic experience of God and very surprising for me. It was difficult for me to put a name on it. (IF mgt 2008/52.)

Describing this experience in his autobiography, Schmitt uses the metaphor of music: the mystical encounter, like Mozart's music, relieved fundamental anxieties, pulled him away from the enticement of non-being and placed him firmly on the path of life. In such moments, Schmitt writes, all our questions are finally silenced and replaced by a feeling of 'satisfied unity'. He also recalls a sentence constantly repeating itself in his mind: 'Everything is justified' (Schmitt 2005: 131). Schmitt felt he had experienced the Absolute; he was spiritually empowered and clear about his future destiny: he was to become a writer. Returning to France, Schmitt wondered how to continue. He started reading the founding texts and mystical poetry of the major world religions and to his surprise, his response was not to reject them as before, but to find interest and identification. Gradually, over the course of several years, the contemplations grew into a personal faith. It was a long journey for him, he says, and even today God remains 'very exotic' (IF mgt 2008/52). A few years after his mystical experience, Schmitt shot to fame in France as a playwright and decided to abandon his academic career to become a full-time writer. He started his narrative journey into the creative landscape of interreligious encounters, a journey that thus far has resulted in a vast number of novels, short stories, essays and plays.

As seen in Schmitt's description of the extraordinary journey that turned into a personal, spiritual pilgrimage on the way, disorientation can indeed play a significant and fascinating role in religious travel. Usually, we regard it as favourable to have a clear idea of who we are and where we are going in contrast to being disorientated and confused. Still, Frederic J. Ruf writes, there are instances when we willingly choose discord and disruption, 'when *they* become our orientation' (Ruf 2009: 275). For Schmitt, the trip to the Sahara became just such a pilgrimage, offering a chance to encounter the strange—in the form of divine transcendence—and to transform his personal life situation in a profound way.

### **Complexity and incarnation**

The pluralistic experience of pilgrimage and travel seems to require an expanded language in order to be communicated; it needs 'words that will be flexible and supple, words that will not grab hold for dear life, but that will

pull us forward, farther and farther' (Ruf 2009: 278). In my interpretation, this comment sheds light on the way of reasoning that after the sojourn in the Sahara led Schmitt to choose literature as his mode of expression rather than academic research. Literature is the sense of complexity, Schmitt asserts: its purpose is to legitimate different perspectives. 'The purpose is not: What is true? The purpose is: How is it possible to live together?' Therefore, novels can be helpful in creating awareness of the necessity of a pluralistic humanity. The wish to express complexity in his writing was one of the reasons why Schmitt abandoned a successful academic career to become a writer of fiction: philosophy strives to simplify the world, literature makes it even more complex, he asserts. Another reason was the wish to include emotions in his texts. The overall reaction of the French intelligentsia to this choice was astonishment, Schmitt admits, but in his view, the leap from fact to fiction is not that great. Intellectual life is always connected to emotions, he declares: an intellectual without feelings is an abstract man and philosophy abstracted of emotion is pure craziness (IF mgt 2008/52).

Feelings often mark the beginning of an intellectual journey, Schmitt believes, because 'you have to think inside life, inside your body, with your emotions'. This is where art becomes important to interpersonal communication and understanding: by telling a fictional but engaging story you can give your readers access to the religious other in a fresh and enriching way. By including emotions, literature can be more effective than rational arguments: it describes encounters of real human beings rather than purely academic speculations. It creates wisdom instead of simple knowledge. 'It has to be incarnated; it has to be flesh and blood and feelings', Schmitt asserts (IF mgt 2008/52).

The purpose of literature is, according to Schmitt, 'to explore the world and to explore the minds and hearts of people'. As an artist he regards it as his mission to create respect and sensibility towards the religious complexity of the world; to promote peace, love, understanding and curiosity. 'Art is useful for life', Schmitt claims: it makes us able to live together. Through poems, music and literature we may catch a glimpse of the indiscernible and discover a world where the shared vulnerability and interdependence of humanity replaces our individual selves as the central axis. This is of course an invented world, but it is nevertheless *our* world, Schmitt claims: a shared space of harmony and beauty, 'beside nature, . . . beyond Christianity, Judaism; independent of religion' (Schmitt 2005: 50–1, 111).

As are the post-secular pilgrims mentioned earlier, Schmitt is prone to talk about spirituality rather than religion in conveying his relationship to the topic. 'I am inspired by the religions', he claims, 'but I am not a religious per-

son, rather a “believing agnostic.”’ When asked if God exists, Schmitt simply responds: ‘I don’t know. Believing and knowing are different approaches’, he says, but at least in his experience, God is present in every human being, in her questions. If God is just fiction, he concludes, it is useful fiction (IF mgt 2008/52). Schmitt describes his interest towards religion as a humanist one. To him, the primary question is not whether a religion is true or not, but how different people understand these ultimate realities. Religions help us to create meaning and to deal with the mysteries of life, he claims. Thus, the human aspect of religiosity is more relevant than the doctrinal. Schmitt declares:

I am believer, but I still consider life a pure mystery. But I have a different way to inhabit this mystery now. My first way to live in this mystery was fear, anxiety. My new way. . . is faith and confidence. It’s still a mystery, but the feeling is totally different: faith and confidence instead of fear and anxiety. And that’s the benefit of religions; [they] open your brain to other things than pure rationalism. (IF mgt 2008/52.)

In Schmitt’s arguments, spirituality is often paralleled with the notion of mysticism. By giving precedence to experience over rational reasoning and traditional dogmas, contemporary spirituality certainly bears a significant familiarity with the classical mystical traditions inherent in many of the world’s religions. In a similar vein as the traditions of mysticism, the discourse on spirituality emphasises a religiosity grounded in personal practice and experience and advocates a view of human beings as ‘more than the sum total of words and thoughts’ (Geels 2009: 15, 20). Whereas mysticism traditionally has had quite an elitist label in religious circles, pertaining only to an exclusive group of initiated masters, the notion of spirituality has gained a more widespread use in contemporary culture, capturing also intensive, inner experiences on a popular level. The spiritual attitude characteristic of the post-secular condition thus tends to give emphasis to subjective traits such as passions, enthusiasm and feelings in the unmediated experience of spirituality. A post-secular account of religiosity, hence, needs to acquire a sense of lived experience (Sutcliffe 2003: 218; Taylor 2007: 8).

To Schmitt, interreligious encounters are complex challenges where not only two religions (as theoretical and historical constructions), but also human beings stand against each other. Thus, as mentioned above, his writing acknowledges the post-secular critique of the body–soul dichotomy and regards the human spiritual experience as a holistic unity. At the heart of religions, one could say, there are bodies: breathing, sensing, feeling and inter-

acting (Plate 2009: 267). In Schmitt's novels, complexity is a key word and the lines of difference transformed in the encounter are several: Muslim–Jew, young–old, happy–sad, powerful–powerless, convinced–confused:

I am obsessed with complexity! For me, it is a mistake to desire a simple solution, a simple truth, a unique algebraist formula. It's terrible because it's impossible. You have to fight against this obsession of simple ideas in order to accept complexity. (IF mgt 2008/52.)

In the presentation of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's life story and authorship given above, several hallmarks of the post-secular pilgrim have been salient: his perspective is an eclectic, subjective and emotionally saturated understanding of spirituality as an inner, holistic experience. As a conclusion, Schmitt strives to underline that our identities, in the end, are the results of pure chance; of historical coincidences, social patterns and hazards. A fixed and stable identity—uniting us with some who share it and separating us from others who do not—is fiction. The human way to survive is, according to him, to accept the complexity of our interpersonal world. In his writing, therefore, he wants to be 'clear about complexity' at all levels of life, which is always richer than we are able to imagine.

### Concluding remarks

In my interpretation, the analysis presented above concerning the spiritual journey of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt and the convictions and values he promotes today, sheds light on many of the aspects that seem central to the religious motivations of contemporary pilgrims. Returning to the aspects presented at the beginning of this article as characteristic for the post-secular situation, we may recall that spirituality seemed to be a more attractive word than religion to pilgrims of different affiliations, representing a subjective, emotionally charged way of experiencing the divine holistically through body and mind. Moreover, the goal of finding oneself and finding a deeper meaning in life seemed central as the focus shifted from theories, institutions and collectives to emotional experiences, creative combinations and personal choices.

The personal development story of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt follows similar thematic lines: an intense physical experience initiates a progress from the simple truths offered by rationalist science to emotionally informed nar-

ratives of complexity, from fear and anxiety to faith and confidence. Thus, I think Schmitt in his biographical statements and in his novels gives a description of the post-secular spirit that inspires many pilgrims of today. This inclusive spirit was tangible also during my visit to Santiago de Compostela, where I soon noticed how difficult it is to divide the visitors into watertight categories of either 'traditional' pilgrims or travellers inspired by new forms of spirituality. Among the pilgrims I observed, there seemed to be a mix of believers motivated primarily by the Catholic doctrines, persons seeking a spiritual experience, taking on a challenging adventure, or just taking a tourist trip with an extra twist. Also, the numerous souvenir shops revealed that not only were Christian symbols desired by the pilgrims, but that neo-pagan objects and items related to the new spiritualities were equally popular. A positive apprehension of plurality seems to guide the post-secular pilgrim.

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt can indeed be regarded as a post-secular pilgrim, but also as a modern mystic. Lost in the Sahara, he felt a connection to the Absolute, that everything was justified, that God was greater than any narrow, worldly divisions. In his opinion, love is the real heart of all religions: it marks the 'tenderness of the creator' (Schmitt 2005: 104). As mentioned above, his worldview includes an uncompromised respect for complexity, but also openness to the idea of a common humanity, expressed, to conclude, in words resembling classical mysticism:

In fact, I think I have everything in me, because the other is just one possible me. . .with another story. What we have in common are the questions, what makes us different are the answers. (IF mgt 2008/52.)

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