

The spirituality ripoff

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In the past year, the national and local media have given a great deal of coverage to the spread of spirituality in this country. Feature articles on Transcendental Meditation (TM), Erhard Seminars Training (EST), and the general trend toward therapeutic mysticism have appeared in newspapers and magazines of the right, left, and center. In addition, feminist publications have devoted entire issues to women and spirituality. There is no doubt that “something is happening here.” What exactly is happening is a matter that needs to be examined with some thoroughness. In general, both straight and alternative presses have viewed the phenomenon with scepticism. That scepticism has varied in degree and kind depending on the politics of the writer, but none of the articles I have read have made connections between the spiritual revival, patriarchal power, and women’s oppression. Feminist publications have concentrated mainly on redefining spirituality, an exciting and necessary activity (and one which I’ll discuss later). However, we need also to talk about what it means, and what it means specifically to women, that patriarchal spirituality is spreading like wildfire in the 1970’s. And that it is catching on not only with men, and women who were never too interested in the women’s movement, but with feminists, and many times strongly political, radical feminists. Probably most of us know someone, even a close friend, who has suddenly gone the spirituality route and “become a different person,” one who unfortunately is often, no longer “into” politics or such “narrow” concerns as feminism. The Rennie Davis—Sally Kempton transformation¹ is no isolated occurrence; it keeps happening—over and over, and to more and more of us. The question is: why?

“Meditation, Mind Control, and the Politics of ‘Inner Peace’

Psychologically, the political perspective has become alienating and unsettling as support drains and the circumstances of the “real world” seem to change only for the worse...Now, mysticism, spiritualism and therapeutics provide the ready shelters for the politically lost or strayed...”²

—Andrew Kopkind

“...They wanted someone to set matters right again, to tell them what to do, and it did not matter how that was done, or who did it, or what it required them to believe.”³

—Peter Marin

There are doubtless as many reasons why people turn to spirituality for answers as there are individuals who do the turning. The fact that they are turning at all, though, suggests a commonality of need which goes beyond the simple desire to understand the meaning of life. The need to be directed, to have someone else provide answers, rules, laws, is one which our society not only fosters but actually creates. From the time we are born, we are taught to submit to an authority greater than our own; we learn subservience and passivity at the feet of god, the father, and father, the god. This is the basic nature of patriarchy, as feminists have pointed out again and again. The mythical “separation of church and state” means nothing when the lesson we learn in both places is the same: follow the rules, law’s, commandments. Accept whatever

¹ New leftist Davis became the follower of Guru Maharaj Ji, and Sally Kempton went from radical feminism to Arica.

² Andrew Kopkind. “Mystic Politics, Refugees from the New Left.” Ramparts, June 1973.

³ Peter Marin. “The Now Narcissism.” Harper’s Magazine. October, 1975.

father, teacher, god tells you. Is there real difference between a policeman and a priest? We are told we are free, but the only freedom we have is in choosing which man to follow. And women, of course, can't be trusted to will-lessly participate in this system without constant supervision (those at the bottom are always somewhat dangerous). So we need our own personal husband/dictator to accompany us through life. And if you escape somehow, if you turn out to be a witch, dyke, or amazon, all the power of the patriarchy is turned against you to silence or destroy that voice of rebellion. The insidious ways in which this power can be exerted have direct relevance to the increasing popularity of spirituality in the past few years.

If the women's movement has stood for one thing, it is resistance to hierarchical structure and blind obedience. Feminists across the country have worked to break the leader/follower pattern of personal and political organization. The issues that women have raised are a threat: by questioning the necessity for either power or authority, we have shaken the very foundations of religion and government. Those in authority and those who live by power will do anything to turn our questions aside, indeed, to keep them from being heard. But in order to stay on top they need to provide the American public with new answers, answers that will smooth over all the turmoil and confusion that the 60's churned up, ease the guilt and disillusionment, and above all, tell us that everything is okay, that we are okay, or will be soon. If anything can do all these things, it is the new spirituality, which, in every one of its many forms, throws us back to the pursuit of happiness, the search for "inner peace," which comes from losing ourselves in something greater than our individual egos, which comes from following: the Perfect Master, the Mahareshi, Reverend Moon, Werner Erhard, Oscar Ichazo. etc., etc. And, if there's one thing our government knows, it's that, good followers make... good followers, especially if they're "blissed out."

The most frightening aspect of the new spiritual/therapeutic groups is that they all, without exception, easily plug into our patriarchal, capitalist society. The government has funded no less than thirty TM teaching and research programs involving alcoholics, drug addicts, prisoners, students, and civil servants.⁴ Similar programs for EST and the Divine Light Mission have also been government-funded, but TM seems to be the most adaptable to a wide variety of "trouble areas." The Mahareshi himself says: "Crime, delinquency and the different patterns of anti-social behavior arise from a deep discontent of the mind; they arise from a weak mind and unbalanced emotions [...] [I]t has been made clear that the conscious mind may be enlarged to its fullest capacity and strengthened to its greatest extent by the practice of transcendental meditation."⁵ Stanford law professor John Kaplan calls it "a nonchemical tranquilizer with no unpleasant side effects."⁶ The potential uses of such a quickie "cooling-out" process are endless.

The basic TM method involves two 20-minute periods of meditation a day. For many nervous, unhappy Americans unable to put a finger on the political roots of their personal misery, it is a fast easy solution, the perfect tranquilizer. And, quite handily, it can be used by those who make the laws as well as those punished by them. Thus, at one end of the spectrum is the anxiety ridden businessperson who pops into the executive washroom twice a day to emerge a calmer, happier capitalist, more adept at ruthless, cutthroat competition. The other end of the spectrum is the man or woman locked in a prison cell, whose jailers hope to use TM as part of the "rehabilitation" process.

⁴ Eugene L. Meyer. "The Business of Meditation." Boston Globe. November 23, 1975.

⁵ Quoted in "Transcendental Meditation and the Criminal Justice System." Stephen B. Cox, Kentucky Law Journal. Vol.60, no.2, 1971 72.

⁶ Gerald Clarke & Anne Hopkins, "The TM Craze: Forty Minutes to Bliss," Time. Oct. 13. 1975.

This universal applicability is not mere speculation. One of the sub-organizations of the TM World Plan Executive Council is the American Foundation for the Science of Creative Intelligence, a group formed in 1971 for business and professional people. It lists among its goals: “to bring fulfillment to the economic aspirations of individuals and society,” “to eliminate the age-old problem of crime and all behavior that brings unhappiness to the family of man,” and “to improve governmental achievements.” (Emphasis mine.) The strong links between big business and government are, of course, no secret, but now the links are being extended to a spirituality which helps both government and big business function more effectively.⁷ In the June 1973 issue of *The New Englander*, an article entitled “Business Tries Meditating” includes a TM course description:

Mounting grievances, job alienation, absenteeism, reduced productivity, low quality of output, and lack of innovation constitute major “people problems” confronting management. One technique that is showing positive results in these problem areas is Transcendental Meditation.⁸

The same article shows a photograph of the Mahareshi meeting Illinois Governor Daniel Walker, with a caption explaining that the Illinois House of Representatives, in Resolution No. 677, adopted May 24, 1972, “formally encouraged all educational institutions in the state to study feasibility of TM courses.” The resolution itself points out: “school officials have noted a lessening of student unrest and an improvement in grades and student-parent-and-teacher relationships among practitioners of Transcendental Meditation.” In like manner, a TM booklet entitled *Fundamentals of Progress* features a series of graphs which illustrate “increased productivity, improved job performance and job satisfaction” as well as “improved relations with supervisors” for meditating workers.⁹ Motivated by the possibility of greater corporate efficiency, A T & T, General Foods, Connecticut Life Insurance Co., Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Chicago, and Crocker National Bank of San Francisco have all offered TM courses to their employees.¹⁰

TM brochures proclaim endless accomplishments for meditators. On request, they will send you a whole series of pamphlets and reprints which allege greater efficiency and success in everything from athletics to the military. Probably the most revealing application of TM is discussed in a reprint from the *Kentucky Law Journal*, which describes a project in La Tuna Federal Penitentiary in Texas, where twenty-three volunteer inmates were instructed in TM. The article states: “[...] preliminary findings indicate that pre-meditation stress as measured by GSR, blood pressure, etc., is higher in inmates than in members of the public at large, and that TM is an effective mode of stress release and normalization of bodily processes.”¹¹ Obviously, what is being pedaled here is an instant cure for all “deviant” behavior. TM proponents are covering all bases: education, business, and the “criminal justice system” — each a prison of one kind or another. And TM helps us learn to accept peacefully the iron bars in all our lives.

Transcendental Meditation is, of course, not the only spiritual group in the business of selling normality and “inner peace.” The cults are multiplying so fast that it is difficult to keep up with

⁷ TM is actually a business itself, last year clearing \$20 million in this country alone, and because TM is classified as a “nonprofit educational organization,” all of it was tax-exempt.

⁸ Richard N. Livingstone. “Business Tries Meditating.” *The New Englander*. Vol.20. No.2, June 1973.

⁹ *Fundamentals of Progress*. A Transcendental Meditation Publication, 1975.

¹⁰ Clarke and Hopkins.

¹¹ Cox.

them. I won't attempt to discuss or even name them all here. What seems more important is to talk about the similarities they share, most significantly, the perpetuation of the leader-follower syndrome. The group which most blatantly exemplifies this education for submissiveness is EST. EST is a multi-million dollar corporation headed by Werner Erhard, a former salesman of such diverse products as used cars, Grolier, Inc. encyclopedias, and Mind Dynamics. (The latter two organizations have been sued by the state of California for deceptive business practices.) Erhard established the EST trainer style: visually hip, cool, casual; verbally authoritarian, manipulative, militaristic. The purpose of the training is to "tear you down and put you back together," a kind of psychological Humpty Dumpty process which leaves the participants virtually at the mercy (or more usually, cruelty) of the EST group leaders.

During the course of the two-weekend seminars, the trainees are verbally abused ("You're all assholes!") and psychologically browbeaten to the point where they are so confused and will-less that they will accept whatever they are told. And what they are finally told is that "you are perfect the way you are," a notion which seems to imply that the pinnacle of perfection is assholedom. Whatever the contradictions, the message is comforting, and that after all is what each person paid \$250*** for — comfort, solace, an Answer. Although the Answers may vary from spiritual group to therapy group, the actual process, whether it is called ego-reduction (Arica) or mind control (Silva), is the same in that it promotes passivity and prepares individuals for happy, "well-adjusted," acquiescent lives within an authoritarian, patriarchal society. "The end result is [...] a kind of soft fascism,"¹² in which "finding yourself" means losing yourself to something or someone else.

Fascism has many faces, and until we exorcise the spectre of leadership, until we abolish hierarchy in all phases of our lives (political, personal, spiritual), we will all be susceptible to it. In 1976, nearly a decade after the era of male-defined politics and instant "Revolution," women are slowly working our way out of the old power traps and learning together new ways of being and action which will create a future untainted by either domination or passivity. But we must be extremely careful. Confusion, disillusionment, and exhaustion are everywhere these days, in or out of the women's movement. And women, always conditioned to look for answers outside of ourselves will have to be especially vigilant against the lies which will be told in order to keep us from actualizing the dreams we hold so precariously in our hands. The "new" spirituality is a weapon which is being used against us. At its most destructive, it hands us a whole new set of myths to replace those we have debunked: from romantic to spiritual love. We must resist it with all our collective strength.

Women and Spirituality: An Affair with God

The weapons that modern technology is developing for social control of deviants, particularly women, are more subtle than burning at the stake. They merely destroy minds — the capacity for creativity, imagination, and rebellion while leaving hands and uteruses intact to perform the services of manual work and breeding.¹³

—Mary Daly

¹² Marin.

¹³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father, Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1973. p.65.

“Falling in love again, what am I to do?”

—Marlene Dietrich in *Blue Angel*

*** The price tag on personal salvation/transformation is always high. Only the rich can afford to “find themselves,” except, of course, when “tranquility” is part of a package deal imposed on workers, prisoners, etc. by those in power. Spring, 1976.

About ten years ago, Time magazine carried a cover story with the banner “Is God Dead?”. Last year Ms. magazine ran a similar feature story with one word changed - “Is Romance Dead?”. At first glance, these two queries may seem to have little in common. However, if one sees the challenge to patriarchal religion in the context of a more general challenge to all patriarchy, the connection begins to come clear. The conclusions of both articles were that neither god nor romance are really dead, a rather depressing observation for those women who came to realize that, these two institutions were at the root of their oppression. Sadly enough, these conclusions are more than likely valid; at least there are those who would like us to believe they are, and that’s the crucial point.

Any challenges to god the father and father (husband) the god, are met with absolute denial, while in the meantime new disguises are being made for both so that the old myths can be swallowed unquestioningly again. Power is a chameleon-like entity; it can change colors in order to survive. And survive it has, over and over again. That survival has depended upon the cleverness of the disguise, and now as the new spirituality attempts to legitimize all patriarchal power, it is time for women to point out that the emperor’s new clothes are indeed an illusion.

This action on the part of women is a necessity now. We must prevent the godfather from reinstating himself in our heads or our bodies. It will not be an easy task. For many of us the godfather has never been totally exorcised; we carry him around inside of us as we fight the double-passivity bind which was handed us at birth. Women have been taught- to submit themselves to all authority and to all men (usually they’re the same). To be assertive in any way is a struggle against outer and inner forces which attempt to hold us down, to keep us submissively “feminine.” The “eternal feminine” has been promulgated by religion and romance for centuries. And now when our frustration and anger are beginning to take concrete, active forms, all the power and cunning of the patriarchy are enlisted to stop us cold. The results are frightening:

“A Long Island “housewife” reports that “when she found herself screaming at her two children and wondering ‘Why can’t I control myself?’, she signed up for TM. By the end of her second week, she felt noticeably less tense and realized that her ‘boiling point’ had been raised to a reasonable level. ‘Whatever TM does’, she says, ‘it releases those pressured, tense, harried feelings we all have from life today.’”¹⁴

*** ** *

“A few months ago, I went to dinner at the house of a woman who had just been through a weekend of EST [...] she assured me that her life had radically changed, that she felt different about herself, that she was happier and more efficient, and that she kept her house much cleaner than before.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Clarke and Hopkins.

¹⁵ Marin.

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Joan Apter: "I have never met a woman working in an ashram kitchen that wasn't happy, and that's what matters [...] service is service, whether designing plans for the perfect city or cooking a meal. You get the same satisfaction because of Maharaj Ji's Grace."¹⁶

*** ** *

Joanna Rotte: "[...] since my experience of deepened spirituality and femininity had been spontaneously concurrent, and since woman and mother appeared to be inextricable — might not motherliness be kin to godliness?"¹⁷

These women are being swept along in the wave of the new spirituality. Each is part of a different group; each no doubt has a somewhat different spiritual perspective. Yet each one is expressing the same kind of mystical joy about woman's traditional role as housewife and mother. The questions and concerns of feminism are literally swept under the rug as women turn to the gurus for easy answers that will make them happy. Happiness, you remember, was the prime selling point of that old standby "romantic love." To surrender to a love which would be all, which would give meaning to one's entire life, this was the hope and desire of all little girls growing up in the 50's and 60's. This was the promise that romance made to us all. Then along came the women's movement and turned all the fairy tales upside down. Prince Charming wasn't so charming after all. And even though some of us were so buried in diapers and dishrags we couldn't hear, the seeds of truth had been sown.

Old myths die hard, however, and if there is one person who wants us to keep believing in fairy godmothers, it's god the father. So suddenly we are presented with an updated romance-isn't-really-dead story and an even-if-it-is, spiritual-love-is-alive-and-well sequel. If you find you can't believe one, there is always the second.

And many women are finding that they can believe both simultaneously. The high incidence of women falling in love with an individual man in a spiritual group either immediately before or after their own "conversion" is alarming. Then there's always the "bride of Christ" syndrome, where women substitute god (guru or therapist) for husband, and subsume themselves to that romantic image. Any way you look at it, it's the same old "individual solution," the same old romantic bullshit, which they try to pretend isn't outright slavery.

Needless to say, most of this new line is in direct response to the growing strength of the feminist movement. It is an attempt to fool women back to their old role by remythologizing it, by legitimizing it in mystical terms. In a recent issue of the East West Journal, an internationally distributed spiritual publication, the editors came out with a stand that was not only pro-femininity and pro-heterosexual but anti-abortion and anti-lesbian as well. In response to a reader's feminist critique of the Journal, the following was printed:

"[...] we do not accept the extreme feminist view that all traditional sex roles are imposed artificially by society with no basis in nature. We see man and woman as complementary rather than as interchangeable...

¹⁶ Ken Kelley. "Blissed Out with the Perfect Master." Ramparts, June 1973.

¹⁷ Joanna Rotte, "Women and Gurus," East West Journal, Vol.5, No.8, August 15, 1975.

We feel that birth control and abortion are to be avoided — not “lest we do something sinful, ” but simply because life is more enjoyable when all our actions express full awareness of our responsibility...

In our opinion, homosexuality is not a crime or a ‘sin,’ but is the manifestation of a blockage in the lower chakras which limits the natural expression of the truth inside a man or woman. People are free to dissolve that blockage — if they wish to — by dietary and other methods...”¹⁸

This kind of attack is not surprising when one realizes that radical feminist, radical lesbian women probably constitute the greatest threat to any patriarchal structure, including the new spirituality. Independent, woman-identified anti-authoritarian women have the potential to topple the old system of power/subservience entirely. We are not only redefining the meaning of politics and spirituality, we are also trying to eliminate the dialectical/hierarchical mentality altogether. We are attempting to abolish the godfather within as well as without. It is no wonder that all the forces of patriarchy — spiritual and political — have been rallied against us.

Feminist Spirituality: Consciousness Leaping

“The journey of women becoming, then, involves exorcism of the internalized God-father, in his various manifestations...the very process of exorcism, of casting off the blinding veils, is movement outside the patriarchally imposed sense of reality and identity.”¹⁹

—Mary Daly

“I submit that the evolutionary leap of consciousness to which Daly refers as necessary for a woman’s be-coming, pvenlually must include this choice of a total commitment to women [...] lesbianism is a spiritual/political issue [...] it is a totally integrated commitment to women.”²⁰

—Jacqueline St. Joan

“I have visions of becoming and
I dream in female.”²¹

—Barbara Starrett

Why have women, sometimes radically feminist women, fallen into the traps laid by the new spirituality? Why have they failed to see women’s liberation as spiritual revolution? I would say that is because of the lingering presence of that old monarch, god the father, in our minds as well as in the outside world. His presence, what we have been conditioned to believe is Reality and Truth, follows us even when we separate ourselves from as many male institutions as possible.

¹⁸ East West Journal. Vol.5, No.8. August 15. 1975.

¹⁹ Mary Daly, “The Qualitative Leap beyond Patriarchal Religion.” *Quest*. Vol.1, No.4, spring, 1975.

²⁰ Jacqueline St. Joan, “Beyond God the Father—Toward a New Theology.” *Big Mama Rag*. Vol.3, No.6. Dec. Jan. 1975.

²¹ Barbara Starrett, “I Dream in Female: the Metaphors of Evolution.” *Amazon Quarterly*, Vol.3. No.1.

It is the patriarchal either/or mentality that causes so many men and women to leave politics behind for a spiritual solution when Revolution becomes an “impossible dream.” And remnants of this dualistic mind-set still persist within the women’s movement. The process of eradicating this last and most persistent stronghold of patriarchy will be long and difficult. It will require of women an action one step beyond the old consciousness-raising, a revolutionary action which can only be described as a “leap of consciousness” so great that it will thrust us into totally new ways of being and becoming. Ways that eliminate all schisms, splits and dualities, ways that deny the necessity of one final answer.

Some women are beginning to make these leaps now. But because we are pushing out against nothingness, because we are defining ourselves and our world as we go along, without any one person or set of principles to tell us exactly what to do, it is a frightening process. Frightening too because we are trying not to fill up the gap left by god the father with a female equivalent, a penultimate Great Goddess. We seek change as a permanent process, revolution that is participatory and non-authoritarian, and being inseparable from be-coming. The world that we have “split open” is one full of uncertainty and fear. Sometimes it may seem very seductive (especially to those who have been struggling a long time) to return to an easy answer, a simple solution. To have all the holes filled up and all the dots connected would be so comforting; but oh so dangerous. For the answers and solutions are there, waiting to trap us, to enslave our minds and bodies, and pull us backward into romanticism and a spirituality based on power and mind control. Now, more than ever, we need each other’s strength and support to escape the pitfalls that lie all around us.

The healing of schisms, the denial of authorities. is a long process which requires both dreams and action on the part of women. It means that we will be attempting to integrate political analysis and spiritual/psychic awareness.

“Our political analysis tells us what must-change; our spiritual awareness shows us how. In the process of living out the ‘how’, new visions arise giving birth to new political analysis, which in turn stretches our spiritual awareness.”²²

At times discussions of spirituality drift into a vagueness and generality which can be both confusing and alienating. What we as women need to do is keep ourselves well-grounded in the real world of economic and political oppression while simultaneously dreaming and living toward our collective vision of a Utopian future. This means thought and action occurring in unison with each other. It also means that the elimination of dualism can only come from a non-dualistic process.

A woman friend of mine, who recently went through Arica training, told me that she was no longer concerned with “dialectical”, “confrontation” politics, that she now realized that change can only come from “within”, that the process must be “inner to outer.” What she was actually doing in her anti-dialectical statement was perpetuating dialectics, i.e., seeing inner and outer as separate, opposing entities. She also talked of “ego-reduction” while at the same time affirming a solution which was individualistic and focused on personal “inner change.” This kind of behavioral and intellectual contradiction springs from the dualistic foundations of patriarchal philosophical and theological systems.

²² Dorothy Riddle. “New Visions of Spiritual Power,” *Quest*. Vol.I, No.4. spring. 1975.

“[And] [...] duality, no matter which opposite is preferred, gives us only two choices. We may choose the reasoning, observing, dominating ego; or we may choose the annihilation of the personality. But if we learn to think beyond that binary, beyond the given choices, we can honor, equally, the conscious and the unconscious mind. We need not believe that the only alternative to mind is its annihilation. Both of these choices express a death pattern.

In the same way, we are often forced to choose between individuality and community. But we can at least imagine the possibility that we can choose both alternatives... We can refuse to consider one half of the dualism better than the other half. We can refuse to make ethical choices of either/or when it is possible to choose both.”²³

This is what women are learning to do now as we redefine spirituality and politics. As we “leap” beyond patriarchal world views, we are creating both new words and new actions.

“Renaming ourselves and the world”²⁴ means that we need no longer separate being and action into two categories. It means that we need no longer call ourselves “cultural feminists” or “political feminists” but must see ourselves as both. It means developing our psychic, intuitive powers while simultaneously learning to confront daily oppression in concrete, specific actions. It means teaching ourselves womancraft and selfdefense. We need both psychic energy and physical energy to change the world and ourselves. They rely on each other for effectiveness; one at the expense of the other leaves us trapped on one side or the other of a patriarchal duality. We have to leap these male-defined, male-perpetuated barriers in order to come together as women-loving-women without barriers, without sides, and without mono-istic definitions of ourselves, spirituality, or the future. We “seek the twin gifts of self-reliance and interdependence”²⁵ and the end to all external “answers” which sink us deeper into passivity and inaction.

In turning to each other for love, for dreams, for active participation in new ways of Being, we are creating a space in which our individual and collective schisms can be healed. “The presence of women to ourselves which is absence to the oppressor is the essential dynamic opening up the women’s revolution...”²⁶ The significance of that absence (and the presence which is lesbianism) is that because of it a circle of strength and energy is formed which includes all women. It is from that point that we move forward to create the future in present-time. In choosing to be witches, dykes, and amazons, to be radical feminists, to be lesbian feminists, to be whole spiritual/sexual/political beings, we are choosing to make that leap of consciousness which is in the truest (female) sense of the word “revolutionary.”

²³ Starrett.

²⁴ Judy Davis and Juanita Weaver, “Dimensions of Spin*uality.” *Quest*. Vol.I. No.4, spring 1975.

²⁵ Sally Gearhart and Peggy Cleveland, “On the Prevalence of Stilps.” *Quest*. Vol.I, No.4. spring 1975.

²⁶ Daly. *Quest*.

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