

# Towards a “Redescription” of “Spirituality”: A Response

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## Abstract

In “The Spiritual Illusion” (2014), Jonathan R. Herman wishes to initiate a discussion of the feasibility of the category “spirituality” within the study of religions. This response addresses several methodological problems with his effort, and questions the feasibility of this ironic approach. My critique is five-folded: Firstly, Herman draws a crude picture of the relationship between theology and the study of religion. Secondly, he does not explain why his sample of authors constitutes a hegemony for the understanding of “spirituality” in the study of religions. Thirdly, he ignores those who have been influential for how the category is used today. Fourthly, religion is assumed to be a “rectified” category not worthy of discussion. Fifthly, it remains unclear where an “ironic” and “imaginative” comparison of spiritual\religion and penis\vagina will take us.

## Keywords

spirituality – religion/spirituality distinction – theology – insider/outsider – methodology – conceptual/semantic history – genealogy – SBNR

The use of the category “spirituality” in the study of religion deserves critical review and those who use it should be subjected to “collegial deconstruction”

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(as we all do). In the MTSR article “The Spiritual Illusion: Constructive Steps toward Rectification and Redescription” (2014), Jonathan R. Herman addresses the feasibility of the category “spirituality” within the study of religion. He problematizes the category “spirituality” by pointing at a series of quotes from mostly theological sources. In an effort to “redescribe spirituality” in an “ironic and imaginative manner,” Herman compares the religion/spiritual distinction with that of penis/vagina. Unfortunately, Herman fails on several points at the outset of his rectification and redescription. In fact, he stumbles into many of the same traps he sets up for his colleagues and data, including theologians.

Firstly, Herman draws a too simple and naive picture of the theologian/scholar of religion relationship. Secondly, due to a vague methodology, he does not explain why an arbitrary sample of theological and popular religion authors should have any bearing on the conceptual use of a folk category within the study of religion. Thirdly, those who have been influential on how the category of spirituality is used within the academy(ic study of religion) are not brought into the discussion. Fourthly, “religion” is assumed to be a “rectified” category not worthy of further discussion. Fifthly, in the attempt to be “ironic” and “imaginative,” the relationship between religion and spirituality is conceptualized on the basis of unqualified assumptions about religion, spirituality and the human “reproductive organs.”

Herman opens his “Spiritual Illusion” by sending Russell T. McCutcheon on to the stage.—*You shall be suspicious of the dangers of hidden theological apologetics*, he preaches. Herman deploys McCutcheon to legitimize the kind of “collegial deconstruction” he is about to venture into. The message is clear: How “spirituality” is generally conceptualized has to do with theological, ego-centric and religious motivations, a.k.a. stuff we do not fancy within the study of religion. After all, we are scholars of religion, but not theologians.

Herman’s agenda is hereby set: the brave critical critic of religion fights against the dubious religious apologetic caretaker. The first engages in “legitimate research and scholarship,” the last is likely to produce “biased, incomplete or erroneous” scholarship (160). In other words, theologians and other religious actors within the academy should be treated as “outsiders” with religious and/or spiritual motivations behind their scholarly work. They should be regarded as “data.” It is not made clear if these illegitimate motivations follow from the disciplinary designation or vice versa. While I do think it is necessary that we need to employ a hermeneutics of suspicion, also when it comes to our colleagues within the academy, I do not think theologians warrant the extra suspicion compared to any other disciplinary identities.

## I Missing Theologians

In my work on the conceptual/semantic history of “spirituality” in Norway, theologians have proven one of the most relevant sources for understanding how “spirituality” as a concept has been understood since its introduction into Western history, between the letters of Paul and the fifth century letter most likely written by Pelagius, the first source where we find the term *spiritualitate* (Principe 1983: 130). This is because it is within theology you are most likely to find those who have bothered with tracing and analyzing this history. Scholars of religion have merely dismissed this genealogy as not relevant for how the concept is used in the modern period (e.g., Carrette & King 2005: 33; Bregman 2006: 8). One of the most comprehensive surveys of the category written in English is by the catholic nun Lucy Tinsley in her dissertation *French Expressions for Spirituality and Devotion: A Semantic Study* (1952). To my knowledge, a similar study has not been done since. This goes to show that theological motivations have been one of the main forces behind the will to systematize and scrutinize our sources to religious thinking in the past. A good example is the pioneer in computational linguistics, the Jesuit priest Robert Busa, who in the 1940s began working towards the digitalization of the complete works of Thomas Aquinas, which was launched as the *Index Thomisticus* in 1974. In many cases, work within theology cannot just be dismissed as “data” of dubious religious actors with academic ambitions. While we indeed have to reinterpret and redescribe theological research to fit within the epistemology of the study of religion, we often depend on these scholarly contributions.

In the article “Toward defining spirituality” (1983), the theologian Walter Principe is clearly restricted by a rather narrow interpretation of Paul, but he still offers a three page outline of a conceptual history of spirituality from the outset of the Pauline epistles. This is more than any scholar of religion has produced till this day. Principe’s article is cited in a matter of fact manner in works that comment on the history of “spirituality”, e.g., by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their *Selling Spirituality* (2005), but strangely ignored by Herman. One would expect Herman to acknowledge the 1.900 year long history of a concept that for most part fits within Christian thought as part of an attempted genealogical rendering of spirituality as a emic folk category with theological tendencies. It would in fact have strengthened his case.

My aim is not to be an apologetic of theology, or to shield theologians or other colleagues from critical scrutiny or epistemological questioning, but to challenge the assumption that academic titles or departmental identity

are sufficient to untangle the assumptions, motivations and goals behind the use of certain salient categories. While I (obviously) subscribe to the idea of “collegial deconstruction,” I find Herman’s attempt disappointing. To begin with, it is unclear whom Herman identifies as “a colleague.” We can assume that both McCutcheon and Jonathan Z. Smith are deemed colleagues, but neither receives any deconstruction. Rather, these are the people, some of them not identified, whose statements are “deconstructed”: Popular religion writer Karen Armstrong; “a well elderly, well-educated, American Jewish man”; a host of unnamed presenters on the IAHR-conference; the theologians Philip Sheldrake, Wesley J. Wildman and Amy Hollywood, Ewert Cousin, Paul Tillich, Morton Nelle, Alister McGrath, John D. Barbour, Tim Renick; leadership speaker William Guillory; Psychiatrist/Philosopher/Anthropologist Roger Walsh; nurse Joni Walton; and educator/author/consultant Duncan Ferguson. None of them, as far as I can see, has contributed to the discussion of spirituality in any of the central journals of our discipline.

The challenges and problems with the term “spirituality” as conceptualized by theologians is not that it is kept “vague.” On the contrary, it is more problematic when theologians indeed aims to “reclaim” by arguing its historical belonging to Christian thought to redefine it within a certain theological understanding. They do not usually communicate that the Greek term *pneuma* (translated to the Latin *spiritus*) is used by Greek philosophers in similar ways before the Pauline epistles was authored. Moreover, the idea of human spirit and that something can be ascribed to it, predates and goes far beyond the elaborate use of it in the Bible. As demonstrated by the linguist Alexandre François (2008:184ff), similar semantic connections between the ideas of breath, invisible entities and life principles can be traced in many languages, e.g., the Greek *pneuma*, Russian *dux*, and the Aleuit *anri*. If “spirituality” indeed is to be used as an analytical and comparative category, we must challenge the notion of it being essentially Christian in nature. Take for example the sentiment that Sheldrake entertains in his *A Brief History of Spirituality* (2007: 1, my emphasis), “The contemporary use of the word ‘spirituality’ is sometimes vague and difficult to define precisely because it is increasingly detached from religious traditions and *specifically from its roots in Christianity.*”

The unclear operational distinction between “colleagues” and “data” aside, Herman’s article could potentially have been a valuable contribution to the conversation if he had done a better job of explaining why and where a bunch of theologians and popular religion writers have any bearing on how the emic folk category “spirituality” should be used, understood, rectified and (re)described within the study of religion. In other words, besides the implicit nods to McCutcheon and Smith, what in Herman’s opinion constitutes

a proper, unbiased and clear use of spirituality as an etic category within the academic study of religion? In my case, because of this lack of methodological clarity, Herman becomes, ironically, “a datum” himself.

## II Missing Colleagues

Herman’s assertion that “spirituality” is “scarcely a scholarly category at all” (163) is plausible in the sense that the meta-theoretical discussion is scarce in proportion to its widespread use within the academic study of religion. It is therefore almost suspect that he categorically omits the few who have at least raised the issue in our disciplinary journals (e.g., Rose 2010; Huss 2014).<sup>1</sup> Why not survey the use of the category within the study of religion and its central journals? For example, how did Mircea Eliade use the category? Can we not assume some hidden apologetics behind his usage of “spiritual” in the article “Spirit, truth and seed” (1971), the title of which—by the way—seems to fit the comparative framework that Herman concludes his article with? It is hard to read Herman’s article as more than a series of missed opportunities.

One would think that there is a plenty of low-hanging fruit within the study of religion. Take for example the influential book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005) by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. They relate their use of spirituality to “express commitment to a deep truth that is to be found within what belongs to this world” (6). In fact, you will find a bunch of vague and undefined associations of spirituality in this book, which it also has been criticized for (e.g., in Voas & Bruce 2005: 43-4). The use of “spiritual” and “spirituality” would easily fit Herman’s interpretation of “vague or jargonistic” (164), but *The Spiritual Revolution* is not mentioned at all.

Even authors that would have supported Herman’s agenda are left out of the picture. In the above-mentioned *Selling Spirituality*, Carrette & King ask: “what are the socio-political effects of the decision to classify specific practices or philosophies as ‘spiritual’ and who benefits from such constructions?” (4). In fact, Carrette & King’s stance towards “spirituality” is very similar to Herman’s. Like the latter, they argue that it has become an encoding of Western neo-liberal value propositions, “a projection of modern, western, cosmopolitan religiously liberal values” (171). Compare also the following sentences:

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1 I included Huss’s article for interested readers. It is not reasonable to imply that Herman should have included this, since it was published concurrently.

There are perhaps few words in the modern English language as vague and woolly as the notion of ‘spirituality.’ (Carrette & King 2005: 30)

If there is anything that most purported (or implied) definitions of spirituality have in common, it is that they tend to be vague or jargonistic, i.e., either lacking in specificity or substituting other obscure language that may give a misleading impression of specificity. (Herman 2014: 164)

Dave Webster, in the introduction of *Dispirited* (2012) adds to Carrette & King’s assessment that, “[b]y itself, this is not a problem, ‘love’ can be pretty hard to define, and that is not enough to have us rejecting that it can mean something . . .” (2). Webster even takes the effort of defining what theology is (Herman does not): “Theology is the attempt at finding out what it means *if* we accept certain foundational propositions” (3). If one has accepted the biblical rendering of “the spirit” as *something* given to us from a god with moral implications, the implementation details may be as vague and varied as you want, but it is pretty clear what they are getting at: an attempt of describing what the experience of God is. We may not “get” what the definitions are “getting at,” but it is not hard to understand the challenge it attempts to resolve. Of course, if you simply adopt theological propositions to answer a challenge within the study of religion, you are getting into deep waters.

Furthermore, if theologians should count as colleagues\data, why should not psychologists? Within psychology, there have been several published studies on how spirituality as a emic folk category is understood (e.g., Schlehofer et al. 2008; la Cour et al. 2012; Keller et al. 2013), and how it should be conceptualized as a research category (e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997; 1999; Hill et al. 2000; Koenig, Harold 2008; Westerink, Herman 2012). The relationship between religion and spirituality, which Herman addresses has been broadly discussed in over a decade within the psychology of religion, but you will not find Pargament, Hill or Koenig mentioned in Herman’s analysis. In the article “Spirituality: A glowing and useful term in search for a meaning” (2006), Lucy Bregman has done the legwork and refers to a 2002 study by Unruh, Versnel, and Kerr which identified 92 definitions in empirical and clinical studies (9). In fact, Bregman would be an interesting sparring partner for Herman. She concludes that “spirituality,” “will work for many of us in spite of these drawbacks, in part because it fills niches in a changing religious situation” (24).

Herman states, “One need not search very far to find rich and amusing examples of how such a folk category may conceal numerous layers of social and rhetorical significance” (161). Well, you do not have to search long to identify the discussion of spirituality as a scholarly category within the study of religion either. While he states that, “many social scientists and critical

theorists in the academic study of religion are inclined to dismiss ‘spirituality’ as an illegitimate scholarly category . . .” (162), he does not identify who these are. While we all are in constant danger of missing or leaving out something that has been said about our field of study, it is strange that a journal which emphasizes methodological and theoretical discourse publishes an article that ignores most of it. While there may be reasons for a “fresh start,” we should keep with the academic ideal of explaining why something is deemed (ir)relevant.

### III Missing Methodologies

Herman’s methodological declaration to wipe out “any confusion as to the nature of this project” is done by negation: Neither is it a “a genealogical study” of the concept, nor a “morphological study,” nor a “survey of all literature and social phenomena that self-identify as spiritual” (163). However, by identifying his project as “rectification” and “redescription,” one is left wondering what it exactly is that is rectified and redescribed. Can the concept of spirituality escape genealogy, morphology and its use as a label for identity? If it can, is a detached and seemingly coincidental analysis of theological vague use of the concept a useful strategy towards rectification and redescription within the study of religion? For example, Herman hastily concludes that William James’ “now-creaky, definition of religion” (167) is “satisfactorily debunked by the gamut of theorists from Clifford Geertz to Talal Asad” (168) (some references to the inbetweeners would have been interesting). Observing that Asad in fact saw it necessary to challenge the concept of religion from a genealogical perspective, it is strange that even McCutcheon’s work is not given credit when it comes to challenging the category of religion in Herman’s article. Neither are prominent critics such as Timothy Fitzgerald (1999) or Daniel Dubuisson (2003). In other words, while spirituality is dismissed, religion is portrayed as an unproblematic category.

I almost suspect this is deliberate on Herman’s part, but it is a bit ironic (in the Morrisettian sense) that an article that criticizes the unwillingness to define spirituality does not follow through with its own use of “religion\ous.” In Herman’s own words, “most people may be poor informants when it comes to describing the specifics of their own religious engagement, but their attempts at self-disclosure are more often than not the data that need to be contextualized and analyzed” (161). It is perhaps a cheap blow, but the article suffers under its lack of describing the specifics. If you actually talk with people, you may learn how “spirituality” as an emic folk category works. When Margrethe Løøv and I did this, at the largest Mind, Body, Spirit fair in Norway in 2012 and 2013, the associations and meanings assigned to

“spiritual” by our respondents were not necessarily “vague” at all (Løøv & Melvær 2014). As expected you find associations with “abstract concepts” such as “energy,” “love,” “openness,” “enlightenment” and “the divine”; but also specific concepts such as “crystals,” “divination,” “ghosts” and “the color purple.” With just over fifty respondents, they gathered a list of close to over a hundred associations with “spiritual.” While this may just be a measure for its “vagueness,” it may be also be noted that within this list you may draw word clusters of terms with similar meanings, and there are recurring patterns within the set that suggest that it may not be so vague after all. The term “spiritual” as an emic folk category (among those who visits these fairs in Norway) refers to certain experimental categories (e.g., “happiness”), to ontological structures (e.g., “the divine”), to specific activities (e.g., “divination”) or to identities (e.g., “good person”). It is not that Herman is wrong in that the category of spirituality appears in book titles and on the internet as if its meaning is self-evident, but he forgets that for most other people, it kind of is. Like most words we use.

Herman follows through the vein of “collegial deconstruction” and takes on a collection of paper titles at the IAHR congress in Toronto 2010 that mention either “spirituality” or “spiritual” (Herman 2014:162-163). From peeking through the collection of abstracts, he concludes that they don’t suggest that these categories are problematized or put “ironically” (because that’s apparently a thing we do now). To put Herman’s methodology to his own work: I cannot find any suggestion in his abstract that he will use the category “religion” in a problematizing or ironical manner, and in fact, he doesn’t in the article either. But let us return to the IAHR abstracts.

In the Congress Proceedings of the XXth IAHR World Congress (2010), you will find these categories put to use. For example, in a plenary presentation, professor Catherine L. Albanese claims that, “Channelled theologies address some of the most acute spiritual problems of our times...” and that “channeled worlds fan out into a larger, more accessible new spirituality” (151). No hints of a problematizing approach there. The abstract of the paper on “African Spirituality” does not address the challenges of defining neither “spirituality,” nor “African.” On the other hand, you find several examples of this now salient category being used within quotation marks, which do hint to a certain degree of meta-theoretical reflexivity. But also more explicitly, for example (my emphasis added): “the narrative construction of the categories ‘religion,’ ‘spirituality’ and ‘esotericism’ ” (Miczek in Wiebe 2010: 323); “Our use of spirituality in this paper will be painstakingly explicated” (Boniface in Wiebe 2010: 346); and “. . . issues of religiosity/spirituality, terms which have generally been used interchangeably” (Ramsay in Wiebe 2010: 368). Although I suspect that Herman is right in assuming that these categories are used uncritically by

many, I do not accept his standard model of assuming that they then are used in a “theological” or a “speculative” way.

Several of these aforementioned titles and abstracts can be identified as belonging to the study of new religious movements/New Age/esotericism. More often than not, I suspect, can the use of “spirituality” be traced to be some flavor of the definition offered by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005: 6-7). They are also partly responsible for the frequent distinction and dichotomization between spirituality and religion/religiosity found within the study of religion. But, again, they did not earn their spot as colleagues to be deconstructed by Herman.

Herman identifies three main problems with how spirituality is used within his arbitrary sample (164-7). First, it is vaguely defined. He substantiates this anecdotally by drawing on an earlier version of the Wikipedia entry “spirituality.” He states that the definition is replicated on “thousands of websites” (164), which it in fact is. This is actually the most insightful part of his article. Herman traces the quote to the *World Spirituality* series and Philip Sheldrake’s *A Brief History of Spirituality* (2007). It is interesting that these books seem to have had such a huge impact on how spirituality is represented on the web. One is left to wonder why such “vague” and “jargonistic” definition enjoys such a broad appeal. Maybe they make some kind of sense to people after all? The broad reception of the definition offered by Wikipedia would be an interesting case study of itself. Is conceptual vagueness the best explanation for its broad spread, or is it something else? And if it is, what is the appeal with vagueness, and what does it tell us about our object of study?

Additionally, if you actually flip the covers of some handful of the books Herman refers to, you will find efforts to define and describe what is meant by “spirituality.” You do not even need to have the physical copies of the books to discover this; using amazon.com’s *Look inside* feature will suffice. Let me be the devil’s advocate: Those efforts may not necessarily follow the McCutcheonian genealogical paradigm, but should they? Does Herman’s sample of authors claim to have the definite operational definition of spirituality that should be used in all matters? I could not find these claims. Perhaps scholars of religion have uncritically adopted them? Herman does not know, nor do I, because this study has not been done yet.

#### IV Missing Clarity

While Herman criticizes other authors for not defining spirituality in a proper manner, he himself fails to define his own analytical categories sufficiently.

What constitutes “vague,” “essentialist,” “vane,” “narcissist,” and “evasive” concepts? If we are to assume these descriptions to be self-explanatory, why does it not extend to “spiritual”? In fact, Herman proves that the broad use of spirituality is not that hard to pin down after all, witness his “four specific qualities” of spirituality (167-172): (1) It tends to be directed to the *individual*; (2) It is focused on the *interiority*; (3) It is a *private* affair; and (4) it involves a broad conception of the *divine* and/or *the transcendental*. These four identifiers, here ironically elaborated from William James’s definition of religion, would be a useful heuristic for identifying what is generally meant by spirituality.

This also proves to show the complexity of the role certain categories play within the study of religion. *They can be understood as categories, as identities, as phenomena, as codifications and as terms*. The categorization of categories, however, comes with different scholarly expectations and analytical boundaries. As “categories” we deal with the whole complexity of the term at once, and try to deem which roles it has played within and between discourses. Such as I try to do here, and what Herman wants to achieve in his article. As “identities” we investigate how categories signal commitments to certain ideas and groups, and the (lack of) negotiation of these labels, e.g., the SBNR-label. “Spirituality” as a phenomenon is perhaps what is usually found within the theological and psychological disciplines. It may make sense within a study of religion framework to pinpoint the people’s explicit or implicit efforts motivate a lifestyle to get closer to a representation of transcendence (however it may be conceptualized). It may be useful to discern this from the more general category of “religiosity,” without drawing a dichotomy between it and “spiritual.” One can also take the McCutcheonian route and analyze “spirituality” as a codification of certain ideologies or values, as seen in Carrette & King (2005) or David Webster’s *Dispirited* (2011). Lastly, “spirituality” can also be understood as a placeholder for a subset of terms, which through a genealogical approach can be used to investigate the history of religion. If we can assume a genealogical link between the Hebraic *ruach*, the Greek *pneuma|tikos* and the Latin *spirit|us|alities* and the English *spiritual|spirituality*, it can be fruitful to investigate the historical specificities that are involved in this development.

The Western genealogy of spirituality takes us to Herman’s second problem. The category “is frequently assumed to be a universal quality and it is brought to contexts where the concept simply does not apply . . .” (166). As Carrette & King and Webster spend almost the whole of their books to point out, “spirituality” has been used to repackage practices and beliefs from other-than-Western religions and presented to consumers in the West with shallow references to their original cultural settings. Herman’s argument is similarly presented in comparison with what he deems as “erroneous” labeling of “Jewish mysticism,”

“Buddhist mysticism” and “Islamic mysticism” (166). Herman argues that since this is genealogically a Christian concept, it is inherently wrong to attribute it to practices or philosophies in other religions. If that is so, then most of our analytical categories go with the spiritual bathwater. “Religion,” “the sacred,” “god,” “Hinduism,” “sacrifice” and “canon” are all categories mainly, but not exclusively, used and historically developed within Western cultures. Post-colonialist or post-structuralist critics, including McCutcheon, have also targeted most of them. One may wonder why “spirituality” has not got the same post-colonial attention. My hypothesis is that since its detachment from Christian discourses in 18-19th century France, it has to a larger extent been used by non-Westerns to translate certain concepts from other languages. At least, this seems to be the case today. Ironically, when criticizing the misattribution of “spirituality” to non-Western contexts, one ignores the wealth of non-Western actors who choose to use this term themselves. When a guru in India chooses to attribute his wisdom as “spiritual,” has he brought the category into a context where it does not apply?

The third problem pointed out by Herman is that it is “more often than not, an expression of unalloyed narcissism” (167). Again, how does Herman know this when he explicitly states that he has not done a genealogical study, nor a content analysis of the extensive literature that uses this category? Furthermore, how is “narcissism” employed as a methodological quality of analytical categories? Is “religious” less narcissistic, and by which criteria? Has Herman perhaps observed a correlation between the personality traits of those who use the category and those who does not? Where is the data? Beyond my misgivings with Herman’s missing methodology, is deeming the narcissism of categories a fruitful endeavor in the study of religion at all? Or can such work, which fails to engage relevant methods, data and literature, itself be redescribed and rectified as an instance of “narcissism”?

## V Missing the Irony

I am certain that Herman’s comparison of spirituality/religion and vagina/penis will raise some eyebrows, either in provocation or amusement, but it remains unclear to which scholarly end it moves us. The penis/religion & vagina/spiritual comparison is presented as “ironic” and “imaginative” in the abstract, but not really in the article text itself. In this section, Herman does declare his methodological approach in the comparison that follows: “this discussion makes no pretenses about ‘real’ differences between religion and spirituality; nor does this advance any claims that constructions of religion

and spirituality and constructions of gender or sexual organs reflect similar social or cultural processes” (174). It is rather, “taking imaginative steps to illuminate certain idiosyncratic binary contrivances that are evoked in ‘spiritual’ rhetoric” (174). We must now assume that the “rhetoric” he refers to, belongs to the numerous theologians referred to earlier. Though, the dichotomy between religion and spiritual(ity) is not entertained by most of these authors. Hence, Herman’s “rhetoric” cannot refer to that of these authors. Herman also makes reference to “the semantic field for ‘spirituality’” (172), but also without being specific to the context where this field is to be found. We are left to imagine on what and to where Herman’s imaginative steps are made.

Beyond the matter-of-factly presentation of the human genitalia and their “physical appearance and location, social dynamics, and ethical implications” (159), the heuristic value of this discussion seems to be a bit out of sync with how these things are perceived within the humanities. First of all—and Herman even mentions this in passing (174)—the representations of penises and vaginas are subject to cultural values and ideologies. Even within religious traditions they are portrayed in different ways, textures, materials, and functions. A *yonī* is not “soft” and “introvert,” but rather made of stone and figures rather prominently within the ritual space. I cannot even criticize Herman for a Western ethnocentrism, for while his description of the penis as *overt* makes physiological sense, it does not fit in Western popular culture where it is more often than not censored, forbidden and hidden from view. These contradictory observations aside, why genitalia and not something else? What exactly does the alleged penis/vagina distinction reveal about the categories “religion”/“spiritual”? Does it make it easier to communicate? Does it identify new areas of thought, from where these phenomena should be researched? How far does this comparison extend? Further, it is not clear if Herman deploys the penis/vagina distinction as an analogy or homology. The first would suggest that it is a rhetorical device, to prove a point—which still is somewhat vague to me. If it were the latter, Herman would need to explain the underlying principles that lead to this conclusion.

As much as Herman seems to allude to Jonathan Z. Smith, he does not follow through with the necessary “e.g.”-s to exemplify his generalizations of religion/spirituality and penis/vagina. The whole section is full of unqualified matter-of-factly statements. It is unclear on what level of abstraction or for whom these generalizations are made. In lieu of Herman’s own methodological negations and the few included references, it cannot be generalized to the literature or scholarly work that mentions “spirituality,” nor to the history or contemporary use of the term, and not to speak of the scholarly attempts to define or conceptualize it. While Herman writes himself into the study of religion as

*datum* for “spirituality,” I cannot see how his article contributes to its status as a scholarly category.

## VI Conclusion

The final irony is that I find myself in overall agreement with Herman’s conclusion (except the parts I have just refuted). He is correct in asserting that “spirituality” is “an important data point in the study of religion,” that it is a “relatively recent coinage with a distinct historical lineage, and it projects a cluster of liberal religious values and implicitly disparages more traditional ones” (179). His call for “examining questions of definition, analyzing the lexicon, and offering a redescriptive metaphor” is warranted. As I have shown in this article, this examination is already underway, however scarcely, within the study of religion. What we need, however, is neither irony nor imaginations. We need to gather relevant data with solid methodologies. If we want to be less vague, biased and erroneous when it comes to the use of “spirituality,” we do not need to hide behind “provocative manner[s],” we just need to do what the author of *Imagining Religion* recommends: “. . . be relentlessly self-conscious” and “articulate why ‘this’ rather than ‘that’” (Smith 1981: xi).

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