

YOGA TRAININGS, “SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE” DEVELOPMENTS AND TRANSITIONS TO THE WORLD OF HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITIES

(A Review of the Book of Teodora Karamelska *Spiritual but Not Religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality*, Sofia: New Bulgarian University Press, 2023, 235 pp., in Bulgarian)

How does homoeopathy heal? How can we connect with both the world of angels and our true selves at the same time? How can we turn our bodies into sacred temples and rid them of impurities and residues from the cycle of mineral exchange? How can one assemble their religious cult by combining Buddhism and Taoism, the teachings of the Sufi mystic Rumi and Kabbalistic formulas, Sivananda yoga, Ayurveda, and the healing recipes of Peter Dunov? What is the better path to channel and increase one's life and spiritual energy – going to an ashram in Greece or receiving initiation in Reiki in one's native city?

How can one contact God outside the church, without the help of unworthy priests and burdensome rituals? What does it mean to be a believer, while not religious in an everyday or non-everyday sense? How can we compare and follow the cultural routes of traditional religiosity and holistic spirituality in a historical, global, and local Bulgarian context? To what extent do the religious narratives and alternative spiritual practices of late (post)modernity meet the contemporary Bulgarian's appeal for purity, tranquility, and well-being in a world of crises, social insecurity, and constantly devaluing ideological/life projects?

The book by Teodora Karamelska not only provides intriguing and extensive answers to these questions but also immerses us in the field of non-theological studies of religion. This field, despite enjoying serious academic interest in recent years, has long remained in parentheses and footnotes in the humanities and social studies in Bulgaria, except ethnographic surveys of cul-

tural traditions and heritage. Not coincidentally, the starting perspective is sociological, while the analysis of specific life trajectories of holistic spirituality relies on biographical, cultural-historical, and anthropological approaches. The sociological perspective minimises the risk of profane or biased readings of popular figures and practices associated with holistic therapies, while the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews (conducted by Karamelska herself) allows both the existential and profane meanings of spiritual exercises, adherence to diets, purifications, and strengthening of auras to be extracted.

A well-known and brilliant translator of fundamental thinkers like Weber, Troeltsch, and Simmel, Karamelska now chooses to be their discussant to trace the “emergence of the modern religious world” (to paraphrase the famous paper by Troeltsch). She uses their classical sociological reflections on the emergence of new types of organisation of religious experience as an entry point to precisely define the different frameworks of holistic spirituality in the context of resecularisation and the individualisation of thinking/experiencing the divine. She then refers to renowned authors such as Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, and Franz Höllinger to explore the mobilisation of emotional resources, gender dynamics, and self-referential worldviews in the realm of religiosity and spirituality. Karamelska specifically describes “new regimes of self-expression and body care”. These regimes probe the psychosomatics of unhealed traumas and healing revelations while being used by cosmetic and health industries. She identifies the leaders of these regimes as highly educated women

from the middle and upper-middle class, who, while aspiring for liberation from emotional labour and male dominance, have turned into a targeted group for “new religious services” within the Apart from contextualising the genealogy of female dominance over spirituality, Karamelska pays special attention to the pivotal event that unlocks interest in and entry into the “deep waters” of “spiritual knowledge”. She updates the conceptual and methodological stakes of William James’ open scientific project for archiving the diversity of religious beliefs and experiences within individual human lives, including personal testimonies and memories of conversion to holistic approaches. Several chapters of the book are dedicated to such testimonies – of Bulgarian respondents who, along with stories of their first encounter with non-church religiosity, share the entire stream of holistic consciousness – their enlightenments accompanying the reading of sacred texts, the “self-care” that organises their daily lives, and the numerous positive changes in their health and social status. Projections of death and the afterlife occupy a special place among them. While the body and personality in holistic terms increasingly need to be spiritualised in the course of the life path, after death they are expected to transform entirely into life energy or cosmic consciousness or to pass through a purifying series of rebirths, which, however, ultimately bring about complete destruction.

The discussion of this ambiguous definition of the (after-)life goals supports one of the most convincing theses of Karamelska, played out throughout the text, namely that holistic spirituality steps onto two incompatible and mutually exclusive ontological projects. The first assumes the construction of a reality in which the individual has complete freedom and autonomy in expressing their relationship with the transcendent and cultivation of personality. The second announces exactly the opposite – the fragmentation of the self into multiple incarnations and/or its dissolution into mystical experiences and the impersonal cosmic unity of all beings. Furthermore, anonymity and mundanity loom over every attempt at emancipation or salvation from the ego-centricity of existence.

The book consistently problematises the claim of holistic spirituality to eliminate religious

inequalities and monopolies over the interpretation of sacred texts and biographies while legitimising an endless array of gurus, spiritual teachers, and instructors promising to fulfil this claim. Thus, Karamelska speaks about the production of standardised belief codes and narratives (“we recognise each other because we speak the same language”). As much as these destabilise traditional ritual, symbolic, and socio-gender hierarchies in the religious field, they also contribute to the emergence of a new type of religious inequality. Furthermore, they develop into a symbiosis with market mechanisms and complex regulations of access to spiritual goods. However, the social and commercial impact of the holistic practices confronts the researcher with more general questions that are vital to understanding our own modernity, insofar as they refer to the social effects of acceleration of time and of constant pressure on the individual to try new and novel methods of self-realization and self-development. The interviews eloquently reveal the experience of particular kind of vulnerability, suffering and weakness, gained in the so called period of the “democratic transition”, i.e. in conditions of rapid economic, social and cultural crisis/change, which the training in meditation or the attainment of „spiritual intelligence“ is expected to eliminate. Furthermore, the adherence to alternative religious worlds reveals as opportunity pathway for the generations of transition to resolve their existential anxieties and social dilemmas such as instability of partnerships and emotional bonds, alienation and insecurity.

Purposefully, Karamelska includes in the book an overview of the smile-inducing criticism of contemporary yoga fan practices by Bulgarian guardians of the pure Orthodox faith. This criticism serves as a twisted mirror of the popular clichés of holistic therapies. The Orthodox mentors “debunk” the yoga instructors’ commitment to supporting self-perfection and spiritualisation as an act of obsession, devilry, soul destruction, etc.

Last but not least, in her exegesis of standard belief narratives, Karamelska invariably maintains the focus on the specific Bulgarian social environment, where moralistic and patriotic interpretations of the great Western narratives about the unity of “soul, mind, and body” merged with popular astrological, spiritual, and esoteric dis-

courses inherited from the period of late socialism. These discourses have proven to be highly influential for the religious experience of several generations, who continue to add new worldview elements to their spiritual path of enlightenment and personal improvement after 1989.

Today, it is indeed impossible to avoid or not be attracted to holistic spirituality. It has become such a handy, everyday, and universal tool that a large part of modern young families in Bulgaria wonder whether it is more suitable for their child to attend a Waldorf school or to choose the educational models of Montessori. However, unlike them, Teodora Karamelska does not allow herself to choose between the multiple and diverse col-

ourful versions for achieving harmony between the soul and the body. She does much more by outlining the two extreme approaches to the holistic paradigm – empowering and elevating vs. formatting and demeaning the individuals in transcending their reality. She adeptly guides us on how to talk about religiosity and spirituality both in a secular venue and with erudition in theological traditions and discourses, with goodwill and fascination for diverse personal experiences, but also with a critical attitude towards the ideological basis, contexts, and stakes of being a believer while not religious.

Galina Goncharova