

Alternative Spiritualities in Paulo Coelho's Texts

Gurpyari Bhatnagar

A new kind of literature has emerged in the contemporary age, which allows its readers to explore religion beyond its rigidly codified definitions. This literature disclaims the fixed logos of theological perspective and delves into unconventional spiritualities. The paper aims at providing insights on alternative spiritualities as explored by Paulo Coelho in his novels, *The Alchemist*, *The Zahir*, *The Witch of Portobello*, and *Brida*. It also examines the reasons for change in the religious or spiritual identity of the major characters in these novels. While being appreciative of Coelho's disengagement of religion from patriarchal conditions, external ritualism, and dogmatic restrictions, the paper also critiques the practice of breaking away from religion to find answers to age-old questions surrounding the soul and human existence in alternatives such as psychedelically induced mysticism, witchcraft, and magic.



Gurpyari Bhatnagar, PhD, serves as Assistant Professor at Sharda University, India. Over her 15 years of teaching career, she has taught courses in literary theory and criticism, classical literature, mythology, and consciousness studies. She has presented her consciousness studies research at the series of *The Science of Consciousness* conferences and the *Dayalbagh Science of Consciousness* conferences. Her email contact is gurpyari.bhatnagar11@gmail.com.

Received March 23, 2022

Revised April 3, 2022

Accepted April 4, 2022

Key words

Alternative spirituality, mysticism, magic, psychedelics

1 Religion and Literature: An Introduction

A traditional understanding of religion includes belief in an Absolute God as a route to salvation or redemption of the soul. This conception of religion is best expressed in literature that serves the theological aim of fostering dependence of man upon God for his redemption from the travails of this physical world. Morality plays, for instance, reflect this understanding of religion most explicitly as these are a form of religious theatre focusing on the life of the individual Christian and his salvation. These plays typically deal with the individual's actions, his seduction by seven deadly sins leading to his fall, repentance, and ultimately salvation; thereby ending with the explicit message that salvation cannot be achieved without the intervention of the absolute power. *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1405–1425), a masterpiece of morality plays, is built on the religious doctrine that ends are governed by means, that is, only a good and virtuous life can reserve a place in heaven. Written by an anonymous playwright, this play has Mankind, the protagonist, finding himself at the moral crossroads during his spiritual journey. Though the singular pronoun is used for Mankind, he is symbolic of the entire human race. The protagonist Everyman in another archetypal morality play, *Everyman*, is also representative of all human beings who are blind to spiritual matters. Everyman, with all the worldly resources, leads a life drowned in sin. But when death knocks at his door, he realizes that he has wasted his entire life as he never prepared himself to meet his death. This play, built on the same premise of moral causation, gives a similar religious message: “*Ye think sin in the beginning full sweet/ Which in the end causeth the soul to weep/ When the body lieth in clay*” (Anonymous 1485, 1). Thus, morality plays are a veritable index of religion in its traditional sense.

Similarly, religious poetry of the seventeenth century affirms the worth of virtue as a necessary means of salvation. George Herbert (1957a, 128), in his famous poem *Virtue*, asserts, “[o]nely a sweet and vertuous soul/ Like season’d timber, never gives.” However, a shift of focus from the distant and objective view of religious concepts of sin and salvation to one’s own frailties and spiritual journey is seen in this age, emphasizing personal involvement and relationship with God. For instance, John Donne, in *The Litanie*, pleads with God to purge his “*vicious tinctures*” (1933, 308, line 8) like “*youths fires of pride and lust*” (1933, 309, line 22), “*thirst or scorne of fame*” (1933, 313, line 153), and “*entanglings... by power, love, knowledge*” (1933, 309, line 32). Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* are an

other expression of his personal anguish and pain: “*Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see/ That thou love’st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me*” (Donne 1957, 83). Herbert’s poetry also illustrates the theme of inner conflict between religion and worldly pleasures at a personal level: “*But as I rav’d and grew more fierce and wilde/ At every word,/ Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child!/ And I reply’d, My Lord*” (Herbert 1957b, 135). The image of God in Herbert’s poetry is not impersonal but has the characteristic of being father-like. For example, towards the end of the same poem, the poet asserts that he “*heard*” God calling him a “*child*” (Herbert 1957b, 135). Though the focus in religious poetry shifts within the context of a deeply felt relationship with God, the essential nature of both morality plays, and religious poetry is the same, which is to present a world where man’s religion is governed by his faith in the divine presence and a virtuous life directed towards salvation.

Later, a new outlook on religion stimulated fresh interpretations of the above-described religious literature in literary-critical circles. For example, poet-critic T. S. Eliot views religious poetry as “*deliberately and defiantly*” religious literature. He believes that this kind of literature is a contrast to “*unconsciously*” religious literature which is not “*guided by any theological principles*” (Eliot 1935, 103). Northrop Frye holds a similar view when he asserts that the *anagogic* [1] perspective is not necessarily implied of an “*apocalyptic epic*” but of any poem “*we happen to be reading*” (Frye 1957, 121). Frye contends that this understanding involves looking at literature from the “*circumference*” instead of the “*center*” of religion (Frye 1957, 122). This further explains that when the writer does not present the subject of religion from the center, he does not give it a privileged position in his writings. This view is also expounded by Jacques Derrida, who believes in destabilizing the metaphysical thought that prioritizes one concept over another. For instance, much contemporary literature evinces a *free play* of the elements in the *God/Man* binary where the Absolute God no longer enjoys the privileged first place. According to Derrida, metaphysicians have been unjustified in privileging one side of the binary and marginalizing the other: “*All metaphysicians from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc.*” (Derrida 1977, 93).

Derrida ([1976] 1994, 7) calls for not only deconstructing the classical binaries but also dismantling the fundamental *logocentrism* and *phonocentrism*, which denotes the privilege accorded to the spoken word as against the written word. The basis of logocentrism is the traditional concept of *logos*, which is illustrated as the word of God and God Himself in the Gospel of John (1:1): “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*” This description of *logos*, which is the equivalent of the metaphysical and infinite status of God, has been critiqued by self-confessed atheist writers of our age, especially Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. Their works subvert transcendent narratives, parody God, and revel in blasphemous utterances and narratives. The significations that were prominent in the religious literature of the past, woven around religious structures of revelation, God, morality, virtue, sin, and penance, are now deconstructed. The transcendent symbols of priesthood and places of worship that held an undisputed position in the narratives of the earlier ages have been replaced with literary characters questioning the authoritative and fixed *Logos* of theological perspective. Thus, New Age literature on religion and spirituality repudiates the fixed *logos* of theological perspective and traditional understanding of God as *logos*. However, not all contemporary writers have discredited the notion of a “transcendent signified” in God. Paulo Coelho, for instance, distances himself from the postmodern view of questioning and undermining the concept of God. The postmodern influence in his works is only limited to dissolving the fixity of meaning of religion and spirituality, thereby offering a pluralistic view of both.

Coelho presents new and alternative forms of spirituality and religion not by deconstructing the notion and position of God but, I contend, through positing a different notion of subjective spiritual experience and unorthodox forms of *realization*. This may prove advantageous for an expansive exploration of religion and religiosity. Moreover, he confines his theoretical and ideological imagination around his own spiritual experiences, which help us understand religion and religiosity anew on the basis of his phenomenological experiences with God, religion, and spirituality. In order to have an insight on Coelho’s ideological and theoretical imagination around the subject of religion and spirituality [2], the subsequent parts of this article will explore his life and the continuum of spiritual narratives within his select works.

2 Life of Paulo Coelho

Paulo Coelho is one of the most widely read writers whose candid writings resonate with spiritual experiences of the reader, making his oeuvre an extremely significant contribution on contemporary spirituality. His corpus of works comprises twenty-five books, the most popular being *The Alchemist* (originally published in Portuguese in 1988). Coelho was born on 24 August 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. During his childhood, having to attend Jesuit schools, he found religion to be authoritarian, controlling, and repressive and felt that it talked only of constraints, sufferings, and the “*constant threats of hell*” (Coelho 2016). He felt scared of the confessions at Church and derived no joy from the sermons. He could not express his feelings to his parents as they were devout Catholics. So, he started opening up in his diary entries. His religious doubts articulated in the diary grew from “[*t*]he fact that I couldn’t keep my word is Your fault!” (Morais 2008, 64) to “*it’s at times like this that I doubt the existence of God*” (Morais 2008, 91). During his youth, he rejected mainstream religion and began exploring new and unconventional paths, which find expression in most of his works. Sects like *Hare Krishnas* and hippie groups became an obsession with Coelho. Morais explains that his interest in hippie culture was not so much about “*drugs, rock, hallucinations*” as the ideology behind the “*hippie insurrection*” (Morais 2008, 146). Coelho also got initiated into Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), a mysterious oriental organization. The reason for joining the organization was the “*regular anxiety crisis*” that he suffered during his youth (Morais 2008, 186):

[H]e was nearly twenty-five and still just a nobody, without the remotest chance of becoming a famous writer. The situation seemed hopeless and the pain this time was such that, instead of asking for help from the Virgin Mary or St Joseph as he usually did, he decided to make a pact with the Prince of Darkness. If the Devil gave him the power to realize all his dreams, Paulo would give him his soul in exchange.

Coelho decided to make a “*pact with the Devil*”, which did not signify a tryst with “*evil*” for him but “*just one of the poles*” in the “*equilibrium of humanity*” (Morais 2008, 186). The following excerpt from his biography recounts an extremely uncanny, eerie incident around his writing a pact in the diary in red ink, performing the related ritual of crushing a flower from the vase and the final encounter with the Devil (Morais 2008, 205):

By now, along with the dizziness and the smoke, he could hear terrifying noises, as though someone or some being were breaking everything around him, and yet everything remained in its place... he broke down into uncontrollable sobs... The smell of the dead, the smoke and the dizziness continued, as did the noise of things breaking, which was so loud that he had to cover his ears with his hands to deaden it.

Coelho believed that this episode in his life was due to the severing of “ties with Christianity” and making an attempt to contact “negative energies” through black magic (Morais 2008, 206). He got so frightened that fear paralyzed him for months and he decided to renounce all connections with OTO. This phase of his life lasted just less than two months. A few years later, his fascination with drugs ended too, which, in his interviews, he has often condemned. A new chapter followed in Coelho’s life in 1986 with the catholic pilgrimage [3] to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, which was instrumental in bringing him back to the religion of his childhood. However, in his interview with Priya Bala, where he spoke on his book *Hippie*, Coelho confesses that he has “gone back to spirituality” and that there is a marked difference between religious people who “have to prove to themselves that they have faith” and people like him, who “think about contradictions” and have “doubts about life” (Bala 2018, 8). He also adds that “[h]is faith in a higher power is unshakeable, but he is increasingly disillusioned with organized religion” (Bala 2018, 8). As a matter of fact, while still a Catholic, he never believed in a single path to realizing God, which is evident from the books he wrote until his recent work *Hippie*. It is also apparent from his interviews that though he had an unshaken belief in a universal power he never subordinated himself to the authoritarian and exterior elements of the Church. On the one hand, keeping in view the key incidents around his

experience with the Church and his shifts between religiosity and spirituality, it can be inferred that during his teenage years, when he rebelled against the mainstream religion of his parents as a hippie, he must have considered religion and spirituality as opposing forces. On the other hand, after his pilgrimage, when he decided to go back to the religion of his childhood, experientially he must have identified himself as religious-spiritual, considering spirituality to be an element of his being religious. However, identifying spirituality exclusively as his existential orientation, with no credit to explicit religiosity at all, in the aforementioned interview, suggests that he now considers religiosity and spirituality as two distinct concepts. Coelho distancing himself from the religious establishments recalls the polarized conceptualization of religion and spirituality in recent scholarship. This raises the following significant questions:

1. Is the polarized conception of religion and spirituality an offshoot of the evolving attitude towards the two?
2. Can the polarized approach or silence towards the subject of God explain and justify the matters of self and soul?
3. Do the references to transcendent reality in spirituality mean the same in the context of religion?

3 Alternative Spiritualities in Coelho's Select Novels

Many studies have associated personal quest with spirituality, where the individual no longer wishes to seek truth that is absolute but the truth through which one can find true meaning in one's life. The quest dimension is expected to be more prominent among the spiritual type of personality than among the religious or spiritual-religious type (Schnell 2012, 41). However, it would be incorrect to claim that quest is not a dimension of religion at all. In fact, Charles Daniel Batson and Patricia A. Schoenrade (1991, 431) have evaluated the concept in relation to a religion's orientation for an "open-ended responsive dialogue with existential questions raised by the contradictions". Unfortunately, most of the mainstream established religions, being authoritarian, do not let Batson and Schoenrade's proposition of "religion as quest" work [4]. Thus, the individual attempts to seek truth outside religious institutions, as in the case of Coelho and most of his characters. Coelho's *The Zahir* (2005) is a novel where the narratives clearly signify the pattern of spirituality, which are individualistic or inward, the basis of which is personal belief in a supernatural force without any commitment to an established institutional belief system. The following statements from the novel are indicative of, to use Schnell's phrase, "spirituality without religiosity" (Schnell 2012, 43):

We need to find a way of channeling all this, of allowing the energy of this pure, absolute love to flow through our bodies and spread around us. – Coelho (2005, 60)

'I believe in signs,' I said. 'I believe in fate. I believe that every single day people are offered the chance to make the best possible decision about everything they do.'
– Coelho (2005, 37)

The Zahir also examines the reasons for change in the religious or spiritual identity of the major characters. Esther, the narrator's wife in the novel and a war correspondent, is disillusioned with the conditions that have failed to evoke spiritual sensibilities. Therefore, she leaves her home and family in pursuit of an alternative to purely religious Meaning and Truth. Michael and Dos are the other characters here who have been trying to discover their own ideology of hope outside religion. Born in a war-torn country, Kazakhstan, Michael's view of religion emerges from the conflict between his impressions of the appalling post-war condition of his

father and his romantic ideals from conditioning at school. War hero of a two-hundred-day-long battle, his father is a nervous, restless, and unemployed insomniac. In the appalling conditions of war, he is forced to eat the flesh of his own "dead frozen companions." His post-war condition is as dismal, wherein the communist group labels him a traitor and his family has to live in poverty. Michael's perspectives are conditioned further by the headmaster of his school, who views religion as a thing of superstition and community worship as a practice for the old and the idle. Michael believes to have seen visions and heard voices and is expelled from school on the grounds of spreading superstition and encouraging pseudoscience. He grows up into a muddled youth who believes visions to be his guiding force but cannot disclose them to anyone for fear of a negative reaction. It is only when he meets Esther at his garage that he believes the "mission" "entrusted" to him can be fulfilled. On his way to Kazakhstan as her interpreter, he informs Esther of his connection with the "invisible" force, and she guides him to run a little group therapy in France. On his return, he starts holding meetings with people who are "afraid of ending up" like those who have given in to "reality," also integrating the culture of "storytelling" and "dancing" with alcohol and drugs (Coelho 2005, 276).

As seen from the above narratives and situations, Coelho's view of spirituality stresses on the subjective understanding of the absolute. The reader can very clearly perceive that this personalized perception of God is attributed to Coelho's own shift in the spiritual realization. The paper appreciates his view of the direct experiential realization of the Absolute, and his characters expressing their desire to sense the energy in its pure(st) form. The paper also acknowledges that the practices that are hollow in nature have no power to enable the proximity to the Transcendent. But at the same time, the paper contends that religion cannot be conceived only in terms of place and practice of worship. Only when understood broadly as an institutionalized belief system, it can be positively associated with spirituality. The right approach to define the term religion, therefore, becomes extremely significant in scholarship. Loose and fuzzy definitions do not take us far; these rather confuse and dissolve the very purpose of scholarship on religion and spirituality. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's take on this issue is very helpful. He asserts the scholar to adopt the right approach in exploring

the problems of religion. He explains, “[t]he problems of religion stimulate the philosophic spirit” (Radhakrishnan 1996, 6), hence drawing a very close connection between theory and praxis, which ultimately culminates into spiritual realization. This kind of attitude frees us from the biases so that we can objectively realize the subject of religion and spirituality. The interrogation of Coelho’s work hence involves not only how the finite world in his select novels engage the matters of religion and spirituality, but also how and where they locate the two. This exploration extends to the rest of the article.

The Zahir, for instance, locates spirituality outside organized religion, in *group therapy* and *Tengrism*. Michael’s group therapy is an alternative spirituality which not only acts as psychotherapy and healing therapy but also spiritual therapy, which is extremely therapeutic for the soul. Storytelling is a very essential activity in his spiritual community, where the members talk about the stories of “jealousy, abandonment, depression” from their own personal lives (Coelho 2005, 54). In doing so, one has a feeling that one is not alone in the crowd: “I think about myself and the many times this has happened to me. They are, after all, statistics. We are not alone” (Coelho 2005, 54). The members illustrate their personal experiences to ensure that others benefit from their energies but at the same time “empty their own minds,” thus benefitting themselves spiritually. They reach a stage where the process develops their potential to the maximum and they can go no further in the process of emptying themselves of their past: “as we empty our minds of old stories, a new space opens up, a mysterious feeling of joy slips in, our intuitions grow sharper, we become braver, take more risks, do things which might be right or which might be wrong, we can’t be sure, but we do them anyway” (Coelho 2005, 118). Michael believes that during the sharing of his stories it is “the voice” or “the presence” that speaks for him on stage. He narrates only those stories that the voice or the angelic presence asks him to do, and therefore he believes his experience is mystical. His going into trance makes the members in the group believe him to be gifted with a special power, while the narrator thinks it to be just epileptic fits. Research shows that the “primary and necessary cause” of such experiences can only be the “mystical capacity” of a person; drugs, dance, music, and so on are not the primary cause but can only trigger the mystical experience (Clark 1968, 91). Drugs cannot be the cause or even instigation of mystical experiences, as shown in the case of Michael’s group therapy. However, dance and music as forms of

transcendence exist in institutionalized religions too. Dance, in fact, is a recurring element of transcendence specifically in Indian literature. Sunil Kothari (1978, 73) explains: “Through dance the symbolic meaning of the desire of soul (*ātma*) to merge with the Super-soul (*Paramātmā*) God is conveyed. The outpourings of the poets, the saints, the devotees underline this symbolic motif.” R. K. Narayan’s well-known novel *The Guide* is an apt example which considers dance as a spiritualizing state of being and meditative in nature. The character Rosie is a classical dancer in the novel whose dance on the song from an ancient Sanskrit composition makes her lover, Raju, transcend time and space. He admits: “I could honestly declare while I watched her perform, my mind was free, for once, from all carnal thoughts. I viewed her as pure abstraction” (Narayan 1958, 125). In *The Zahir* too, the ritual of dancing transports the members to an alternative world. The narrator, who is part of the therapy group, has a mystical experience and desires to surrender himself to the sound of instruments that are “emitting sounds to no known language as if they were speaking directly with angels” (Coelho 2005, 97). To him, the tracing movements of the members in white clothes seem to express the communion with God.

In the same novel, Coelho views another spiritual possibility in the worship of “sky god” or *Tengri*. *Tengrism* is the traditional religion and belief system of Kazakhstan, whose basis is concordant, peaceful, and balanced coexistence of mankind and nature. *Tengri* has also been associated with the name of Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan), the great Mongol leader. It is believed that he was protected by Heaven and thus came to be known as *Tengri* or the “son of Heaven” (Sagaster 1987, 328). In the novel, Esther meets Dos, his grandfather, the local tribes, and shamans in Kazakhstan, from whom she learns about this religion. They believe in sky worship and consider it a “kind of religion without religion” (Sagaster 1987, 323). They recognize that they cannot take divinity out of nature and put it in a “book” or within the “four walls” of any religious institution (Sagaster 1987, 323). *Tengrism* and its relation to Kazakh culture and nomadism as explored in the novel have been extensively discussed by Charles Weller in an article entitled *Religious-Cultural Revivalism as Historiographical Debate: Contending Claims in the Post-Soviet Kazakh Context*. Revivalism of the traditions of the past is one of the foci of Weller’s article (Weller 2014, 142). Weller argues that *Tengrism* was revived and could peacefully co-exist with the other dominant religions, Islam, and Buddhism, because of

its tolerant nature. The novel also highlights the inclusiveness of *Tengrism*. Here Coelho asserts that in the “vastness and simplicity” of the steppes, “everyone has passed through... Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, different sects with their beliefs and superstitions in order to get relieved of their sense of the past” (Coelho 2005, 181). Belief in the sky worship is also associated with the indigenous “culture of the steppes”; the local tribes have the belief that spiritually one should never be static but in “constant movement,” a strategy which helps one distance oneself from one’s “personal history”. This idea is not new; ancient Indian philosophy holds that one’s *karma* or “action” leads to *moksa* or “liberation”. *Karma Yoga* from the Bhagavad Gītā accords action the most significant place and explains that inaction distances one from spirituality: “*Nakarmanamanarabha-nnaiskarmyam purusosnute*,” which can be translated as “[n]ot by abstention from work does a man attain freedom from action” (Radhakrishnan 1993, 151). In other words, a man who fails to perform deeds does not attain spiritual wisdom.

While discussing the alternative religion of *Tengrism* in *The Zahir*, Coelho explores a deep interconnectedness between spirituality and nature in the steppes of Kazakhstan. In other works too, Coelho holds nature and its objects in reverence and sees a very strong connect between nature and spirituality. Nature has inspired the consciousness of most of his characters and motivated them to recognize the pervasiveness of an unknown force in every object of nature. In *The Alchemist*, the basis of the close proximity of Santiago, the shepherd, with his sheep is a mystical functional understanding: “it was as if some mysterious energy bound his life to that of the sheep” (Coelho 1993, 4). The shepherd boy believes that the girl he loves is not as important as his flock for she does not “depend on him” and therefore, his decision to leave them would lead to their “suffering” (Coelho 1993, 26). He strongly feels that his flock trusts him completely and relies on his instinct for its survival (Coelho 1993, 7). Coelho’s another significant work, *Manual of the Warrior of Light* (1997), opens with a mysterious woman asking a boy to go to the sea so that he can listen to the bells of the temple that were submerged under the sea years ago. Despite making conscious efforts day after day, he is not able to hear any sound as he is oblivious of the natural world around him. Being close to nature all day long, the fishermen on the other hand could hear the bells of the temple distinctly even though they never made a conscious effort to listen to them. Once he has

learned to “contemplate Nature” and appreciate the beauty of the “seagulls’ cries,” the “roar of the sea,” and the “blowing of the wind” in the “palm trees,” the sound of the bells reach him loud and clear (Coelho 1997, x). The indigenous tribes in *The Witch of Portobello* (2006) also perceive nature as an embodiment of divinity: “My temple is the park, the sky, the water in the lake, and the stream that feeds it. My people are those who share my ideas and not those I’m bound to by bonds of blood. My ritual is being with those people and celebrating everything around me.” (Coelho 2006, 119).

The intersection of literature, religion, spirituality, and ecology is a burgeoning area of research within the field of literature. Coelho most skillfully uses this intersection as a literary genre for critical exploration of alternative spirituality. The paper endorses the author’s ecocritical view of spirituality for the reason that this literary genre impacts the reader positively. The engagement with the characters’ experience of the mystical and spiritual stain in nature helps the reader investigate his own experience with the natural world. It offers the reader moments of reflection to consider the role of natural world in forming his own identity. The harmony with nature as a New Age spirituality has gained increasing prominence with scholars not only from the field of literature but from other spheres of life too: philosophers, painters, scientists, and environmentalists have seen this connectedness. For example, Delwin Brown (2005, 171) asserts that one of the most significant impetuses for defending naturalistic religion in recent times is to defend the earth itself. In the same vein, Sergei Tsvetkov, a Soviet geologist, in an interview with Gale Warner, considers ecology a strong basis for visualization of “spiritual integration of the global community,” naming it a spiritual movement (Warner 1988–89, 28).

4 Are Alternative Spiritualities Mystical Experiences in View of Coelho's Select Novels?

Vast and expansive as the notion of mysticism is in itself, it is not easy to express it through a single definition. Nevertheless, this section makes an attempt at conceiving its attributes via studies in this area. The closest description of mysticism is that it is characterized by an *"immediate contact with the transcendent"* (Kourie 1992, 85). This definition when viewed from the religious perspective can be construed as the *"immediacy of contact with the deity"* (Deissmann 1926, 149). Hence this concept, as argued by John Byron (1949, 242), does not just exist *"in its own right"* as a *"self-contained system"* but is associated with *religion* as well as the *alternatives to religion*. Out of body experiences and extraordinary states of consciousness within *yogic meditative practices* can be taken as examples to prove that mysticism is not at odds with the attributes of religion. Moreover, many studies have discussed the mystical sensibilities of various writers, dramatists, and poets themselves. A study on William Blake explores the poet's faith in the internal manifestation of the divine since his childhood: *"At the age of four Blake saw God in a vision... the gigantic face with large forehead and eyes peered into the room at the boy. It must have had a supernatural dimension"* (White 1966, 286). Wayne White explains the poet's ability to perceive visions and hear voices as a special power without *"mediation or instrumentality of the five senses"* (White 1966, 288). Another study explores John Milton's experience with a supernatural power while he was writing *Paradise Lost*: *"The narrator is the epic bard, physically blind, but, through the heavenly Muse, spiritually enlightened. In this capacity he sings his song of praise to God. By joining with God, through the spirit, he tells his story which asserts 'Eternal Providence' and justifies 'the ways of God to men'"* (Wilson 1971, 359). Similarly, Coelho believes in a personal experiential vision while writing his books. Almost all his works are the expression of an experience with a higher force, and his characters too have enjoyed experiences which are out of the ordinary. To use Coelho's own words on the *"non-ordinariness"* of his experiences, *"the universe spoke its own language of 'signs' and... in order to understand this language, we had only to look with an open mind at what was going on around us – all this made me wonder if the occult really was the one doorway into those mysteries"* (Coelho 2005, 21). Deciphering signs or a deep sense of intuition is a rare gift of Coelho's characters, which leads them to an expanded awareness of happenings around them beyond the normal scope of their mind. This also entails the experience that is not ordinary and hence

mystical. The narrator in *The Zahir* is guided by his instincts or the sixth sense throughout his entire journey. The same is the case with Santiago, the shepherd boy in *The Alchemist*, who finds the treasure through his intuitive sense. The old man advises the shepherd boy, *"[i]n order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you"* (Coelho 1993, 28). Coelho's characters believe that *"Divinity"* comes to their *"aid"* (Coelho 2005, 169) while they follow the signs. The signs could be recurrent dreams, as in the case of Santiago, which cannot be perceived by the senses involving visual or auditory components. So, while Santiago is spiritually sensitive to the omens, the faculty of intuition is not developed with other characters. *"But I am not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream,"* says a character from the book, who simply nullifies signs as something irrational (Coelho 1993, 155). Another example surrounds Michael, who *"wander[s] the steppes with the hunters,"* believes that he has *"magical powers,"* sees visions, hears voices, and prophesies *"when the next drought will come, when the animals will fall sick, when the traders will arrive"* (Coelho 2005, 111). While the hunters for whom he prophesies believe that he has magical and intuitive powers, the other characters in the novel with a scientific mind refuse to believe in his powers and use medical science to call his ecstatic experiences *"musicogenic epilepsy,"* provoked by *"hearing a particular kind of sound or music, sound of bells as in the case of Joan of Arc"* (Coelho 2005, 122) [5].

The defining traits of mysticism that emerge from the foregoing discussion are *"non-ordinariness," "spontaneity,"* and *"intuitiveness";* experiences that are largely *personal* and *individual*. However, as asserted earlier, it would be wrong to say that mystical experiences are not related to religion. Christopher M. Bache (1991, 217) observes that mystical awareness necessitates a spiritual journey involving *"religious awe and trust"* and *"the time-tested methods of spirituality"* creating *"conditions of purification."* He contends that it is only when the system is purified that one shall be able to establish contact with the higher force. Surprisingly, Coelho also maintains that one is capable of a mystical experience only when one has distanced oneself from *"personal history,"* but his methods are undeniably

unconventional and the experiences definitely not a subclass of religious experience at all. Further, Coelho himself questions the spiritual merit of psychedelically induced experiences in his most recent work, *Hippie*, through one of his characters in the novel who confesses that there are “other,” “better” methods to achieve the “same effect,” such as “meditation and yoga” but people do not have the patience to “try them out” and therefore prefer LSD (Coelho 2019, 256). Many studies have also argued that a mystical experience brings a realization and a transformation that is lasting while a psychedelic experience is only a temporarily altered state of consciousness. Kulwant Singh Gill refutes the notion that Eastern religions stress psychedelic experience as a means of mystical experience. He quotes the Bhagavad Gītā (9, 20), where “soma’ is referred to only in a single sloka,” and it does not enjoy any “specific importance as a means of God-realization.” Rather the Bhagavad Gītā stresses three ways to seek mystical experience: “the Karma Mārga (the way of action), the Jñāna Mārga (the way of knowledge), and the Bhakti Mārga (the way of love)” (Gill 1981, 604).

Witchcraft, occult, and magic are other unconventional forms of mystical experience described by Coelho which hold a polemical relationship with religion. When the ideological differences between magic and religion should ideally widen with time, why is it that spiritual alternatives that exist in the modern world today subsist on the modes that are most primitive and regressive, such as the occult and the witchcraft? Magic being usually positioned lowest on the evolutionary hierarchy of magic-religion-science, it is said to be associated with everything that is not rational yet prevalent in the most educated circles today as a substitute to religion. The collapse of the boundaries in the religion/magic dichotomy can be ascribed best to James G. Frazer’s contention that primitive dimensions of life unceasingly and continually intrude into the veneer of civilization (Frazer 1890, 10). This perplexing religious development is not only evaluated but also legitimized in Coelho’s *The Witch of Portobello* and *Brida*.

Both the above-mentioned novels symbolize, to use Anthony Giddens’s term, a culture of “individualistic reflexivity” (Giddens 1991, 20) as opposed to the established religious institutions in assigning an *identity* to the characters. Coelho (2006, 12) recognizes four archetypes with which, he

believes, *women* identify themselves while searching for a meaning in their life:

The Virgin is the one whose search springs from her complete independence, and everything she learns is the fruit of her ability to face challenges alone. The Martyr finds her way to self-knowledge through pain, surrender, and suffering. The Saint finds her true reason for living in unconditional love and in her ability to give without asking anything in return. Finally, the Witch justifies her existence by going in search of complete and limitless pleasure.

However, as Coelho admits, the central characters of *The Witch of Portobello* and *Brida*, Athena and Brida, in search of their faith identities choose an alternative that has the characteristics of all the four identities enlisted above. He further asserts that their witchcraft does not emphasize self-glorification and power as has been standardized for this craft but has the values of a religion including humility. Coelho argues that the characters in the novel submit to the “magus” or *wicca* completely as in any religion and their complete surrender is directed not by manipulation of the “magus”. Their only objective of willful acceptance of the “magus” as their master is to learn the craft with all humility. As “magus” in *Brida* concedes, “[l]earning something means coming into contact with a world of which you know nothing. In order to learn, you must be humble” (Coelho 2008, 42). The concept of white magic emerges in the novel, wherein the members belonging to the group have positive, benevolent intentions and use their powers not out of malice as in the case of black magic.

As in the case of other alternative spiritualities, witchcraft is also opted for as a religious identity when the characters get disillusioned with the mainstream religion of their parents. Brida, “rather young” to be “taught magic,” wishes to unlock her occult powers by learning magic from the “teacher,” either “magus” or *wicca*, in the hope of finding solutions to the most perplexing questions relating to life and faith which the priest at the church could not answer. On the other hand, Athena, a young divorced mother, realizes the orthodoxy and narrow-mindedness of the Church when she is refused communion by the priest. Consequently, she joins a group practicing witchcraft, where while dancing goes into a trance, she experiences a “profound ecstasy” and becomes conscious of her hidden powers. However, both the characters believe in the power of prayer to the Supreme Power and hence, when

5 Conclusion

Brida has to be initiated into the “*great mysteries of witchcraft*,” she visits the “*empty*” church, says her silent prayers to a “*seemingly silent simple God*” without any “*representatives*” and feels for the first time that “[*h*]e was looking at her” and “*understanding her words*” (Coelho 2008, 174). The other witches in the novel too believe in God’s mercy and power and mention “*Jesus and the Virgin Mary*” during the commemoration of the “*martyrdom of witches burnt at the stake*” (Coelho 2008, 174).

Rituals of both transformation and initiation central to witchcraft practice have been very explicitly drawn in *The Witch of Portobello* and *Brida*. Strangely, sex has been considered quite a significant ritual as a way of initiation into witchcraft; as Coelho puts it, “*when mankind was closer to God, sex was the symbolic means of communion with the divine, a re-encounter with the meaning of life*” (Coelho 2008, 112). In fact, erotic experiences and copulation with the devil leading to trials and judicial inquiry have been the subject of research within witchcraft discourse. However, with Coelho sex during the ritual is not related to the physical, sexual act but has to do with the force or the energy generated during the act: “*pure forces of life*” that are in “*communication with each other*.” This kind of force, argues Coelho, can also be generated “*independent of the bodies*” (Coelho 2008, 113); hence this force can be used by some even without having sex. The idea behind this act, as *wicca* explains to Brida, is to “*use your ‘five senses’ at all times. If they all come together at the moment of orgasm, you will be accepted for Initiation*” (Coelho 2008, 114). Coelho’s view, hence, is that the combination of five senses is an extremely powerful agent of spirituality and that the profound feelings induced by the senses evoke feelings of closeness to the Creator Himself. This stance runs contrary to the perspective of established religious institutions of the East that advocate control of the “*five external senses*” or *indriyas* of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch through meditational practices.

The subject of witchcraft, *wicca*, paganism and magic make an interesting and curious read but can the literary plots be relied for intellectual rigor in this area? Reliance on fictitious work for understanding of a subject that finds no evidence in Science will undermine the scholarly worth of the article. Coelho in none of his interviews professes faith in this particular alternative spirituality and hence, it is left to the reader’s speculation whether to consider it as a historical work of witchcraft or a work of fiction and imagination.

It is important to reflect on the future and scope of alternative spiritualities. In the process of negotiation of the boundaries between religion and magic or religion and science or religion and nature, would these alternatives only end up becoming a fad with the present generation? This is not to say that new forms of spiritualities should not replace the religious notions that are orthodox and dogmatic. Alternative spiritualities will continue to emerge if institutional religions persist in relying on external ritualism and not on intuitive contemplation. In fact, individual choice of new religious or spiritual identities, based on the awareness of the belief system one has been exposed to since birth, should be seen as a positive development.

This author deeply appreciates the following nuances of Coelho’s scholarship:

1. The disengagement of religion from patriarchal conditions, external ritualism (*The Zahir*) and artificial, dogmatic restrictions (*The Witch of Portobello, Brida*).
2. Realization of *signs* as the direct correspondence with the Power (*The Alchemist, The Zahir*).
3. Nature and ownership of inquiry with regard to understanding of the concepts of spirituality and religion (in all of Coelho’s works).
4. Positive affiliations with nature leading to wellness of life and soul (*The Alchemist, The Zahir*).
5. Unexplained mystical experiences as evidence for the existence of God (*The Alchemist, The Zahir*).

However, I would strongly repudiate breaking away from religion itself to find answers to the age-old questions surrounding soul, creation, and genesis and existence of mankind, and so on in the alternatives that are not at all rational and logical, including witchcraft, magic, and psychedelics. These are not life-conducive in a larger sense and revival of interest in them must be seen as a negative and alarming development.

Notes

- [1] The term *anagogy* generally relates to themes of divine beings and indicates a spiritual or mystical interpretation of statements and events. However, Northrop Frye provides a liberated view of anagogic criticism in the chapter *Theory of Symbols* of *Anatomy of Criticism*. He contends that though anagogic perspective is usually used to analyze works that directly relate to religion such as T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where "*the words of the poet are placed within the context of the incarnate Word*," the writings of Rilke are equally useful in this context, which are "*explicitly not Christian and illustrate the independence of the anagogic perspective of the poet's attempt to speak from the circumference instead of from the center of reality, from the acceptance of any specific religion*" (Frye 1957, 122).
- [2] The terms, *religion* and *spirituality* have been used in view of how these have been explored in research. Contrary to the term spirituality, religion has been defined in a fairly consistent manner over the years. Lawton (1930, 45), for example, defines religion as not "*merely a philosophy or theoretical faith*"; he asserts it is a "*practical one and requires an organization, officers, and services*". Durkheim (1995, 44) gives a similar definition when he asserts that religion is a "*unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things*" which "*unite into one single moral community called a Church*". A recent study also emphasizes on institutional spaces, involving ritual practices, beliefs, and actions as the basis of religion (Smith 2019, 22). In the past, religion and spirituality were understood as one. However, in the contemporary scholarship, not many researchers view the two as interchangeable. Lederberg and Fitchett (1999, 375) for instance, consider spirituality as a "*search for the sacred or divine*" but not through an established institution. Hubert Knoblauch (2010, 24) also explains it as a "*new form of religiosity*", which poses an "*alternative to religion*". Interestingly both the definitions are formulated *vis-à-vis* religiosity only. Additionally, the contemporary research on spirituality has been so diversified that the term is independently explored in view of "*well-being*" (Villani *et al.* 2019, 6), "*quest for meaning*" (Baker 2003, 52), "*connectedness to oneself*" (Kasapoğlu 2022, 767) and "*connectedness to others*" (Türkben 2021, 12) amongst others. Coelho too regards the subjects of spirituality and religion as two independent concepts. However, the author of the paper does not accept the compartmentalized division of the two; it instead endorses the views of Popp-Baier (2010, 59) and Streib and Hood (2011, 442), who have used the terms, "*self-controlled religiosity*" and "*privatized experience-oriented religion*" respectively in order to look at spirituality as part of religion.
- [3] Coelho recounts his experience of self-exploration during his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in *The Pilgrimage* (1987). Though not very successful, the book paved the way for the phenomenal success of his pivotal book, *The Alchemist*. A significant portion of *The Zahir* (2015) also describes his journey to self-discovery along the road to Santiago. *Hippie* (2019) is another spiritual road book where Santiago happens to be one of the stops.
- [4] It may be asserted that authoritarianism is not the attribute of an ideal religion or religious consciousness but the feature of established institutions of mainstream religions, their conventions, and rituals. This position is vehemently espoused in most of Coelho's novels. For example, he reveals increased conservatism and decreased tolerance of priests of the church in *Brida* (2008), an idea which is elaborated in one of the following sections.
- [5] As we know, Joan of Arc was a simple peasant girl who was driven by the supernatural voices and visions to lead the French army and defeat the English: "*The heavenly ladies, when they had told her their names, bade her help the king of France. This was a strange thing. She, a poor peasant maiden, humble and obscure, with no knowledge save of household matters and of tending sheep and cattle; what had she to do with kings?*" (Richards 2014, 64).

References

- Anonymous. 2010. *Castle of Perseverance*. Edited by David N. Klausner. Accessed June 11, 2020. rochester.edu.
- Anonymous. 1485. *Everyman*. Accessed December 15, 2019. www.astorialand.com.
- Bache, Christopher M. 1991. "Mysticism and Psychedelics: The Case of the Dark Night." *Journal of Religion & Health* 30 (3): 215–236. doi.org.
- Baker, David C. 2003. "Studies of the Inner Life: The Impact of Spirituality on Quality of Life." *Quality of Life Research* 12 (1): 51–57. doi.org.
- Bala, Priya. 2018. "Writer Paulo Coelho on Tagore, Bollywood and the Bhagavad Gita." *Hindustan Times Brunch*, September 23, 2018.
- Batson, Charles Daniel, and Patricia A. Schoenrade. 1991. "Measuring Religion as Quest: 2) Reliability Concerns." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (4): 430–447. doi.org.
- Brown, Delwin. 2005. "Religion and Reverence for Nature: Donald A. Crosby's *Religion of Nature*." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 26 (3): 171–183.
- Byron, John. 1949. "What is Mysticism?" *Theology* 52 (349): 242–248. doi.org.
- Clark, Walter Houston. 1968. "Religious Aspects of Psychedelic Drugs." *California Law Review* 56 (1): 86–99. doi.org.
- Coelho, Paulo. 1993. *The Alchemist*. Translated by Alan R. Clarke. Noida: HarperCollins.
- Coelho, Paulo. 1997. *Manual of the Warrior of Light*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Coelho, Paulo. 2005. *The Zahir*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Coelho, Paulo. 2006. *The Witch of Portobello*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Coelho, Paulo. 2008. *Brida*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Coelho, Paulo. 2016. "My Religious Education." Accessed June 22, 2019. paulocoelhoblog.com.
- Coelho, Paulo. 2019. *Hippie*. Translated by Eric M. B. Becker. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Deissmann, Adolf. 1926. "Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History." London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Derrida, Jacques. [1976] 1994. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1977. *Limited Inc*. Translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Edited by Gerald Graff. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Donne, John. 1933. "The Litanie." In *Poems of John Donne*, vol. 1, edited by Herbert Grierson, 308–313. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Donne, John. 1957. "The Holy Sonnets." In *The Metaphysical Poets*, edited by Helen Gardner, 87. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 1935. *Religion and Literature*. Accessed January 1, 2020. www.gwern.net.
- Frazer, James George. 1890. *The Golden Bough*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Frye, Northrop. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gill, Kulwant Singh. 1981. "Aldous Huxley: The Quest for Synthetic Sainthood." *Modern Fiction Studies* 27 (4): 601–612.
- Herbert, George. 1957a. "Virtue." In *The Metaphysical Poets*, edited by Helen Gardner, 128. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Herbert, George. 1957b. "The Collar." In *The Metaphysical Poets*, edited by Helen Gardner, 135. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Kasapoğlu, Figen. 2022. "The Relationship among Spirituality, Self-Efficacy, COVID-19 Anxiety, and Hopelessness during the COVID-19 Process in Turkey: A Path Analysis." *Journal of Religion & Health* 61 (1): 767–785. doi.org.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 2010. "Popular Spirituality." *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 19 (1): 24–39. doi.org.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1978. "Symbolism in Indian Dance." *The World of Music* 20 (3): 70–83.
- Kourie, Celia. 1992. "Mysticism: A Survey of Recent Issues." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5 (2): 83–103.
- Lawton, George. 1930. "Spiritualism – A Contemporary American Religion." *The Journal of Religion* 10 (1): 37–54. doi.org.
- Lederberg, Marguerite S., and George Fitchett. 1999. "Can You Measure a Sunbeam with a Ruler?" *Psycho-Oncology* 8 (5): 375–377. doi.org.
- Morais, Fernando. 2008. *Paulo Coelho: A Warrior's Life: The Authorized Biography*. London, UK: HarperCollins.
- Narayan, R. K. 1958. *The Guide*. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications.
- Popp-Baier, Ulrike. 2010. "From Religion to Spirituality – Megatrend in Contemporary Society or Methodological Artefact? A Contribution to The Secularization Debate from Psychology of Religion." *Journal Of Religion in Europe* 3 (1): 34–67. doi.org.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. 1996. *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, 1993. *The Bhagavadgita: With an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Translation, English Translation and Notes*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- Richards, Laura E. 2014. *Joan of Arc*. New York, NY: Appleton. Accessed February 2, 2020. archive.org.
- Sagaster, Klaus. 1987. "Chinggis Khan." In *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, 328–329. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Schnell, Tatjana. 2012. "Spirituality with and without Religion – Differential Relationships with Personality." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 34 (1): 33–61. doi.org.
- Smith, Christian. 2019. *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Streib, Heinz, and Ralph Hood. 2011. "Spirituality As Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives." *Implicit Religion* 14 (4): 433–453. doi.org.
- Türkben Polat, Hilal, and Aysel A. Özdemir. 2021. "Relationship Between Compassion and Spiritual Care Among Nurses in Turkey." *Journal Of Religion & Health* 25: 1–11. doi.org.
- Villani, Daniela, Angela Sorgente, Paola Iannello, and Alessandro Antonietti. 2019. "The Role of Spirituality and Religiosity in Subjective Well-Being Of Individuals With Different Religious Status." *Frontiers In Psychology* 10. doi.org.
- Warner, Gale. 1988–89. "Ecology is the Contemporary Religion." *Earth Island Journal* 4 (1): 28–29.
- Weller, R. Charles. 2014. "Religious-Cultural Revivalism as Historiographical Debate: Contending Claims in the Post-Soviet Kazakh Context." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25 (2): 138–177. doi.org.
- White, Wayne. 1966. "William Blake: Mystic or Visionary?" *CLA Journal* 9 (3): 284–288.
- Wilson, Talbot. 1971. "The Narrator of Paradise Lost: Divine Inspiration and Human Knowledge." *The Seewanee Review* 79 (3): 349–359.