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Consuming the afterlife: spirituality, neo-spiritualism and continuity of the self

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ABSTRACT *Late-modern consumer society materially supports the self's spiritual goals. Yet the lack of fulfilment in consumption has produced ambivalence in these goals. A consideration of the continuation and intensification of afterlife beliefs suggests that these goals have not been shaped solely by consumptive trends but are implicitly tied to a deep concern with death and the quest for the inner self. Popular fascination with psychics and mediums, after-death communication and the near-death experience attests to the emergence of a new spiritualism that reaffirms the philosophy of the afterlife as a type of late-modern didacticism on self-continuity. At the same time, the rise of spirituality as a de-traditionalised and inner-directed approach to self-exploration suggests a convergence with neo-spiritualism in the attempt to gauge the transcendental-future of the self. Although this convergence provides a convenient platform for the marketability of afterlife beliefs, the late-modern preoccupation with the self may eventually redirect mystified consumption into personalised projects of self-discovery.*

KEYWORDS: afterlife; consumption; death; neo-spiritualism; self; spirituality

Introduction

The late-modernity paradigm proposes a highly fluid situation in which the twin processes of globalisation and individualisation impact on the self by elevating its autonomy in both the social and religious realms. Together with secularisation, these processes have allegedly freed the notion of the sacred from the control of ecclesiastical orders and provided the self with a subjective determinism for revitalising the nexus between spiritual experience and realisation (Aupers & Houtman, 2010; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Lee, 2008a; Von Stuckrad, 2013). As the self seemingly becomes its own master in charting the routes to the sacred, it is also simultaneously exposed to market forces that are reshaping the consumptive trends in spiritual practice and realisation. These forces are partly a response to the subjective turn that is propagating an engagement with inner rather than outer transformation (Heelas, 2008). By inner transformation is meant the pursuit and accomplishment of spiritual goals held by the self as vital to the maintenance of personal well-being and the enhancement of holistic experiences. Within the context of the subjective turn,

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however, inner spirituality itself is not fully disengaged from the outer material realm that also contributes to the impetus for the shift towards new meanings of the sacred. The inner–outer dialectics underlying the subjective turn has led Dawson (2011a, p. 311) to suggest that ‘what belongs to the material pertains to the spiritual and vice-versa’. Consequently, efforts at spiritual realisation cannot be considered as occurring independently of the material supports that function as a commodity¹ for enabling the success of spiritual quests.

This theoretical approach does not nullify the subjective turn. Rather, it elucidates the role of materially driven consumption in the production and realisation of spiritual quests. People seeking inner transformations may indeed prioritise the spiritual over the material but they cannot fully extricate themselves from the consumptive trends in which they are embedded. Dawson (2011a, p. 313) depicts the outcome of these opposing forces as mystified consumption because spiritual seekers can symbolically deny religious commodity while enjoying what it has to offer. It is like attempting to balance the desire for worldly possessions with searches for inner fulfilment. When this desire is considered only secondary to spirituality, the idea of consumption is preserved without being subsumed by the preoccupation with inner realms. Yet it is not really plausible to expect all forms of new spirituality to simply reflect the transposition of economic capital (and pleasure) into symbolic (and salvatory) capital. There are limits to which people would regard their material well-being as an acceptable indicator of spiritual preparedness and progress. Having lived a comfortable or luxurious life and then moving to an ashram may not necessarily substantiate one’s quest for spiritual certitude. It may in fact produce an opposite effect: the seeker becomes quickly disillusioned and abandons the spiritual path. On the other hand, it is the deep concern with the limitations of the material realm that is likely to increase the profundity of inner searches. All material forms eventually break down and consumption merely reaffirms the law of entropy by enjoining the replacement of the old by the new. In an era of increasing violence, calamities and uncertainties, the consumption ethic might seem to be a puny panacea in a sea of prolonged suffering and destruction. How can this ethic attune itself to the self’s inevitable confrontation with the end of material being, death?

My argument here is that the question of death is an important feature in the material–spiritual equation and is often neglected by researchers dealing with the consumptive aspects of new spirituality. The inevitability of death poses a condition that exacerbates rather than attenuates anxiety over the future of personal identities. Even with advances in health care, medical research and the control of diseases, the struggle with facing our mortality has not been lessened but intensified as prolongation of life implies greater existential attachment. A consequence of this struggle is the increasing focus on the possibility of post-physical existence. It suggests a shift in attitudes towards deconstructing the death taboo for initiating new areas of thinking about human mortality (Lee, 2008b; Sayer, 2010; Stanley & Wise, 2011). These are areas of research and debate that are generating attention on the meaning of life after death.

For example, the output of personal writings (Devers, 1997; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996; Van Praagh, 1999) and scholarly research (Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Kwilecki, 2011; Walliss, 2001) on after-death communication indisputably attests to the non-declining attraction to beliefs in life after death.²

The quest for confronting the view that life does not end with death leads inevitably to a consideration of the possibility of the afterlife. As a previously marginalised idea (Walter, 1996), the afterlife has regained currency as a burgeoning belief in otherworldly planes of existence (Davies, 1997; Singleton, 2012). There are studies that do not refer directly to the afterlife, but address the implications of death as a transition to alternative existences. For instance, Kearl (2010) using the term, post-self, argues that the dead have not only become memories but also post-physical sources for engaging with the living. In this view, personal identities are not obliterated by death but thrive in a milieu of high transcendence drives. It suggests a context in which the boundaries between life and death are blurred in order to re-imagine the dead as being present in the world of the living (Howarth, 2000). Even in death, the self continues to be celebrated as a force of being that cannot be suppressed or put out of action. Not only are the identities of the dead preserved but they are also seen as possessing the potency to manifest their presence in diverse ways. Hence, studies of after-death communication often convey the idea that therapeutic relief derived from contact with departed relatives and acquaintances corroborates the notion of a surviving self. Given the increasing plausibility of meanings attributed to life after death, it would be appropriate to ask whether late-modern uncertainties are providing a context for bolstering the consumption of afterlife beliefs in conjunction with the search for inner realms. In other words, is spirituality directed towards an inner self also an attempt to incorporate the afterlife as a template for promoting the idea of self-continuity? To explore this question, I shall first examine the thematic connections between spirituality and spiritualism that relate to the meanings of the afterlife and self-continuity. How these connections may constitute a consumptive trend in spiritual realisation will be discussed in the penultimate section.

The afterlife: between spirituality and neo-spiritualism

An analysis of spirituality as a form of inner realisation and spiritualism as a practice of otherworldly communication entails a review of religious trends centring on the cultivation of a deeper self for an alternative understanding of reality. In this understanding, the belief that the present world is not prior to all other worlds comes to play an important part in reviving the meaning of the afterlife, not simply as a post-physical realm, but also, as a transcendental mirror for the evolving self. Examining these trends necessitates, firstly, an overview of the growth in de-traditionalised forms of religious practices and, secondly, an explanation of increased spiritualism that is refocusing the meanings of the occult.

In general, there is a growing trend in Western countries for the bifurcation of religious orientations into new spirituality and a traditional church-related cluster (Berghuijs, Pieper, & Bakker, 2013; Fuller, 2001; Houtman & Aupers, 2007). New spirituality is sometimes described as a form of secular religion (Von Stuckrad, 2013, p. 6) and debates about it have generated controversy over its alleged difference from traditional religion. Nevertheless, people who consider themselves spiritual tend to claim greater affinity with ideas and practices related to the paranormal, reincarnation, syncretism and karma (Berghuijs et al., 2013, p. 26). This difference suggests that contemporary Western spirituality is not just a new autochthonous movement, but one significantly connected to influences stemming from various religious beliefs and practices in many non-Western cultures (cf. Campbell, 2007; Hammer, 2004; Hanegraaff, 1998). In short, it is not a simple matter of dismissing new spirituality as another false dawn (Voas & Bruce, 2007), but an occasion for re-examining the changing patterns of personal piety in late modernity and how they might relate to the continuity in afterlife beliefs.

The picture emerging from these studies suggests a new form of religious individualism that has become the focus of contemporary meanings of the sacred, making the exploration of personal piety as not dissimilar to an authentic understanding of the self. To be religiously engaged has come to be seen as more than just a matter of being plugged into different forms of institutionalised worship. There is a sense that efforts at self-realisation are not necessarily church-centred but are informed by an individualistic need to be intimately involved with the sacred whether in the form of teachings, objects or persons. In other words, the sacred has been subjectivised as the personal territory of spiritual practices. Durkheim (1965, p. 472) foresaw this when he suggested that the collective functions of sacred symbols would soon give way to the individualised meanings of sacred power. In his view, it was the growing influence of the cult of the individual and its resistance to external pressures that provided the conditions for directing sacred symbols inward. This prognostication seems to be supported by recent discussions of the emergence of a post-Christian society in the west (Bruce, 2002; Gilbert, 1980), where pews are emptying even as forms of individualised spirituality are seen to be on the rise.

These recent developments suggest that all religions cannot but appear to display the accoutrements of spirituality, whereas the individualised practices of spirituality do not always necessitate an adherence to the outer or ornate forms of religiosity. Rather, the growth of spirituality associated with individualistic pursuits implies an assiduous turn towards inner experiences as determining the meanings of sacredness. To a large extent, these meanings are not just confined to a quest for the renewal of faith in the divine but also addressed as the discovery of being and time beyond death. Spirituality connotes an intensity of personal exploration as well as the inculcation of a transcendental-future perspective that broaches the question of self-continuity after death (Lee, 2009). Within this perspective, the self becomes compelled to confront the possibility of alternative realities beyond mundane existence. In this respect, spirituality as

the personal vehicle for understanding the sacred unknown converges to a certain extent with spiritualism as the practice of otherworldly communication. However, this convergence does not necessarily imply equivalence between the two, but merely suggests a shared focus on the afterlife as an affirmation of self-continuity in post-physical worlds, an issue to be discussed following a review of contemporary spiritualism.

While spirituality redirects notions of the sacred from the institutional to the personal, spiritualism remains very much a personal undertaking that attempts to maintain or advance the perceived connections between the present existence and other worlds. In a sense, these connections putatively linking the living and the dead are considered sacred since they represent a scarce and valued resource for accessing other worlds. For this reason, spirit mediums as conduits to other worlds command a certain degree of awe and power, which gives spiritualism a distinct hint of charisma that is not so evident in inner-directed spirituality. This is not to suggest that spiritualism is charismatic by nature, but that its practices frequently draw on potential sources of charisma for empowering otherworldly contacts. It implies that charismatic elements can provide the drive to activities linked to spiritualism, especially when it takes on the character of a religious movement.³

Spiritualism as a religious movement gained much public attention during and after the two world wars when grieving relatives sought communication with dead soldiers. The history of this movement has been amply documented (Brandon, 1983; Carroll, 1997; Hazelgrove, 2000; Leonard, 2005; Nelson, 1969) and its expression in popular culture has received increasing attention (e.g. Brown, 1997; Hill, 2011; Wooffitt, 2006). What needs to be stressed here is that despite various controversies, it continues to provide a supportive environment for people who wish to bridge the gap between 'the Great Divide' (Walliss, 2001, p. 142). It implies that there is no sharp marginalisation of spiritualist beliefs and that the presence of spirit mediums in late-modern societies reinforces and perpetuates those beliefs. In late-modernity where consumption and media-dominated networks constitute many aspects of social organisation, the role of media-savvy spirit mediums has come to shape the way people relate to them as charismatic conduits to the hereafter. Celebrity mediums not only write books and appear regularly on television, but they also provide an upbeat sensibility to the meaning of the afterlife. Their writings and performance tend to convey an optimistic view of the afterlife as the continuity of the self in spiritual development (e.g. Browne, 2000; Cannon, 1993; Van Praagh, 2011; Wands, 2006). Together with the media-focused paranormal investigators, celebrity mediums are regenerating public concern with the question of life beyond death in a quest that can be aptly termed neo-spiritualism.

Neo-spiritualism can be construed as the current manifestations of the earlier movement and connotes consumption-oriented responses to otherworldly contacts and sojourns in a high-tech and media-dominated environment. These responses are based not only on the tenacity of afterlife beliefs, but also on concerted efforts to seek out personal guides and resources for discovering the

authenticity of the afterlife. Unlike the earlier movement that mainly involved the bereaved seeking contact with the dead, neo-spiritualism lacks the exclusivity of the bereavement process as it also engages with the personal interests of seekers attuned to a plethora of products dealing with the occult. These products typically include books, videos, online contacts, TV shows, workshops and networks for interfacing with psychics, thus providing resources for the personal exploration of hidden worlds beyond death. In this regard, neo-spiritualism assumes a multifaceted cultural role to deliver the meaning of the afterlife not only as a form of religious therapy, but also as an epistemological technique in sensitising the public to the apparent presence of spirit-beings and existence of non-ordinary worlds. Mediums feature prominently in this spiritual landscape that highlights the possession of psychic abilities for making otherworldly contacts. Such contacts also comprise the claims of some hypnotherapists who use past-life regression techniques in their line of work (e.g. Newton, 1994, 2000). Similarly, paranormal researchers and ghost-hunters showcase their use of high-tech equipment to putatively provide evidence to mass audiences that the dead have not fully left us. Popularity of these demonstrations suggests a recurring public interest in and demand for delving into the alleged intricacies of life after death. Despite modern disenchantment with the occult, the links to beliefs in other worlds have not been completely severed, but buttressed by the continuing appeal of spirit mediumship and after-death investigation.

Maintenance of these links provides an understanding of the widening rather than waning influence of neo-spiritualism because it represents a form of engagement with the uncanny and the mystical as transgression of mundane self-knowledge. As Gibbons (2001, p. 13) puts it, dealing with the occult and the magical is 'essentially a means of concentrating the will and engaging the imagination'. Ultimately, such acts of transgression are seen by some as a wittingly desirable approach to a deeper understanding of the self. The impact of the occult on the popular imagination cannot be underestimated because it has continued to provide the esoteric sources for challenging conventional knowledge. Indeed, as noted by Wilson (1971, p. 36) in his monumental study of the occult, esotericism offers glimpses of 'a meaning that goes beyond everyday banality, a moment when the human radio set picks up unknown vibrations'. It is these hidden vibrations that allegedly constitute alternative dimensions opposed to the static, surface view of things. In a sense, the occult has come to provide a meeting ground between the quest for inner realms and communication with worlds beyond death. It merges the inner and the beyond as the post-physical in which self-transformation is perceived as enabling new experiences of freedom and creativity. What is regarded as hidden becomes the source of revelation for new understandings about the self before and after death. It is not just the magical and fantastical that underlies occult realities but the confrontation with those realities that changes self-meanings as exemplified by the attention given to the near-death experience.

The near-death research and its burgeoning literature (Fox, 2003; Kellehear, 1996; Perera, Jagadheesan, & Peake, 2011; Ring & Valarino, 2000) consider

the penetrability of the occult as the innumerable instances in which returnees from death come to provide absorbing accounts of their otherworldly sojourns and encounters. Many of these returnees were hospital patients who died momentarily of cardiac failure or under surgical conditions, but were resuscitated by modern medical technologies. By recounting their near-death experiences, not only do they appear to offer evidence of self-continuity after death, but also to suggest the afterlife as a post-physical reality for further personal exploration and scientific study. The well-publicised case of Alexander (2012), an American neurosurgeon who recovered from a meningitis-induced coma, illustrates the rapturous changes to self-meaning following an unanticipated introduction to occult realms in moments when the body or brain shuts down.⁴

Controversies continue to surround the meaning of the near-death experience, particularly on the question of whether it is a bona fide encounter with death and the afterlife or merely a visionary state common to the dying. Despite these debates, recordings of testimonies given by returnees to near-death researchers suggest the experience to be profoundly real and life-transforming. On one level, these data disclose intimate details of otherworldly encounters with spirit-entities and spirits of the dead, being reminiscent of the communicative attempts to contact occult realms in spiritualism. However, for the near-death returnees, movement into these realms is characterised by reports of dark tunnels, bright lights and serene surroundings. It departs from séances in spiritualism where the bereaved attempts to reach the dead through spirit-mediums. Near-death returnees usually claim direct contact with denizens of occult realms, some of whom may act as their personal guides. Spiritual mediation provided by these guides differs from spirit mediumship since the guides are not from the mundane world and they cannot be actively sought out for personal consultation. The spiritualism implied by the near-death experience is *post hoc* because returnees come to discover the occult realms following an unanticipated physical crisis rather than in preplanned séances. As the data suggest on another level, near-death experiences are associated with changes in self-definition to affect the way returnees address the consequences of their survival. Increase in the sense of self-worth forms a vital aspect of the returnee's attempt to explore the essence of the inner or 'true' self (Ring & Valarino, 2000, p. 193). By this attempt to re-examine the self, returnees converge with seekers of inner spirituality embarked on the path of self-realisation and reaffirm the philosophy of the afterlife as a type of late-modern didacticism on self-continuity.

Like cases of after-death communication, the near-death experience has created public spaces for re-appraising the meaning of the afterlife. Confronting death through the imageries of this experience may have the effect of reducing the fear of nihilism and, at the same time, of promoting conceptions of the afterlife to support perceptions of self-renewal. To address the afterlife as furthering rather than ending self-interest suggests a common ground with the quest for inner spirituality. As a form of neo-spiritualism, near-death experiences involving occult worlds appear to be redirecting material urges towards a

more benign and self-absorbed construal of life after death and, in the process, converges with the ethos of inner spirituality in identifying a transcendental-future for the self.

This convergence thrives in a New Age environment that redirects the quest for self-expression, within a milieu of shifting gatherings and movements, towards the search for a genuine inner level of being (Hunt, 2003, p. 132). As an ethic of inner motivation, Heelas (1996, p. 23) argues that this endeavour activates forms of knowledge that may not be acknowledged as socially conventional. The quest for such knowledge suggests a convergence of beliefs in self-exploration with searches for the inner self. By claiming the social as the outer screen leading to inner realisation, proponents of New Age beliefs are arguing for a notion of self-evolvement from the socially constituted person to an inner being. Consequently, death is not considered the same as self-termination, but as a continuation of personal development beyond physical demise (Walter, 1993, p. 135). It is in this subjective turn to the inner realm that death seems no longer to be perceived as a direct transition to either heaven or hell.⁵ Instead, personal belief in life after death is increasingly treated as a direct confrontation with different forms or conceptions of spirituality (Lee, 2013). In other words, physical death is construed as occasioning a change for further exploration of the self. It would imply that the quest for the inner self in this life cannot be fully accomplished without due attention given to self-continuity beyond this life.

Yet, this quest is occurring in a context where ideas of religious fulfilment have become commodified for individual exploration (Dawson, 2011b, Chapter 8). Buying into the ideas of the afterlife as preparation for self-transformation suggests that many seekers may not be fully autonomous of the consumptive trends in late-modernity. Gauging these trends as central to understanding the pursuit of self-continuity implies that consumption of the afterlife can be treated as a commodity in the late-modern crisis of the self. A discussion of this crisis and its significance for afterlife beliefs follows.

Self, consumption and the afterlife

The popular notion of the self has been perennially linked to the belief in an indestructible force of being forming the nucleus of human personality (Myers, 1902/1961). In the early twentieth century, the English scientist Sir Oliver Lodge (1929) also expressed the view that even though human nature seemed mechanistic, it possessed higher attributes belonging to another order of existence. These allusions to an adamant self not only paralleled the popular interest in the mystical but also struck a chord with scientific enthusiasts experimenting with methods of self-regeneration. Thus, towards the end of the twentieth century, the American invention of cryonics proposed the possibility of deep freezing dead bodies for future revival intact with original memories, implying that human selves possessed a natural potential for resurrection

(Schweid, 2006, pp. 46–48). All these efforts to imagine a link between the self and an inner being could be attributed to the modern quest to address the individual as being more than the sum of its parts. Individual identities were not just seen as derived from biological relationships or membership in different social groups, but as animated by a core of being not visible to the human eye, yet considered the very essence of one's internal reflection and relation to the world. It was this inner being that constituted the modern conception of the self as a form of individualised power as well as a reflexive agent (Taylor, 1989).

Viewing the modern self as a reflexive being was partly a product of the romantic quest to put in place the Enlightenment's emphasis on the right of each individual to self-determination and self-discovery. This right was not merely something that romantics believed as inherent to each and every person but as a logical outcome of the creative impulse stemming from a divine source. Hence, 'the romantic was as fascinated by the distinctive nature of his own self as by his powers of imagination' (Campbell, 1987, p. 183). It implied that the self represented a continuous stream of consciousness from actualising thoughts to concretising actions in a mode of independent awareness. Romanticism, therefore, constituted a critical moment in the unfolding of the reflexive self that became beholden to its own quest for authenticity. But within the milieu of post-war consumption, the widespread access to luxury goods made possible the intensification of this self-meaning to indicate new levels of freedom that in previous eras would have been merely regarded as an extension of religious grace. Thus, in this climate of an exaggerated sense of self, it was not inappropriate to imagine that personal identity could take the form of experimental self-discovery (Honneth, 2004, p. 470). At the same time, reflexivity was compelled by the urgency for flexibility – the need to keep open all decisions and options. Ultimately, these demands weighed upon self-discovery to the point where the path to inner realisation turned upon itself and into an awareness of inner emptiness or a pervading sense of absence of purpose.

If the legacy of Romanticism was seen to inspire a sense of self-autonomy and durability, late-modernity has come to be considered the context in which the self no longer perpetuates the creation of meaning. Instead, the self is conceived as spiralling into the depths of despair as it confronts the abyss of its own making. Unparalleled consumption in late-modernity has hollowed out the quest for self-discovery, as fulfilment of desire in consumer goods comes to produce a sense of ennui associated with the tedium of acquisition and expenditure.⁶ This is occurring in a world of ageing populations where a large proportion of the labour force is headed towards retirement, suggesting that the obsession with cargoes engendered by consumption is coinciding with the extensive loss of meaning people face when they leave their occupations. Under these circumstances, the experimental creed by which the self reproduces its sense of being attempts to undergo a reawakening to connect with new sources of meaning-creation that could propel it from the pathologies of inner emptiness. It is therefore no coincidence that the subjective turn towards inner

realisation and spiritual contact is occurring at the moment in which the self seeks its own renewal. Engagement with occult realms through after-death communications and near-death experiences offers alternative spaces for transforming inner emptiness into fresh hope for dealing with the fate of the self. Being able to re-imagine this fate as a form of spiritual certainty provides the self with a futuristic notion of survival in preconceived realms that are ostensibly authenticated through the ever-growing reports of after-death communication and near-death experiences.

These reports and their media capitalisation have provided the impetus for relaying ideas of the afterlife as an occult reality. On the Internet, scores of websites dealing with these themes capture the viewer's attention with a click of the mouse. There is no dearth of materials on the afterlife produced as cinematic images and literary descriptions that seem to surpass the traditional conceptions of heaven and hell. These new metaphors of life after death still refer to the familiar conditions of pleasure and pain, but juxtaposed in more complex ways in the multiple realms that allegedly exist in the afterlife. They suggest a less cut and dried picture of paradise and purgatory since the focus on self-continuity attempts to pose the spiritual as a journey rather than as an emplacement in a fixed zone. Convergence between inner spirituality and neo-spiritualism comes to emphasise the transitory nature of the self as it is seen to move freely between realms in search of its innate authenticity. Thus, the afterlife is not simply viewed as an abiding point in post-physical space, but re-imagined as multiple levels of spiritual itinerancy as the self strives towards its ultimate realisation. This is exemplified by the four stages of waiting, judgement, possibilities and return in the journey after death. Miller (1998, p. 133), who identified these stages remarked that the 'very notion of travel toward a destination in the afterdeath carries with it a sense of unbroken reality – of moving with intention, energy, and perhaps even joy through a mosaic of possibilities'.

It is this sense of movement that sets neo-spiritualism apart from the previous idea of transference to a predetermined locale in the afterlife. Consonant with this movement is the notion of the self as having the agency to respond to its new surroundings as if it were not deprived of consciousness in death. The self is, therefore, not regarded as being cut off in death from its sources of rationality and even comes to be treated as a spiritual traveller across the boundaries of life and death. Traversing these boundaries implies that it is not imprudent to conceive of the nominal separation between life and death as arbitrary since such movement transcends dualistic constructions and could be rethought as 'the whispered communication' across this divide (Howarth, 2000, p. 136). As with the deconstruction of other boundaries in late-modernity, blurring the separation between life and death empowers the self to rediscover its sense of continuity. Demise of the physical is no longer assumed to be the definitive state leading to nihilism, but merely a stage in the evolvment of the self in its quest for an inner reality. This search might begin in the physical but continues into the post-physical. Thus, the philosophy of the afterlife in this context of

deconstruction is not simply about the promise of reunion with deceased relatives and friends or the anticipation of a better life to come. Rather, it is the renewal of the self's potentiality in the generation or maintenance of identities that gives the afterlife an appeal of marketable proportion to populations facing the estrangement of consumption in late-modernity. In other words, the consumptive drive of the late-modern self is ironically propelling it towards commodified versions of the afterlife, as an assurance against its eventual breakdown in the world of material well-being. Even if cynicism and disillusionment were to develop in the corridors of consumption, belief of self-continuity in the afterlife cultivated under the auspices of neo-spiritualism may provide a marshalling force for redirecting mystified consumption into personalised projects of self-discovery. It would suggest that people might not simply prioritise the inner over the outer in their spiritual quests, but choose to redefine their inevitable demise as an *entrée* into occult realms.

Thus, consumptive concern for self-continuity suggests that engagement with beliefs in the afterlife is also a form of commodicity that implies worldly things as the necessary means for enabling the self to gauge its transcendental-future. Convergence of spirituality and neo-spiritualism does not inextricably represent a rejection of material well-being. Rather, it can be shaped by material supports in markets promoting the occult realms. Exploration of these realms both reflects and re-signifies the late-modern preoccupation with the self. Consuming the afterlife provides the self with the materialistic conditions to re-imagine and even fortify its prospects in the transcendental-future. Yet, as the limits of these conditions are reached, consumption may not come to be regarded as being sought for its own end, but possibly as a sublime approach to a deeper understanding of what lies ahead for the self after death.

Conclusion

On a recent trip to London and Paris, members of my tour group went on a shopping spree and returned home with a vast array of newly purchased suitcases filled with branded cargoes. Ironically, one of them made a self-deprecatory remark about the worthlessness of some purchases but added that money lacked ownership if it was not spent indiscriminately. For these shopaholics, consumption was indeed exhilarating even if needs and wants did not always match. Not long after returning, I inquired after the health of an ageing neighbour whose laboured movements betrayed his once robust demeanour. Not only did he confess to the agony of ageing, but also to the pointlessness of advancing years. Indeed, the incongruity of these two anecdotes could be transformed into a parable about the paradoxes of self-discovery in late-modern society. Especially among the newly affluent, consumption is symbolic of both status acquisition and self-autonomy in choice. Many people consume to empower their sense of self-worth even though their purchases may not always be perceived as highly valued. Consumption drives the quest for self-continuity to affirm wantonness in self-meaning. Yet this wantonness may wane in the

crepuscular moments of ageing and physical decline when the self comes to deliberate on its purpose in celebrating the ends of consumption. Mortality beckons as a possible antidote to consumption, providing an alternative horizon to self-meaning, as shops and soapsuds are left behind. Juxtaposing consumption and death may predispose the self into re-appraising inner spirituality as casting new meanings on its transcendental-future. Seekers of new meanings would not likely ignore the resources of neo-spiritualism either to bolster their venture into realms that suggest the reality of self-continuity. As consumption in late-modernity reaches its crescendo, the conjunction of inner spirituality and neo-spiritualism may set new terms for reinventing the discourses on life after lives or on life between lives. It would imply that the quest for self-continuity is possibly taking new directions by not fully abandoning the cornucopia of consumption, but reshaping it into a receptacle for understanding the afterlife.

Notes

- [1] Dawson (2011a, p. 311) defines commodity as worldly things becoming both a medium for and a barometer of spiritual well-being.
- [2] Proliferation of movies and TV shows on ghosts and spirit manifestations also suggests media capitalisation on the popular interest in after-death communication (e.g. TV shows such as *Ghost Whisperer* and movies such as *Paranormal Activity*).
- [3] The meaning of charisma as a source of extraordinary power has a conceptual history going back to Sohm who wrote about it in the context of the early Christian church. It was Weber, however, who reused the concept to discuss varieties of authority and to hint at its recurring role in the annals of religious change (see Lee, 2010). My purpose is not to elaborate on the concept, but to treat it as a special means for understanding the claim of power in spiritualism for enacting the journeys to and connections with worlds beyond death. In this sense, spirituality per se may not be totally devoid of charisma but only less obvious in its expression.
- [4] As a life-transforming inner experience, Dr Alexander inferred from his NDE that the spirit is eternal and that 'no one has one sentence worth of hard evidence that it isn't' (Kaufman, 2012). However, there is no scarcity of sceptics who are only too ready to dismiss his NDE as illusory, e.g. online articles by Shermer (2013) and Habib (2013).
- [5] In Western culture, secularisation has undermined the literal meanings associated with heaven and hell (Le Goff, 1984; McDannell & Lang, 2001; Segal, 2004; Walker, 1964). Although these concepts still circulate in popular and religious literatures, they no longer have the currency for regulating moral conduct in the public sphere. Indeed, in some secularised populations, the idea of after-death destinations is shrugged off as irrelevant to the concerns of being in the present (see Zuckerman, 2008, pp. 57–75). However, there is also the tendency to treat both terms as referring to different states of the mind rather than to after-death destinations (see Lee, 2013).
- [6] Bauman (2007, 2008) has poignantly raised questions concerning the alienating effects of consumption. For a recent report on the pervasion of loneliness in contemporary society, see Mental Health Foundation (2010).

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