

# Illuminating Spiritual Innovation



How innovators  
from Tokyo to Nairobi  
are responding to the  
spiritual longings of  
our time—and what  
they need from  
us now

Sacred  
Design Lab

Angie Thurston  
with Josh Packard  
and Casper ter Kuile

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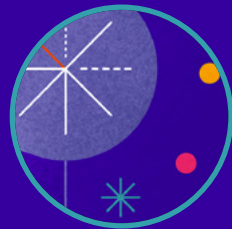
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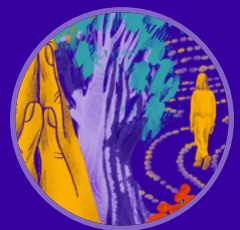
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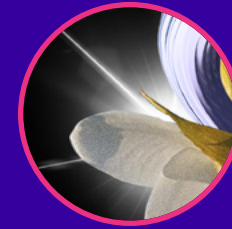
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*Throughout the report, you will find illustrations by artists from around the world in response to the prompt: "What does spiritual innovation mean to you?"*



# Executive Summary

ILLUSTRATION:  
Francine Oeyen—Argentina

*“I chose to represent the powerful feminine force that blends Mother Mary and Mother Nature in Latin America. I included in her mantle elements that connect us to her power.”*

## Executive Summary

### Spiritual well-being is fundamental to flourishing.

The way we relate to ourselves, our communities, and the larger ecosystems we share, is inextricable from our well-being in the areas of:

**Belonging:**

Knowing and being known; loving and being loved;

**Becoming:**

Growing into the people we are called to be;

**Beyond:**

Experiencing ourselves as part of something more.

Yet the march toward modernity has largely neglected our spiritual lives. More and more people have unaddressed longings of the soul, and this deficit contributes to cultures of interpersonal, structural, and planetary harm. Underpinning the crises of our world is a crisis of spirit.

To turn the tide toward flourishing, we need new ways to address spiritual longings. We need spiritual innovation.

This report shines a light on spiritual innovation around the world. We seek out innovations that directly contribute to spiritual well-being, and find that the most promising are those with spiritual integrity, project sustainability, and community support.

After 18 months of research and interviews with innovators worldwide,<sup>\*</sup> we illuminate four themes in global spiritual innovation, key challenges in each area, and opportunities to address these challenges moving forward.

We share this preliminary learning with the hope of amplifying the need for spiritual innovation, celebrating the work that is being done, and identifying promising next steps. We are eager to be in conversation with others who care about advancing spiritual innovation worldwide.

Finally, we hope to help galvanize support for efforts like these and the people who lead them. We dream of a thriving movement dedicated to imagining and creating new possibilities for nourishing our spiritual lives, which in turn would transform our world toward flourishing.

*To turn the tide toward flourishing, we need new ways to address spiritual longings. We need spiritual innovation.*



<sup>\*</sup> We conducted over 100 interviews with practitioners and scholars in 37 countries, worked with a team of seven area researchers across the globe, and traveled to six countries (Egypt, Kenya, India, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, and Brazil). This research builds on a decade of work on spiritual innovation in the United States. For more on our research methodology, [see page 84](#).

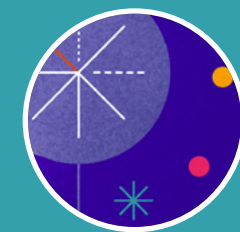
# On

# Spiritual

# Innovation



The Case  
for Spiritual  
Innovation (10)



Understanding  
Spiritual  
Innovation (16)

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# The Case for Spiritual Innovation: Global Crises Are Spiritual Crises



ILLUSTRATION:  
Rosa Kusabbi—United Kingdom

*“This piece focuses on connection and growth as well as the cycle of life and death. I nod to technological advances with the circuit board mirroring the roots of the plant.”*

# Yokosuka, Japan



In the suburbs of Yokosuka, Soin Fujio sits with a young man who's lost his will to live. People in crisis come to his temple often—so often that this monk's life has become a vigil. He says, "I don't leave for more than 24 hours. If I stop for one day, I might lose someone."

A lifelong monastic who worked as a banker to gain worldly experience, Rev. Fujio was moved to begin crisis care after the suicides of three friends. "People come to me with zero battery," he says. "I ask questions to help them feel their body. I ask them, do you need heat? Water? Then we walk zazen together. Sometimes for three hours. I don't let them leave until their battery is recharged. Then, I recharge my own."

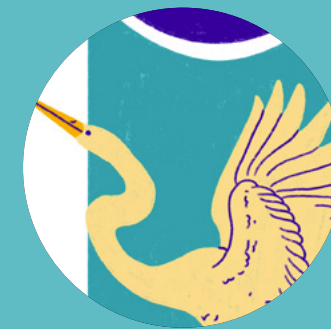
To do this work well, Rev. Fujio has innovated within his Rinzai Zen tradition. He's combined his Zen practice with Tai Chi to support embodied healing. He invites people in his meditation groups to share how they are feeling after each sit. He trains young priests in counseling. And since Covid, he leads [zazen in the metaverse](#).

This is a fairly radical shift for the 400-year-old temple's traditions, but these changes allow Rev. Fujio to be a more effective leader and spiritual care provider. He now co-chairs an association of monks across sects who are dedicated to addressing suicide, as well as serving on the suicide prevention committee for area public health centers where he collaborates with hospitals, police, boards of education, and legal experts.

Japan's struggles with social isolation and suicide are well documented. Forty percent of young people report being profoundly lonely,<sup>1</sup> and 1.5 million Japanese identify as hikikomori, having withdrawn from society completely for six months or more.<sup>2</sup> To address these crises of spirit, innovators are finding new ways to foster belonging, or the experience of being known and loved.

As the sun sets twenty miles north in Tokyo, another Buddhist monk is getting ready for work. Zennen is one of the bartenders at [Vowz Bar](#) in Tokyo's low-rise Yotsuya neighborhood. For 20 years, Buddhist monks have welcomed young people to talk over cocktails with names like "form is emptiness," and—at appointed times every evening—hear a short Dharma talk and chant sutras together. Zennen is tall, wearing gray robes and exuding gentleness and good humor. "We stand by," he explains. "Often, we end up counseling them. So many young people struggle with parent-child relationship issues and a lack of self-esteem. We are here to support and guide."

A majority of those aged 50 and under in Japan say they have no reason to visit a Buddhist temple.<sup>3</sup> Japanese Buddhist institutions can be perceived as detached and unconcerned, reserved for funerals and sightseeing. But these Buddhist innovators are actively working to address the spiritual well-being of their neighbors, placing themselves in service of the needs they feel and see.



*"People come to me with zero battery. I don't let them leave until their battery is recharged."*

– Soin Fujio



## The Case for Spiritual Innovation

The Parable of the Lute, from the Theravada Buddhist canon, has many versions but it goes something like this: A musician approached the Buddha to understand how to meditate. He had been trying diligently and practicing with great effort. “How do you find harmony in meditation?” he asked. The Buddha, in response, inquired, “How do you tune your lute?” The musician explained, “Not too tight, as the strings may break; not too loose, for then they won’t sound.” The Buddha nodded, “Just so, meditation requires a balance, neither strained too hard nor taken too lightly. That is the path to peace.”

Like the musician, we find ourselves out of balance. We have been tightening the strings of technology and business with unrelenting force, dedicating untold effort, attention, and resources to innovation in these sectors. The music produced has been captivating—smart devices, artificial intelligence, breakthroughs in medicine, and feats in space exploration. Yet, in this ceaseless tightening, the strings are at a breaking point threatening to destroy the instrument itself.

Meanwhile, the strings that might evolve our spiritual, moral, and ethical life have been left too loose. Neglected, discounted, and under-resourced, they struggle to produce a melody that can heal and transform the modern world. The consequences often feel intractable: loss of human connection, lack of moral leadership, profound violence and war, erosion of communal values, unprecedented environmental degradation, political and social division, soaring economic disparity, and a pervasive sense of existential angst. In other words, a world rich in ideas but impoverished in ideals.<sup>4</sup>

Could it be that the secret to addressing these problems lies in rebalancing how we spend our creative energy and resources? Imagine a world in which spiritual imagination was a global priority, and we applied ourselves, like Soin Fujio, to the kind of innovation that puts spiritual needs at the center. In this world, the melody of technological innovation would respond to the rhythm of spiritual depth, moral integrity, and ethical consideration—not the other way around. As a well-tuned instrument fills the air with music, so too could a transformed society that puts our industries and economies in service of individual and collective flourishing.

*Could it be that the secret to addressing these problems lies in rebalancing how we spend our creative energy and resources?*

*Imagine a world in which spiritual imagination was a global priority.*



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# Understanding Spiritual Innovation: Definition and Context



ILLUSTRATION:

Hatiye Garip—Turkey

*“This scene emphasizes that we can be close to the cosmos within us from our ordinary rooms, with the help of our ideas and vision, and that we can reach it in a moment as short as the movement of our eyelashes.”*

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## Understanding Spiritual Innovation

### Defining spiritual innovation

We define spiritual innovation as **novel ways to address spiritual longings**.

**Spiritual longings** are the human need for:

**Belonging:**

Knowing and being known; loving and being loved;

**Becoming:**

Growing into the people we are called to be;

**Beyond:**

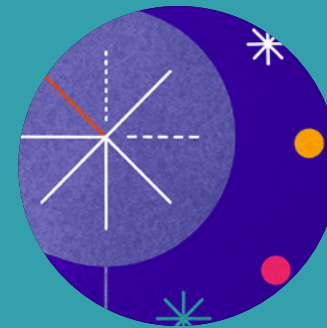
Experiencing ourselves as part of something more.<sup>5</sup>

For many, these longings are addressed within religious traditions and communities. Yet more and more people are religiously unaffiliated, dissatisfied, or embracing hybrid or individuated spiritual paths. Our focus for this project is on the needs of those who are spiritually underserved.

Some innovations, while targeting the spiritually underserved, actually increase harm to self and others.<sup>6</sup> This is not the kind of spiritual innovation we are looking to uplift here. Rather, we are interested in spiritual innovation that contributes to individual and collective flourishing.

The purpose of this report is to advance **novel ways to address spiritual longings that contribute to the flourishing of individuals, communities, and ecosystems.**<sup>7</sup>

*The purpose of this report is to advance novel ways to address spiritual longings that contribute to the flourishing of individuals, communities, and ecosystems.*



**Novel** means that the innovation provides a new concept, offering, or pathway for engaging spirituality in context.\*<sup>8</sup> The most sound and effective spiritual innovations are also typically rooted, in that they grow out of or are informed by existing religious systems or wisdom traditions.\*<sup>9</sup>

**Flourishing** points to the physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being of individuals in relationship to our broader contexts.\*<sup>10</sup> A state of flourishing would be one in which all aspects of our lives, our communities, and our world are good.<sup>11</sup>

Our research and the world's wisdom traditions contend that those well in spirit are better resourced to work on behalf of others, catalyzing virtuous circles of love and justice in the world.\*

**Innovation** is creative imagination in context. At best, innovation opens space for the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.<sup>12</sup> It points to the transformative spirit that we carry, and that we are part of. It evokes a capacity to make potentials actual, to hope for better, individually and collectively, and to bring those hopes to life.

Like all words, **innovation** comes laden with associations based on the history of who has used it and how. To some, it connotes Western ideas about entrepreneurship for capital gain, particularly as a colonizing force or at the expense of traditional ways of being and knowing.\* Maxakali philosopher Cristine Takuá in Brazil suggests that one should not talk about “innovation” but rather “transformation”, as spiritualities, like everything, are naturally changing.<sup>15</sup>

\* For this project, we define spirituality as the innate capacity to experience personal connection to others and a higher power; the cultivation of that capacity; the inner impulse to express prosocial values and behaviors; and the outworkings of that impulse toward flourishing.<sup>8</sup>

\* We define religion as the institutional and cultural mediations of spiritual life, including all aspects of social infrastructure which sustain tradition, identity, ritual, community, belief, and practice.<sup>9</sup>

\* Many spiritually-motivated innovators focus on addressing physical, mental, social, and systemic dimensions of well-being. Here we feature innovators who are explicitly working to address spiritual well-being by cultivating belonging, becoming, and connection to the beyond.<sup>10</sup>

\* Zen priest Rev. angel Kyodo Williams captures this in her emblematic quote: “Love and Justice are not two. Without inner change, there can be no outer change. Without collective change, no change matters.”

\* In Islam, the concept of bid'ah, or religious innovation without roots in Muslim tradition, is widely seen as undesirable if not forbidden. This essay by Muslim scholar Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah on [Innovation & Creation in Islam](#) provides a beautiful overview of the nuances of bid'ah and another concept, ijtihad, which may be closer to what we mean by spiritual innovation. He describes ijtihad as “a process for inducing Islamic creativity.”

Perhaps “spiritual transformation” or “spiritual evolution” will be more resonant language for some readers, but we use “innovation” in this report in part because we think it would be powerful to expand its meaning to include active participation in that transformative life force of which we are part.

So what is **good** spiritual innovation, the kind that contributes to flourishing in genuine, beautiful, and lasting ways? We invite you to consider that question through three lenses:

**Spiritual integrity:** Does the project espouse values that support spiritual well-being, and does the approach to the work match the values?

**Project sustainability:** Is the work reaching those it intends to serve and does it have sound structures, resources, and leadership in place to continue?

**Community support:** Are the innovators themselves part of loving communities of support, training, and accountability from mentors and peers?

If you are a spiritual innovator, you know that there is often not enough infrastructure in place to fully resource you in these areas. And yet, innovators all over the world yearn to bring their healing, transformative work to those in need. In what follows, we hope to help generate awareness and new possibilities for supporting spiritual innovation as a global movement.

## Understanding Spiritual Innovation

# Contextualizing spiritual innovation

When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem's Second Temple in 70 CE, it seemed as if Judaism itself might perish, too. But Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai offered a new way forward: prayer services and text study would replace animal sacrifices and temple rituals. Jewish traditions were reimagined for a new context of exile and Rabbinic Judaism was born.

When priest and professor John Wycliffe commissioned the translation of Latin biblical texts to Middle English in 14th century England, he infuriated the Pope, who condemned him as a heretic. Meanwhile, Wycliffe revolutionized distribution of, and access to, Christian scripture for the growing population who could read in their native tongue.

When Greek-Armenian philosopher George Gurdjieff proposed a "fourth way" of religious practice combining elements of Hinduism, Catholicism, and Islam in the early 20th century, critics branded him a syncretist and a charlatan, even as he inspired thousands of nonbelievers to explore the nature of consciousness for the first time.

Spiritual innovation is inseparable from its context. Each of the examples above illustrates what was novel—and met with resistance—in a particular time, place, and cultural setting. To understand today's innovations, we will explore similar considerations:

Where are they innovating in relationship to tradition?

How are they innovating to address spiritual needs?

How does spirituality operate in their society?

Each of these considerations can be helpfully broken down, while recognizing that there is greater fluidity than any categorization might suggest, and that many innovations span multiple categories.

### Where they are innovating in relation to tradition:

- Inside, rooted in, and helping to evolve, religious wisdom of the past—such as the [Extreme Way of the Cross](#), a popular new Polish Catholic devotional journey based on the traditional 14 Stations of the Cross;
- On the edge, branching out from existing traditions while maintaining a connection—such as Sadhguru's [Inner Engineering Program](#), which is grounded in Hindu principles and practices but designed for broad appeal; or
- Outside, originating beyond religious frames of reference, often directly addressing spirituality in secular settings—such as the Australian [Spiritual Health Association](#), which uses a scientific evidence basis to advocate for spiritually inclusive healthcare.

### How they are innovating to address spiritual needs:

- Practically, through new programs, practices, and services to support spiritual well-being—such as the [Limmud Festival](#) in the United Kingdom, an annual celebration of Jewish life, learning, and culture that has fostered a global network of over 80 Jewish communities around the world;
- Conceptually, through new ideas, frameworks, and strategies to address spiritual longings—such as Egyptian Muslim preacher [Amr Khaled](#)'s curriculum for spiritual growth that draws on positive psychology research; or
- Distributionally, through new pathways of discovery, access, and engagement with spiritual community and practice—such as [Conscious Kenya](#), an online hub for Kenya's wellness community.

### How spirituality operates in their society:

- Entangled, in which spirituality is woven into the fabric of daily life—as in much of Africa;
- Established, in which an authoritative religious institution is recognized and supported by the state—as in Saudi Arabia;
- Institutionalized, in which spirituality resides within formal institutions—as in the United States; and
- Interstitial, in which spirituality is a highly individualized pursuit—as on the internet. <sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This framework was developed by sociologist Nancy Ammerman to situate the ways in which spirituality operates in relationship to society and the state. The categories exist on a continuum, and they can co-exist in a given context. No place is a monolith.

All of these variables help to shape the kinds of innovations that emerge and take hold in a given context. So, too, do other macro-level forces including market capitalism, postcolonialism, secular culture, and American influence worldwide.

Above all, given our focus on the spiritually underserved, one factor stands out in contextualizing global spiritual innovation today: *the growing population of people who publicly or privately do not experience full adherence to or satisfaction from a singular religious tradition.*

There is a well-documented surge in religious “nones”—the religiously unaffiliated—[across the globe](#) over recent decades, especially in Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Israel, the United States, and Canada.<sup>15</sup> Even areas known for high rates of religiosity, such as Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, are seeing the rise of the “nones” in contexts as different as [Iraq, Tunisia, and Morocco](#).

While the composition of the “nones” has been unevenly studied globally, in the US a minority are atheist and agnostic, with the majority being “nothing in particular” and 69% of all “nones” believing in God or a higher power.<sup>16</sup> In Iran, [a recent survey of 40,000](#) people found that 78% of Iranians believe in God but only 32% identify themselves as Shiite Muslims, despite Iran’s official 99.5% Shiite census figure. Rather than strictly a secularization narrative, the rise of the “nones” is a story of declining trust in religious and institutional authority, alongside religious individualization.<sup>✿, 17</sup>

For the majority who remain affiliated, personalized forms of spirituality are evident in the continued hybridity of religious practice and identity in Latin America and Africa,<sup>✿</sup> the fluidity of religious engagement and identity throughout Asia,<sup>✳, 18</sup> the rise of the spiritual but not religious in [Australia](#), and the decline in religious attendance in the [United States](#). Spiritual (as opposed to religious) activities are having such a moment that the [Pew Research Center](#) just released its first-ever report about the state of American spirituality and the [Fetzer Institute](#) released its second in three years.<sup>♦</sup>

✿ Scholar Nicolás Viotti of Argentina describes religious individualization as the tendency for a person to build their own relationship with the sacred according to their personal preferences, experiences, and individual needs, rather than adhering to a conventionally organized religion.<sup>17</sup>

✳ It is quite common in Latin America and Africa to draw on and combine multiple religious traditions in one’s personal spiritual practice, such as praying at altars to Jesus and Catholic saints alongside Orixás from Afro-Brazilian traditions such as Ogum and Iemanjá. We also see trans-religious practice and belief in Africa such as the Mount Kenya annual pilgrimage that includes Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Rastafarians and practitioners of African traditional religions from different countries who come to the sacred mountain to pray for peace.

This context is far from universal, of course. The Middle East and North Africa continue to be overwhelmingly religious, with youth even [becoming moreso](#). Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism have been sweeping across Latin America and Africa for decades. Yet anecdotally from our time spent researching in these places, high rates of religious adherence do not mean an absence of restless grappling, spiritual seeking, and personal takes on traditional teachings.

Amidst widespread shifts in religious identity, adherence, and practice worldwide, it is a tender time for the spiritual well-being of the individual, in which macro-forces interplay with personal longings to produce a great deal of unmet need. This sets the stage for spiritual innovation, but also raises the stakes for discerning what kinds of spiritual innovations actually promote flourishing. Even groups with good intentions can cause harm and lack the training, experience, and wherewithal to address it.

How might we cultivate spiritual integrity, project sustainability, and community support for current and future efforts, so as to mitigate risk and increase the likelihood that these initiatives will meet spiritual needs for the long term?

In the pages to come, we engage this question in conversation with current themes in spiritual innovation worldwide. While these themes are not exhaustive, they point the way toward areas of promise for spiritual innovation. We explore challenges and opportunities in each area to contribute to greater spiritual well-being and overall flourishing going forward.

Across the world, high-level forces interplay with resilient, motivated innovators who are engaging the tools at their disposal to address the spiritual longings in their midst. Here are some of their innovations.

✳ The same individual in Japan might get married at a Shinto Shrine and hold their funeral at a Buddhist temple. A Thai Buddhist might engage in temple visits to make merit and then proceed to Chinese Taoist temples to offer prayers to their ancestors. In the Philippines and South Korea, some Christian and Catholic authorities caution individuals against incorporating other spiritual practices, citing potential exposure to evil. Despite these warnings, many people persist in including various folk spiritual practices. Unlike much of the West in which Abrahamic faiths promote exclusive identities, many individuals in Asia freely identify with a range of traditions. For instance, Taiwanese Buddhist nun Venerable Yifa, founder of the [Woodenfish Foundation](#), has decades of training in her Buddhist Fo Guang Shan lineage and yet freely identifies as a Taoist with Confucian influence.<sup>18</sup>

♦ [Pew Research Center](#) finds that 7 in 10 U.S. adults describe themselves as spiritual in some way, including 22% who are spiritual but not religious. Fully 83% of all U.S. adults believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body and 81% say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it.

# Four

# Global

# Themes



Technologies  
of Spirit (28)



Resistance and  
Reclamation (38)



Embodied  
Experience (50)



Secular  
Spirituality (60)



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# Technologies of Spirit:

“WhatsApp religion  
is a real thing”

ILLUSTRATION:

Alexandra Dzhiganskaya—Ukraine / Austria

*“In my own journey, I have found that spiritual innovation involves the dynamic connection of the past and future, blending the wisdom of ancient traditions with emergent technologies to create new pathways for spiritual growth.”*

# Cairo, Egypt



From cab drivers to street food vendors, everyone in Cairo seems to know of Amr Khaled. “Of course! We grew up with him!” they’ll say—sometimes smiling ruefully. With an audience of over 50 million viewers, Khaled has been called the world’s most famous Muslim television preacher. Foregoing a traditional clerical education, he grew to fame in the 1990s, teaching in everyday clothes and colloquial language to a devoted audience who bought his tapes from street corner market stalls.

Khaled’s work is part self-help psychology, part spiritual experience, and part call for moral renewal—all grounded in traditional religious concepts that confer legitimacy. His early TV shows were inspired by American televangelists, and he ushered in an age of savvy Islamic preachers and media-makers—a tradition that lives on with a new generation of YouTube preachers and TikTok creators like the Zimbabwean [Mufti Menk](#) or the American [Omar Suleiman](#).

“The big problem for the Arab world is that we don’t have an intellectual and spiritual project for the masses. Every major movement, like Wahhabism, is a reaction *against* modernity,” he says. Instead, Khaled wants his viewers to flourish *within* the modern world.

A skilled creative and media distributor, his [latest televised offering](#) is aimed at a young, global Muslim audience. Each episode features a group of youth from across the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe gathered in a circle on a beach or mountain, listening to Khaled teach. They, like Khaled’s viewers, are trying to navigate the challenges of life, and he reframes traditional Islamic practices and concepts to help them on their journeys. For instance, in an episode on how to survive life traumas and crises, he shows how the practice of Dhikr, the recitation of short remembrances and glorifications of Allah, is a step along the bridge to transform pain and difficulty to the tranquility of living with Ihsan, or a state of inner and outer excellence that comes from knowing Allah.

Now in his late 50s, Khaled is a serial innovator, consistently seeking out new technologies and sources of knowledge. For the latest series, he sought out the [VIA Institute on Character](#) in Ohio to enrich his teachings—drawing on positive psychology research to complement his instruction of Islamic wisdom. He has also traveled to India and Japan to learn how Hindu and Buddhist meditation teachers lead mantras, or the repetition of sacred words or phrases, which is a practice he has incorporated into his own guidance on television and social media.

But the quest for wide appeal can lead to pitfalls, too. He was widely panned for appearing in a chicken brand commercial and critiqued when he ran for office after the Egyptian revolution of 2011—“a mistake,” he says. “It was a crazy time.”

His vision remains, however: to help Muslims live out their faith in the 21st century using whatever tools he has at his disposal. So to turn preaching into practice, Khaled is building a network of hundreds of young “Ambassadors of Ihsan” to serve their local communities. They gather weekly on Zoom and annually for an in-person retreat, giving his work extensive reach and meaningful local depth, too. “Spirituality isn’t meant for escaping life,” he says. “It is meant to nourish it.”

*“Spirituality isn’t meant for escaping life. It is meant to nourish it.”*

– Amr Khaled





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## Technologies of Spirit

While spiritual life was online well before Covid, there is no denying the impact of the pandemic on taking spiritual innovation digital [in new ways](#). In some cases, existing roles and structures—the charismatic preacher, the healer-client relationship, the sangha—are reified and reproduced on the internet. In other instances, entirely new forms of networks and rituals are emerging thanks to social media and multinational platforms for spiritual practice.

As of 2024, there are 5.35 billion people with internet access, or 66.2% of the world's population, of which almost all—5.04 billion—are social media users. Age, income level, and the state all influence internet use in general, and engagement with spiritual content in particular.<sup>19</sup> For instance, social media is heavily monitored and filtered in China, and religious and spiritual content is banned altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Though unevenly distributed, the internet is now a part of everyday life for the global majority, and poised to reach billions more within the decade.<sup>21</sup> This makes it a fascinating new avenue for spiritual innovation, as well as an unwieldy environment rife with ethical questions about how to determine spiritual value and legitimacy; the role of artificial intelligence in spiritual life; what to do when spiritual communities rely on social media spaces that are commodified and surveilled; and many more.

One of the most interesting questions is about the role digital spiritual innovation might play as part of a broader movement toward spiritual well-being. As we saw in the ministry of Soin Fujio, zazen in the metaverse complements deep embodied work in person. Not everything will go online. But as virtual reality and artificial intelligence continue to evolve and the line between “online” and “in person” becomes blurrier, the importance of engaging thoughtfully with digital spiritual innovation becomes all the greater.<sup>22</sup>

*One of the most interesting questions is about the role digital spiritual innovation might play as part of a broader movement toward spiritual well-being.*

## Trends

### Spiritual influencers

Gurus, priests, imams, monks, and other spiritual teachers have found a new global stage through social media. The virtual world has dissolved the barriers of distance and formal accreditation, allowing charisma and content to define influence. This digital revolution has also democratized spiritual guidance, enabling a single voice from one corner of the world to echo across continents, resonating with those it might never have reached otherwise.

From Amritapuri Ashram in India, Mata Amritanandamayi—known as [Amma the Hugging Saint](#)—shares her daily livestream with devotees all over the world. From a Pure Land Buddhist temple in Japan, third generation monk and makeup artist [Kodo Nishimura](#) offers pastoral care to LGBTQ+ youth on Instagram. “Religious coaches” [Deive Leonardo](#) and [Claudio Duarte](#) are two of the faces of the evangelical movement sweeping Brazil via social media with their focus on spirituality in relationships and family life, and Venezuelan New Age astrologer [Mia Astral](#) empowers women worldwide with her unique combination of meditation, Ayurvedic nutrition, and Jewish mysticism.

In the United States, spiritual influencers have become so ubiquitous that they can be found across virtually every religious tradition and spiritual niche, eliciting [ranking lists](#) from marketing firms and [critiques](#) in major news outlets. Some global organizations are even specializing in training spiritual leaders in the use of technology to increase their impact.

For instance, [iMisión](#) of Spain, with the tagline, *Evangelizing on the Internet since 2012*, trains Catholic priests and lay people with targeted courses on evangelizing via TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. One of their co-founders and teachers is a Nicaraguan nun named Xiskya Valladares, a social media influencer known as the “Tweet Nun” who provides [spiritual guidance](#) and theological insight to her 700k+ followers on TikTok.

### Digital ritual

All over the world, spiritual practitioners are engaging new tools to facilitate rituals, practices, and journeys. In the words of scholar Dheepa Sundaram, “WhatsApp religion is a real thing.”<sup>23</sup>

In Singapore, the Taoist Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple introduced a [‘praying online’ initiative](#) in spring 2020 that is typical of a Covid-era innovation: For two hours a day, devotees could go to the temple’s Facebook page to [view the main altar](#) of the temple and pray to the tutelary deity, Cheng Huang Gong. They could leave online messages and emoticons. A monitor was placed in front of the deity so he could ‘view’ the messages. Even once temples reopened, this kind of innovation permanently changed the dynamics between devotees and place-based religious institutions around the world.

In China, many churches have no permanent physical location in order to avoid detection. They often leverage digital tools like Zoom to host online services—and many surpass Zoom’s 1,000 person limit, with spillover onto YouTube for those who can use a virtual private network,

or VPN. In another form of digital ritual, the Beijing Zion Church started a practice called “walking worship.” The organizers would record the choir singing and the preaching ahead of time and send it out. Then on Sundays, the Pastor would ask church members to listen to the recording while taking a walk through the park alone or with a small group of family and friends. Since it is normal to walk in a park, no one would be able to say this was illegal. When Covid hit and the community was forced to gather virtually, they were already well-prepared for decentralized, virtual gatherings.<sup>24</sup>

But the innovation goes even further, with Indian platforms like [Shubhpuja](#) (self-proclaimed “Uber of God”) and [ePuja](#) running online marketplaces where devotees can order pujas, or Hindu blessings, for purposes ranging from victory in legal cases to relief from incurable diseases. In the case of Shubhpuja, the individual conducts the ritual themselves, with Shubhpuja [sending instructions](#) about the auspicious time, materials to procure (sugar, small idol, milk, etc.) and preparation (clean eating, no alcohol) “to make the most of the incredible healing energy that will be transmitted during the puja.” By contrast, ePuja allows the individual to [order a puja](#) to be done on their behalf in any of 3,600 temples across India. This is especially powerful for people living in the Indian diaspora, for whom distance from the sacred geography of India can be seen as a spiritual disadvantage.<sup>25</sup>

Start-ups have also begun to capitalize on the potentials of virtual reality for more immersive ritual experience. [VR Devotee](#), with its striking 360-degree visuals, got a powerful start and surged during Covid, but was not able to survive post-pandemic.

### Practitioner platforms

You have likely heard of US-based, global meditation and prayer apps such as [Insight Timer](#), [Hallow](#), and [Pray.com](#), each of which features a range of voices and guides. These are part of a wider trend of practitioner platforms with principles like democratized access, participatory learning, and personal agency for the app user to explore at their own pace and in their own way.

Online platforms include communities of practice such as [O Lugar](#)—in which more than 1,000 participants from 20 countries come together via Zoom to try different practices that support transformation—as well as educational hubs such as [Advaya](#), which features a faculty of more than 300 offering courses on themes of meaning, connection and purpose.

While some practitioner platforms are wide-ranging in content, they can also be highly customized, such as educational platform [Umbanda EAD](#). Rodrigo Queiroz created Umbanda EAD with the aim of democratizing access to knowledge about the Umbanda tradition, an Afro-Brazilian religion that is traditionally transmitted orally. He and his team created the first postgraduate specialization in Theology, Cosmology, and Afro-Brazilian Culture. Through the Umbanda EAD platform, they have already reached over 40,000 people through ready-made and self-instructional courses, live online training, and rituals. According to Queiroz, people are seeking community environments for dialogue and learning that “transcend dogmatic space” with “an investigative spirit.”<sup>26</sup>

## Challenges

Much of digital spiritual innovation is completely inextricable from market capitalism. A puja to help you [conceive a child](#) on ShubhPuja, mentioned above, will run you 31,000 INR (\$485 USD), well over the average monthly salary in India.<sup>27</sup>

Virality is king, prompting content like this [TikTok exorcism short](#) from Australian Priest Fr. Sam French, and appearances are rewarded, as the handsome Filipino priest Fr. Ferdinand Santos [discovered](#) when he went viral for his looks. In short, the attention economy fundamentally shapes digital spiritual innovations, incentivizing individual innovators to try to find ways in which to share their gifts with attention- and profit-seeking behaviors.

Toward this end, spiritual innovators are nudged toward hyper-individualized models of conducting and sustaining their work: as internet influencers, wellness practitioners, and [spiritual coaches](#) recruiting clients online. They rely on word-of-mouth or digital marketing strategies, but often lack resources to invest in marketing tools to increase their outreach. For platforms that connect teachers with students, such as [GroWin](#) and Umbanda EAD, the reputation of the teachers on the platform can attract participants, but often this too comes down to an individual's "brand." In this way, digital spiritual innovations can reinforce the "cult of personality" dynamic that is already a hurdle in many spiritual communities, in which the messenger takes precedence over the message.

The ethics of the internet are also challenging. Amidst the beauty of democratized access to spiritual offerings, we see the perils of a wide open field in which it can be very difficult for an individual seeker to discern the quality or legitimacy of a given teacher, healer, product, or program, especially when most come at a cost.

*Much of digital spiritual innovation is completely inextricable from market capitalism.*

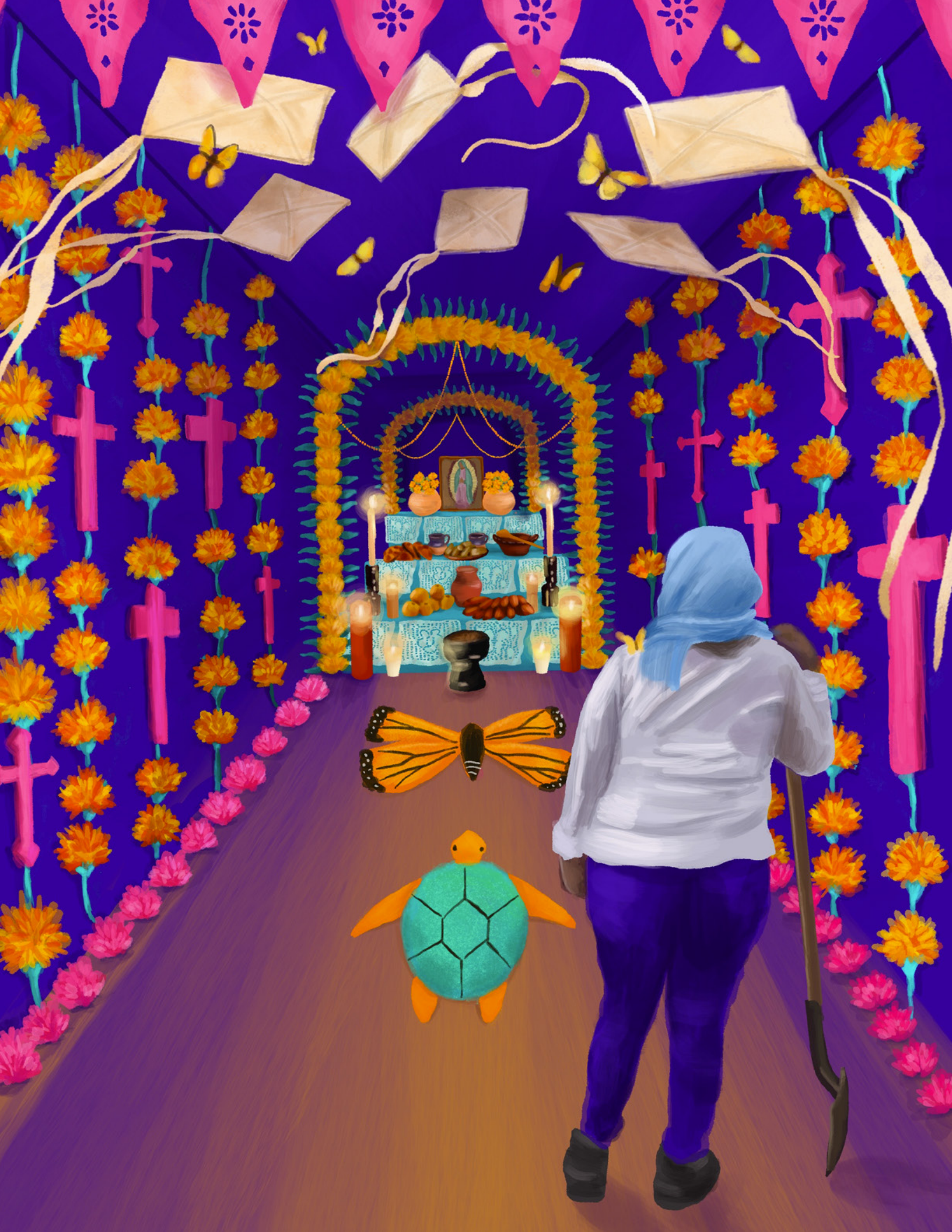
## Opportunities

We see an opportunity for a profound shift in the economics of digital spiritual innovation. At the moment, spiritual innovators cite resources as the primary obstacle to their work, and many in the online space end up turning to the fee-for-service or influencer models that our economies seem to demand. What might we learn from across religious denominations, wisdom traditions, and elsewhere, about how to financially support a network of people nurturing soul and spirit? How might this wisdom be remixed for today? For instance, what if practitioners could be tagged as contributing to spiritual well-being, and recipients could voluntarily tithe to a pooled fund that supports all of their work? How else could we imagine reorganizing the spiritual internet to take some of the burden of hustle off of the lone innovator and support viable careers in this field? We hope to join others in dedicating ourselves to the question of economic imagination in service of flourishing.

We also see vast opportunities for further breakthroughs in how we use technology to support spiritual life. An [AI priest in Kyoto](#) who recites the Heart Sutra is more performance art than pastoral care, but the next decade could change all that, as projects like [Gita GPT](#) and [Father Justin AI](#) suggest. We have barely scratched the surface of what may be possible with AI in terms of personalizing meditation, prayer, contemplation, ritual, and spiritual companionship, among much else. Likewise, potentials for group worship and community gathering in virtual reality are just

getting off the ground. We can see glimmers of collective effervescence in moments like the world record-setting concert by Norwegian singer [AURORA](#) inside the game [Sky: Children of the Light](#), where one of the 10,000 virtual concert-goers commented: "Felt like heaven."

Lastly, we hope to help support the development of digital spiritual innovation as part of a larger field dedicated to spiritual well-being. This starts with uplifting and amplifying, primarily through storytelling, the excellent work already being done in hopes that it will usher in even more that is truly healing, liberating, and transformative. Over time, it could also mean developing a set of questions or benchmarks, grounded in the science of spiritual well-being, which practitioners across and outside of religious traditions could use to help guide the efficacy of their work (ie, is this practice in service of spiritual well-being and how do I know?), and which could also be used by seekers to help find aligned teachers, healers, elders, community leaders, and guides to support their spiritual lives.



# Resistance and Reclamation: “What is sacred is not for sale”

ILLUSTRATION:

Sitalin Sánchez—Mexico

*“This artwork explores how rampant violence in Mexico has transformed Day of the Dead. Altars are bestowed with new symbols, icons, and images amidst constant brutality. This festivity, traditionally oriented to commemorating the dead, has been reconfigured as a space to collectively grieve and devise survival strategies.”*

# São Gonçalo, Brazil

It is Sunday morning in São Gonçalo, Brazil—a city known for its footballers, heavy industry, and violent crime. Though the streets are still sleepy, people are buzzing in and out of the evangelical storefront churches that dot every block. Not far from the early praise music stands a different house of worship, hidden behind a whitewashed wall. This is a terreiro: a domestic temple where mãe de santo Bianca de Xango, a Candomblé priestess, gathers her community.

Candomblé is one of the many diasporic religions that evolved out of colonial oppression. Forbidden from practicing their own religion, Yoruba, Bantu and other West African peoples layered the Catholicism of their European enslavers onto their own indigenous practices and divinities to create a hybridized religious form that survives in a distributed network across Brazil and beyond. De Xango's altar features an array of saints and orixás (deities), while sacred plants sit in the center of the room. But the spiritual mixing doesn't stop there. She also leads Umbanda rituals, involving spiritual possession, with a small curtain being drawn across the room to conceal, or spotlight, the relevant statues and icons.

Today, de Xango has gathered family and friends to celebrate the festival of Iemanjá, the goddess of the sea and mother of all orixás, who in Brazil is frequently associated with the Virgin Mary. Along the Brazilian coastline, people gather dressed in white to bring [flowers or food offerings to Iemanjá](#). Having endured state suppression for centuries, the tides have changed as Iemanjá celebrations in tourist hotspots like Ipenema beach are now encouraged by government cultural institutions, with large branded posters promoting the fact.

Even though only a small minority of Brazilians practice Candomblé, there is growing curiosity about pre-colonial spiritual practices and rituals worldwide, and nowhere is that reclamation of indigeneity more evident than in the explosion of interest in plant medicine. Foreign tourists flock to urban retreat centers and Amazonian villages across Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil for powerful spiritual experiences using mind-altering plant medicines like ayahuasca.

Philippe Bandeira de Mello runs Arca da Montanha Azul, another home-based ritual space, where he's hosted sacred plant ceremonies for decades. Like de Xango, his altar combines religious figures from across traditions, and he draws on Jungian psychotherapy as much as Amazonian indigenous practices.



In a religious system without institutional hierarchies, innovation can spread quickly but quality control can suffer. Alonso del Rio, founder of Ayahuasca Ayllu in Taray, Peru, explains: “When ceremonies travel all over the world, there is a much faster expansion than the capacity to self-regulate...People don't realize the important relationship between the power the plant gives [them] and the rigor and discipline needed so that the power does not create harm. The majority of people use it for their own benefit, with unfortunate consequences.” And as Western [capital is injected into a plethora of psychedelic startups](#), these questions of integrity are likely to grow.

Back in the terreiro in São Gonçalo, mãe de santo Bianca de Xango points to the cupboards stacked high with plates and bowls, which she's used during community meals and celebrations for decades. Amidst the current cultural fascination with pre-colonial spiritualities, de Xango reminds us that so long as her people are faced with repression, poverty, and violence, the heart of her spiritual work remains to nurture a community of care.



*So long as her people are faced with repression, poverty, and violence, the heart of her spiritual work remains to nurture a community of care.*

## Resistance and Reclamation

Spiritual innovation is fundamentally shaped by history and the state. States that repress or impose religion tend to have innovations of resistance.<sup>28</sup> Countries with colonial histories tend to have innovations of reclamation.<sup>29</sup> Given the violent repression of religions practiced by indigenous and enslaved people and their descendants in many colonized nations, resistance and reclamation frequently coexist.\*

Throughout the world, there is a turn toward indigeneity, a yearning for ancestral wisdom that is often accompanied by a movement to explore practices of healing, embodiment, and connection to nature. Inspiring spiritual innovations are emerging in opposition to dominant power structures, and some are beginning to move from the margins to the mainstream—along with a host of timely questions about how innovations in this space relate to lineage; how teachers and leaders are authorized; and how to counteract commodification, among others. How might the collective energy of resistance and reclamation be galvanized to support healing and liberation at the level of individuals, communities, and the systems in which we live?

*How might the collective energy of resistance and reclamation be galvanized to support healing and liberation?*

\* Resistance and reclamation also co-exist when dominant or state expressions of religion are exclusionary. For instance, this [Quran School for Trans Muslims](#) is resisting discrimination against LGBTQ people in Indonesian society, which is 87% Muslim, while also providing a place for transgender Muslim women to reclaim their religious identity and practice.

## Trends

### Underground innovation

Since 2013 and the rule of Xi Jinping, China has ranked among the world's most religiously restrictive governments, promoting atheism and “sinification” and variously subjecting leaders and practitioners of Islam, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism to arrest, internment, surveillance, torture, and re-education.<sup>30</sup> Spiritual activity that is neither officially religious nor seen as a form of Chinese cultural heritage is often labeled as a “superstition” or “evil cult” and its leaders and practitioners can face persecution.<sup>31</sup> But, as sociologist Fenggang Yang explained to us, “When you force people to do things underground, all kinds of innovation happens. When the state cracks down on a religion, the social energy behind such practices does not disappear, but instead resurfaces in other forms.”<sup>32</sup>

Hence what Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson describes as “a spiritual revival [in China] similar to the Great Awakening in the United States in the nineteenth century.”<sup>33</sup> From the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims converging on the Goddess Temple atop Beijing's sacred [Mount Miaofeng](#) each year, to the ongoing [Confucius craze](#) that has led to communities of urbanites developing new rituals around Confucian texts, to the extraordinary growth of underground Protestant churches, the story of spiritual innovation in China is one of remarkable resilience and creativity in the face of a challenging political environment.

One innovative strategy in China's restrictive environment is to cast spiritual spaces in another light to avoid the scrutiny of the state. Shenzhen's utopian [art cities](#) and DaLi's [tea villages](#), promoted for art and culture, become bastions for the spiritually-inclined. Temples are retrofitted as folklore museums, tourist destinations, and heritage sites, downplaying their religious function in favor of historic and economic significance.<sup>34</sup> And in urbanized rural areas, spirit mediums set up hidden ritual shrines in garages and broom closets of sanctioned Taoist temples.<sup>35</sup>

## Pre-colonial reclamation

It is hard to overstate the impact of Western European colonialism, including slavery, massacring of indigenous groups, and forced migration and conversion, on contemporary religious life. From Vietnam to Gabon, there is a drive to cast off the fetters of colonial influence and return to indigenous spiritualities. But for new generations in an increasingly global world, that work comes with layers of complexity. What does it look like to reclaim pre-colonial or indigenous spiritual roots and recontextualize them for the modern era?

One compelling example can be found in New Zealand. Traditional Māori healing was banned by the New Zealand Parliament in the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907, leading to much of the tradition being lost. But a few elders took their wisdom underground and carried it through generations until the ban was repealed in 1962. Since then, there has been a [nationwide resurgence](#), inspired by renowned healers like Papa Hohepa Delamere, known as Papa Joe, who taught many healers of today. Now, both Māori and non-Māori people are seeking care and getting trained at clinics like [Te Arateatea Whare Hauora](#) in Christchurch.

By contrast, in South Africa, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957, which banned any form of African religious practice, has not yet been repealed. Despite the ban, the University of Cape Town-South Africa has been prompted by an alarming rise in anxiety, depression, and suicides among students to incorporate traditional healers—including diviners, herbalists, midwives, and ancestral guides—into its Department of Student Affairs for the first time.<sup>36</sup>

Young South Africans are not alone in seeking connection to ancestral spiritual practice. Among younger generations of African descendents, there is a global re-emergence and trans-nationalization of African spiritualities whose practice had previously been demonized and suppressed by European slave owners and colonists. These traditions—most of which have now been syncretized with Catholicism—include Santería in Puerto Rico and Cuba; Obeah and Myal in Jamaica; Macumba, Umbanda, and Candomblé in Brazil; Hoodoo in the United States; Vodou in Haiti and New Orleans; and Bwiti in Gabon.<sup>37</sup> Young people often embrace them in a quest for [holistic healing, solace, and liberation](#), as well as for their emphasis on nurturing feminine energy and collective action, in contrast to a world order characterized by force, masculinity, and self-interest.<sup>38</sup>

That focus on the collective is something that Rodrigo Rubido identifies as crucial to understanding this phenomenon. Rubido, who developed pedagogies for the [Elos Institute](#) in Brazil that are inspired by indigenous ancestral knowledge, explains that there was historically a strong sense of community among indigenous peoples in the region. The individual was embedded within the collective, including other people, the natural world, and the cosmos. This ethos is still present in many indigenous contexts today. But in broader post-colonial society, the development of individualistic consciousness has led to a loss of connection with the whole. People may appear richer on the outside, but they feel poor on the inside. This leads them on a spiritual quest, looking for deeper meaning in their lives and turning to spiritual practices. “Many people come to us because they feel lost,” says Rubido.<sup>39</sup>

## Shamanism

One of the most consistent forms of indigenous practice being explored and reinterpreted by new generations is shamanism. Shamanism has many definitions and expresses differently across traditions and contexts, but generally refers to engaging with the spirit realm in pursuit of individual and collective healing, especially through trance states and rituals such as chanting, music, drumming, and dancing.<sup>40</sup>

In some cases, the rise in shamanism is driven by a hunger among indigenous young people to connect with their ancestors’ wisdom and practice. For instance, in Taiwan, young Amis tribe members like Kulas Umo [are being trained](#) as “sikawasay,” shamanic healers, in a surge of interest: there are only 100 sikawasay left, and while 60% of them are over 60 years old, 30% are under 40, and that number is increasing. Our research found a similar rise of young shamans in South Korea and Vietnam.

Yet “neo-shamanism” goes far beyond indigenous communities. Neo-shamanism refers to new forms of shamanism, especially when practiced as a type of New Age spirituality, without connection to traditional shamanic societies.<sup>41</sup> In the Philippines, for example, there is a dynamic tension between traditional healers, or *albularyos*, and a [new internet generation](#) of largely self-appointed, self-organized neo-shamans.

[Hong Kali](#), a queer feminist South Korean shaman, or *mudang*, in their 30s, is emblematic of a new generation of shamans trying to mix tradition and innovation with integrity. Kali, who uses they/them pronouns, underwent a “naerim-gut,” a traditional initiation ritual at Mount Gyeryong, but they prefer to work through their [YouTube channel](#) rather than sit in a temple reading fortunes. They see their purpose as a shaman as “lifting the burden of fear,” which they do through their one-on-one healing work during the week and through social activism on the weekends, performing shamanic rites at demonstrations for LGBTQ and women’s rights. They say that most people who come to them are dealing with depression and its surrounding stigma. Kali sees themselves as helping to create a bridge between these young people and the sources required for their healing.<sup>42</sup>

## Challenges

The need for resistance and reclamation is inextricable from the policies, practices, and attitudes around the world that continue to marginalize and suppress indigenous communities and minority religious groups. Working in this context makes all aspects of spiritual innovation more difficult, whether it is the safety and livelihood of innovators, many of whom carry ancestral trauma and endure structural oppression, or the legality of their practices and access to their lineages.

In 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen issued the government's first official apology to Indigenous Taiwanese, and she has since worked to address gaps in health care for Indigenous Taiwanese living in rural areas.<sup>43</sup> Similar [apologies have been issued](#) by officials in at least 14 nations, almost all in the last two decades, and with varying degrees of action being taken to redress historic and ongoing injustices. While spiritual innovations of resistance and reclamation are contributing to individual and community flourishing, systems-level flourishing depends on the real and deep work of acknowledgment, repair, and structural transformation to be done in nations worldwide.

In terms of spiritual integrity, there are a number of inherent tensions to this moment of indigenous resurgence. On the one hand, neo-shamanism is leading to personal agency, ancestral connection, and healing among young people in a world that can feel out of control.

On the other hand, some of today's healers and shamans are drawing indiscriminately on global indigenous wisdom and practice, absent ties to community or lineage, and often [for a price](#). This may not be nefarious in intent, but it does reflect a lack of historical understanding, ethical guidance, and community accountability.

“The power of interpretation of that wisdom should stay with the people, in their territories,” says Maxakali philosopher Cristine Takuá. “What is sacred is not for sale.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, neo-shamanism co-exists and, to some extent, overlaps with the massive, global phenomenon of contemporary witchcraft, tarot, and astrology (not to mention crystal healing, astral projection, and psychic mediumship) among young people, most of which plays out online. The hashtag [#witchtok](#) on TikTok has more than 54 billion views. Ayla Skinner in the United Kingdom, known as [Witch in the Wilderness](#) on TikTok, says witchcraft makes her and others feel empowered: “It gives people a real sense of individuality and the power to do things themselves.”<sup>45</sup> But while there is a sprawling peer community online, there is scant connection to lineage or personal accountability unless the individual goes looking. [Eryn Angellé](#), a hoodoo practitioner on TikTok, [calls this out](#) regularly. She says that trying spells without understanding their history and cultural origins is like having “a tree with no roots.”<sup>46</sup>

The risk is for neo-shamanism, similarly, to reify a kind of rootless individualism—or at worst, spiritual narcissism. The movement in the West over recent decades toward neo-esoteric beliefs, “New Age” spiritualities, and alternative spiritual movements, while grounded in personal reclamation of spiritual life, has often become more about care of self than care of others. This is an aberration of the very ethic from which many of these practices emerge, and it will likely require significant coordinated effort to counteract.

Any attempt to foster the evolution of post-colonial spiritual innovations toward flourishing will require contending with the macro-level forces of our world today, starting with the neo-colonial ethos itself—especially as propagated by the United States—which manifests as a blend of individualism and market capitalism that now informs global understandings of religion and spirituality.<sup>47</sup> The New Age movement, once born of counter-cultural ideals, has seeded a global wellness industry worth [USD \\$5.6 trillion](#) which has reached social elites from China<sup>\*</sup>,<sup>48</sup> to Saudi Arabia.<sup>♦</sup> Resourcing expensive and cosmopolitan lifestyles may seem a far cry from resistance and reclamation, but the risk is that many current spiritual innovations will take a similar turn without intentional support.

🌀 Two African experts spoke about the distinction between spirituality and religion. According to Dr. Eunice Kamaara from Kenya, spirituality is about everyday relationships, with oneself, others, nature, and God, and is intrinsic to the human being, while religions constitute organized practices that are man-made. Dr. Charles Prempeh of Ghana, however, argues that spirituality as defined by current spiritual trends in Africa, divorced from mainstream religions, is a neoliberalization of religions that seeks to harvest individualistic engagements with God or Spirit for profit.<sup>47</sup>

✳️ Affluent urbanites in China, dissatisfied with prevailing ‘Xi Jinping thought,’ are actively seeking deeper philosophies to enrich their lives. Some are turning to psychology and spirituality, following thought leaders and spiritual coaches who provide guidance through books, courses, and online platforms.<sup>48</sup>

♦ The lavish [AIUla Wellness Festival](#) in the Saudi Arabian desert is a good example.



## Opportunities

The growing interest in pre-colonial spiritual practices suggests that new forms of theological education and training for spiritual leadership are needed and would receive interest, if tailored to the needs of these young practitioners. We envision new organizations and networks emerging to provide such education, training, and accompaniment to help today's healers put their work in service of spiritual well-being.

It will be important for any such efforts to be grounded in local communities and lineages, and it would also be exciting for them to connect globally. We imagine trainings that are specifically designed for digital practitioners, given the proliferation of this work online. Innovators and elders across contexts could work together to address key questions of spiritual integrity, project sustainability, and community support for the ongoing work of spiritual healing and liberation.

Part of the turn toward ancestral practices like tarot and astrology is borne of a distrust and disenchantment with religious institutions. In Ireland, for instance, where the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church has been uprooted in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, spiritual seekers are returning to an indigenous spiritual tradition that has a strong ecological core, but simultaneously struggling with the loss of the “shared certainties of a common religious affiliation,” explain scholars Bernadette Flanagan and Michael F. O’Sullivan.<sup>49</sup> There is a real opportunity to support young seekers in reintegrating the disparate parts of their spiritual lives into coherent—if personal—systems of belief and practice, ideally by creating spiritual community settings in which they are not alone with their questions. What might future spiritual communities look like, if they were to be grounded in principles of spiritual well-being while embracing participants’ diverse practices and beliefs?

Finally, we see opportunities for innovations of resistance and reclamation within religious and spiritual movements to lead to greater inclusivity. In Indonesia, where conservatives often use the Quran to discriminate against LGBTQ people, Al-Fatah [Quran School for Trans Muslims](#) provides a place for transgender Muslim women to reclaim their religious identity while deepening their study of the Quran. In contrast to prevailing forms of Hinduism in India, in which only Brahmin men are priests, [Linga Bhairavi temple](#) at Sadhguru’s Isha Yoga Center brings together women priests from different castes, religions, and parts of the world to enter the inner sanctum and worship the goddess—even when [menstruating](#).<sup>50</sup> In China, women are actively working to expand and reimagine their role in Taoism, leveraging the scriptural basis for gender equality inherent in the yin/yang philosophy.<sup>51</sup> And [Queer Yeshiva](#) in the United Kingdom—inspired by [SVARA](#) in the United States— is breaking open Talmud study to provide radically inclusive Jewish learning through an explicitly Queer lens. While these glimmers of change are exciting, there is a long road ahead to create a world in which everyone has full access to transformative spiritual community and practice, regardless of who they are and where they live.

*What might future spiritual communities look like, if they were to be grounded in principles of spiritual well-being while embracing participants’ diverse practices and beliefs?*



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# Embodied Experience: “Felt like heaven”

ILLUSTRATION:

Onyinye Iwu—Nigeria / United Kingdom

*“This illustration is based around Odinani/Odinala cosmology, the indigenous traditional belief system practiced by the Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria of which I am part. It depicts connection to the natural elements, ‘chi’ or a personal God, ‘ndichie’ or ancestors, and ‘Chukwu’ the supreme God.”*

# Kraków, Poland



With headlamps, wooly hats, and torso-sized wooden crosses tied to their backs, a group of young adults heads out into the night. It is snowing in early April, but over 100,000 Catholics across the region are braving the cold and taking part in the [Extreme Way of the Cross](#)—a popular new practice that seeks to help them deepen their faith.

Started in 2009 by Fr. Jacek Stryczek, a keen outdoorsman and Catholic priest, the practice begins with a Mass held on the evening of the Friday before Palm Sunday—the beginning of Christianity’s Holy Week. Then, participants walk through the night for 40 kilometers or more to a holy site like a shrine, basilica, or wayside chapel. The nighttime journey is taken in silence, interrupted only by reading aloud the spiritual reflections prepared by church leaders while kneeling for each Station of the Cross.

Originally designed to engage young men, the practice has far exceeded the initial vision. Tapping into a cultural interest in health and fitness, the Extreme Way of the Cross is part-workout and part-devotional journey, inspired by the traditional 14 Stations of the Cross (itself an 18th century Franciscan innovation). Perhaps most interestingly, in a culture fixated on gratification, image-management, and wealth, the Extreme Way of the Cross illustrates a deeper desire for voluntary hardship, authentic experience, and simple living.

The organizers lean into this stark contrast. “The Extreme Way of the Cross is nothing like traditional pilgrimages, where it’s safe, where there’s singing, [and] a priest to look after you,” reads the website. “The Extreme Way of the Cross means a dark night. And struggling to overcome your weaknesses.” As the practice has spread to more than 20 countries, this counter-cultural innovation seems to be striking a chord.

“Always, at every station, I feel great closeness, grace, and love: immense love,” [explains one participant](#), Ania, who is taking part in her fifth pilgrimage.

The Extreme Way of the Cross demands significant commitment, yet allows for a rich personal experience. Pilgrims can walk any route they choose, as long as it fulfills the core requirements. Some walk for over 100 kilometers. They can walk alone, or in small groups of up to ten, and each person constructs their own wooden cross to carry.

Bridging tradition and innovation, communal experience and religious individualization, the Extreme Way of the Cross is meant to push participants to face physical demands they have never faced before. In this process, explains spokesperson Fr. Matthew Tarczyński, “you discover your own limits...and meet God.”



*“You discover your own limits...  
and meet God.”*

*– Fr. Matthew Tarczyński*



## Embodied Experience

As more of spiritual life plays out online, we simultaneously see a growing quest for direct, embodied experience of the divine. Especially popular are experiences in which individuals can engage in personal devotion as part of a community—and especially while being in nature.

Plant medicine journeys, pilgrimage, spiritual retreats, and festivals are chief among the experiences that are galvanizing spiritual innovation globally. In the face of urbanization and climate destruction, ecospirituality is on the rise, and new forms of devotion are emerging based on the principle of spiritual connection in and through the natural world.

## Trends

### Plant medicine

At the heart of the plant medicine boom, at best, is reverence for the spiritual power of psychedelic plants and the indigenous knowledge and practices surrounding them. Various indigenous cultures across the Americas and Africa have long used plant-based psychedelics like psilocybin, peyote, ayahuasca, and iboga for spiritual and healing purposes. These practices are deeply embedded in their cultural traditions, often involving ceremonies and rituals passed down through generations. This traditional use has clashed with legal systems and been repressed by dominant religions, leading to government bans and restrictions.

Will the [ecovillage movement](#) have more success than the [Transcendentalists](#)? Is there greater healing to be found in Bali, Tulum, and Varanasi than at home? Are [Beyoncé](#) and [Taylor Swift](#) concerts today’s revivals? The impulse toward utopian community, sacred geography, and collective effervescence is age-old, but today’s quest is both propelled and facilitated by an increasingly interconnected, disenchanted, and enchantment-seeking world.

The emergence of plant medicine as an area of spiritual innovation is multifaceted and complex, particularly because it is rooted in indigenous communities while spreading through channels of dominant culture including market capitalism, educational and research institutions, media outlets, the tech sector, and the tourist and pharmaceutical industries—even as it remains illegal in many parts of the world.

The Church of the Santo Daime, a syncretic religion founded in the 1930s by Raimundo Irineu Serra, a descendant of African enslaved people in Brazil, serves as a good example of this complexity. It has spread throughout [Western Europe](#) and beyond, especially over the last two decades, as well as [attracting foreign tourists](#) to Brazil. Its central practice is ceremonies in which participants dress in white, drink ayahuasca tea sacramentally, dance, sing hymns, and seek to open their hearts to insight, peace, and connection with God and the universe. Ayahuasca is known as Santo Daime, or Holy Daime.”\*

Or consider the work of Master POPO, born Landri Ekomie-Obame, an African spiritual leader and teacher of Gabonese origin who is disseminating the Bwiti tradition, which uses the Iboga plant to induce an altered state of consciousness for the purpose of healing. Master POPO originated the “Etame Abiale” ritual, meaning the “Source of a new birth”, to adapt the Bwiti tradition to Latin America and the Western world. He integrated innovative elements such as a lower, gradual dosage of the plant, spiritual world music, and a new therapeutic framework, while retaining the fundamental principles of the tradition. Participants, he says, “return dazzled, reassured, with a new energy—a new strength to face life.”<sup>52</sup>

Science is increasingly seen as a legitimizing force, supporting the understanding, credibility, and visibility of plant medicine, especially as it proliferates in secular settings in the West where initiatives like [Tam Integration](#) offer psychedelic integration coaching, circles, and events, and burgeoning practices like [psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy](#) depend on legal victories to go mainstream. Leaders across the globe, including the [Ayllu Ayahuasca Institute](#) and [Takiwasi Center](#) in Peru, are investing in scientific research to better comprehend how sacred plants impact health and consciousness.\*

*“[Participants] return dazzled, reassured, with a new energy—a new strength to face life.”*

*– Master POPO*

\* Dai-me means “give me” in Portuguese. The phrase, Dai-me força, dai-me amor (“give me strength, give me love”) recurs in hymns.

\* Both the Ayllu Ayahuasca Institute and the Takiwasi Center specialize in using sacred plants to address addiction and mental health issues.

## Pilgrimage

More than 440,000 pilgrims walked the Camino de Santiago in 2023, double the number from ten years before.<sup>53</sup> The 1,200-year-old Christian pilgrimage route to the tomb of the apostle St. James at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain is having a resurgence, especially from non-Spanish pilgrims, spawning an industry of [podcasts](#), films, books, and blogs, and a [tourist boom](#) to the local economy along the path. While some pilgrims are Christian and attach specific religious significance to the journey, many are not. It is an exercise in physical endurance, mental health, and community connection, and often comes with an additional, overtly spiritual purpose: pilgrims walk the Camino in times of transition, [questioning](#), and loss.<sup>54</sup> The journey has developed a reputation for supporting reflection and meaning-making for journeyers irrespective of religious affiliation.

The Camino phenomenon is part of a worldwide uptick in pilgrimage, reflecting a growing interest in spiritual journeys and motivated by factors like modern travel accessibility, increased global awareness, and a desire to be in nature and escape digital life.<sup>55</sup> Whether it is journeying to the home [temple of Mazu](#), the patron goddess of seafarers, in southern China; visiting some of 80,000 shrines in Japan to [collect Goshuin](#), or shrine stamps; or following the [Pilgrim Paths](#) of Ireland to holy sites such as [Croagh Patrick](#), even those who are distant from formal religious structures willingly undertake demanding spiritual journeys that unite reverence, discovery, and transformation.

The integration of pilgrimage with the tourist industry is double-edged. It reanimates local geographies and economies and opens new pathways for spiritual seekers of every creed and culture to embark on journeys that were once geographically and religiously constrained. At the same time, it risks commodifying the pilgrimage experience or putting it in service of alternate agendas. Both [DHARMA](#)<sup>\*, 56</sup> in the UAE and [Jagriti Yatra](#)<sup>♦, 57</sup> in India walk this line. By contrast, US-based [Common Ground](#) maintains the spiritual purpose of pilgrimage while adapting it to new locations and secular source materials.

## Sacred destinations

Mexican scholar Angela Renée de la Torre coined the term “vectors of attraction” to describe pathways through which a given place attracts spiritual seekers. For instance, “vectors” in Mexico that draw travelers from as far as Japan include the opportunities to consume sacred plants, visit sacred sites such as ancient Mayan temples, learn about shamanism from ethnic Mexican communities, and participate in ceremonies of reconnection with natural cycles of time, such as through the Mayan calendar. Each country is different, she says, and offers different vectors of attraction.<sup>58</sup>

In China, for example, temple tourism has become one of the most popular activities for Gen-Z city-dwellers seeking respite from the demands of school and work life. Some travelers choose to stay at these temples a bit longer in search of deeper spiritual guidance. Zen Meditation has become a common tourist experience, with hundreds of Chinese temples and monasteries hosting themed meditation camps. These “sacred escapes” are now a Chinese travel trend.<sup>59</sup>

Nuonata Temple, built on the renowned Mount Lu tourist site in Jiangxi, has become particularly popular. Nuonata now offers three five-day sessions to roughly 180 people per month, specifically tailored to those with limited experience in meditation. The temple provides free meals and shelter, but requests donations at the end of the event. “Many youths I’ve spoken to live in a floaty suspension – rootless beings desperate for a sense of meaning,” says Master Chuanhua, a monk who has taught at Nuonata since 2009. “This has become prevalent in recent years.”<sup>60</sup>

The search for meaning is igniting spiritual destination events all over the world. [Limmud Festival](#) in the United Kingdom is an annual celebration of Jewish life, learning, and culture that is designed as “an immersive journey” to support education, relationships, and personal growth. In addition to the flagship festival, Limmud has fostered a global network of over 80 Jewish communities, in places as far-flung as Bogota, Moscow, Melbourne, and Shanghai, who use their [model and training](#).

Burning Man, the annual festival in the Nevada desert to which thousands ascribe [spiritual meaning](#), has also spawned a [global network](#) of “Burner” events and communities based on its [ten principles](#), which notably center around an ethic of “deeply personal participation” in a communal effort. And since 2012, the Muslim [Oasis Initiative](#) has run the [Zawiyah](#), an annual retreat in Spain, North America, and Egypt committed to “the growth of a healthy, centered and spiritually grounded community” through “an intimate holistic experience that energizes the body, uplifts the soul and nourishes the mind.”

<sup>54</sup> “My purpose in walking the Camino was to afford myself some time to consider the transition from a 42-year working career to retirement,” explained John Nardozi, an environmental engineer. “I felt called to undertake the Camino as a way of opening myself up to new adventure...the beauty of the land and the closeness that I felt with God through all of it.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Pilgrims who complete the route receive a Compostela Certificate. This memento lists the name of the pilgrim who has completed the journey, but you can also add the name of another person if you are walking [in their memory](#).

<sup>56</sup> DHARMA, founded by Charaf El Mansouri in Abu Dhabi, is a “secular pilgrimage” company with the tagline, Travel for the Why. Their vision is to unite online “tribes” who share a passion – be it surfing, mindfulness, or fashion – for in-person experiences in exciting destinations, hosted by well-known people who share their passion. Many of the trips are also sponsored by a relevant brand.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>57</sup> For more than 15 years, the nonprofit Jagriti Yatra (“yatra” means pilgrimage) has run train journeys around the coast of India for young entrepreneurs, with the tagline, “Building India through enterprise.” According to Chief Executive Officer [Ashutosh Kumar](#), their journeys explicitly draw on the ancient tradition of pilgrimage in India, and participants invariably emerge transformed. But the ultimate aim of the journey is to awaken a spirit of nation building.<sup>57</sup>

## Challenges

While touristic and otherwise commercialized forms of plant medicine journeys, pilgrimage, and festivals can evoke spiritual experiences, they are stripped of context and pathways for meaning making. In the words of Cristine Takuá, capitalism leads to the “dumbing down of spiritualities” because it “tends to turn everything into a product.”<sup>61</sup> And of course, much of destination spirituality also requires an investment of resources that most of the global population cannot afford, separating out a class of spiritual tourists.

Given the urgency of spiritual need in our world, we cannot afford to lose the rich lineages surrounding each of these practices, nor the wisdom and well-being of devoted practitioners carrying them forward. Many practitioners look with skepticism on the idea that place-based, community-centered teachings, practices, and experiences would want to expand to new audiences, much less whether they can do so with any integrity.

*Many people leave these journeys genuinely changed, eager to reorient their lives around the epiphanies and connections they find.*

*The challenge is that these experiences are incomplete on their own.*

And yet, the beauty of these experiences is that they bring people together and ignite spiritual sparks. In a time of widespread social and spiritual isolation, this is foundational. Many people leave these journeys genuinely changed, eager to reorient their lives around the epiphanies and connections they find. The challenge is that these experiences are incomplete on their own. Absent ongoing community and practice, the alternative way of being discovered in these spaces can be hard to integrate and even harder to maintain as a way of life. As one participant in Nuonata Temple’s meditation retreat admitted, the mental mindfulness she acquired through disciplined meditation vanished soon after completing the session.<sup>62</sup>

## Opportunities

We hope to help counteract the extraction and corporatization of these practices that is currently underway and at risk of even greater proliferation. We suspect that one way to do this would be to raise awareness about spiritual well-being as a category in public imagination, so that any one effort is not an isolated instance but rather part of a larger fabric of efforts for which we can galvanize support and protections from exploitation. The more that people understand their own participation in these kinds of peak experiences as just one element of a flourishing spiritual life, the more that innovations of embodied experience could start to be seen as contributing to an ecosystem of offerings that are essential to individuals, communities, and societies.

Likewise, rather than resist the scientific research and financial capital being poured into psychedelics—with the promise of more as legal restrictions continue to lift—we see an opportunity to harness this investment in support of holistic approaches to spiritual-well being that honor and learn from the broader lineages of which sacred plants are a part.

Lastly, as we work toward naming and cultivating a field of spiritual innovation, we envision that part of that process will be to engage innovators in developing support infrastructures to foster spiritual community and growth as a way of life for seekers across and outside of religious traditions. We hope to help support and disseminate a body of work that locates one-off spiritual experiences in relationship to ongoing community and discipline—wisdom that exists in many of the world’s religions and wisdom traditions, but can be out of reach for rising generations. What might it look like to support journeys of spiritual deepening that incorporate the collective while honoring each person’s individual path?

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# Secular Spirituality: “Loneliness is the new pandemic”

ILLUSTRATION:

Limoo Park—South Korea

*“This painting depicts a sunset view from the top of a mountain overlooking a city. Hiking has become one of the trends for young people in Korea after Covid. I also sometimes go up to the low mountains and feel nature in the city, and it helps my mental health.”*



# Kanyakumari, India

Five hundred aspiring entrepreneurs have arrived at India's southernmost tip. "Yaaron Chal!" they sing, belting out their anthem in Hindi while [dancing in unison](#): "Let's keep on marching! Let's go together! Let's bring change!" These young Indians have been selected from some 20,000 applicants to journey across India by rail for fifteen days on a specially chartered train. Their purpose? To learn from people around the country about their needs, and to implement the entrepreneurial skills they learn to build solutions.

Founded in 2008 by Shashank Mani, [Jagriti Yatra](#)—which translates to Journey of Awakening—now has 8,000 alumni who have shared this transformative pilgrimage-like program. Twenty-eight percent have started their own ventures, almost 60% of those in rural communities, and many more stay in frequent touch with their fellow Yatris.

Jagriti Yatra is a secular program with a nation-building goal: its tagline is "building India through enterprise". Yet its philosophy and design draw on spiritual principles. According to Chief Executive Officer Ashutosh Kumar, Jagriti Yatra intentionally learns from the ancient [tradition of pilgrimage](#) in India, recognizing that both inner and outer journeys are necessary to facilitate transformation.

Indeed, the program is designed to support the spiritual well-being of a generation often looking for something beyond themselves. Spiritual practices pepper the experience, from daily moments of silence, to small group reflection with mentors, to meditating and chanting around a 300-year-old Banyan tree, to a winter night sleeping without heat in a village in solidarity with the majority of Indians who live this way. When the ride is over, participants celebrate with a valedictory session where they get to express their growth through art and music. This rite of passage marks them with a new identity: they are Yatris now.

It is no surprise, then, that many participants come away with a heightened sense of meaning, purpose, and connection that they wish to carry forward. For its next chapter, Kumar and his team are working to establish hubs throughout India to foster ongoing collaboration and community among Yatris. They have started in Uttar Pradesh, building a support ecosystem that provides community, mentorship, and access to resources for all Yatris who come and stay. This vision is rooted in the concept of *kṣetra-sannyāsa* in Hindu scripture, in which one leaves behind a former life and goes to be in a place of energy or grace.

Back in Kanyakumari, all 500 participants visit the Vivekananda Rock Memorial honoring Swami Vivekananda, who is said to have gained enlightenment on the rock. Famously a spiritual innovator himself, Vivekananda was a key figure in introducing yoga to the West and raising awareness of Hinduism worldwide. "We go here because we want to remind everyone that spirituality is not just about becoming a monk," explains Kumar. "It is also about working for the poor, the community, the nation."



*"Spirituality is not just about becoming a monk. It is also about working for the poor, the community, the nation."*

– Ashutosh Kumar





## Secular Spirituality

In 2021, the United Arab Emirates changed its weekend from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday, in a [nod to global markets](#). (This despite the fact that Friday is customarily the day Muslims take off to worship, and that the government had moved the weekend from Thursday-Friday only a few years before.) The power of secular culture, embedded as it is with economic incentives, can be hard to keep at bay.

So-called secularity<sup>65</sup> takes different forms, interwoven with the way religion and spirituality present in different contexts (see again Nancy Ammerman's framework of entangled, established, institutional, and interstitial).<sup>64</sup> In China, secularity is mandated. In Iran, it is punished. In the US, it is protected. And in many traditional indigenous worldviews, it doesn't exist; the world is sacred.<sup>65</sup>

*Secularity is playing another role in the world today: as a seedbed for spiritual innovation.*

But secularity is playing another role in the world today: as a seedbed for spiritual innovation. From Chile to Australia, innovators are taking on spiritual longings in contexts where, for various reasons, it is not feasible, prudent, or desirable to work inside of religious spaces. Their contributions are, we believe, a vital part of this emerging movement.

<sup>64</sup> AoyamaTreehouse co-founder Thierry Porte stressed the negative associations with religion in much of contemporary urban Japan, dating back to the deep alignment of Shintoism with the state during World War II. This was one of the motivations to use the term Mindfitness as opposed to meditation.

## Trends

### Leadership development

One common secular garment for today's spiritual innovation is that of leadership development. Programs bring cohorts together for journeys of transformation, and while the frame is secular, the purpose and practices have spiritual roots. [The Mindfitness Program](#) for business leaders at AoyamaTreehouse in Tokyo, though it did not survive the pandemic, is a prototypical example.<sup>66</sup>

Raghad Fathaddin, founder of [Sangha Estidama Hub](#), grew up Muslim in Saudi Arabia with a childhood marked by spiritual questioning. Her journey led her to a deep conviction that the state of the world is nothing but a reflection of the state of the people of the world, as expressed in Surah Ar-Ra'd Verse 11 from the Qur'an: "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." This animating belief led Fathaddin to work toward healing the disconnect between individual well-being and global progress.<sup>67</sup> Sangha Estidama Hub aims to cultivate a culture of inner well-being for Saudi future leaders that aligns with global Sustainable Development Goals as well as the goals of [Saudi Vision 2030](#), integrating principles of positive psychology, emotional intelligence, and sustainability into its six-session [PERMA program](#). While influenced by spirituality, Sangha is built on an artistic and scientific foundation so as to be as far-reaching and inclusive as possible.<sup>68</sup>

In Brazil, the [Guerreiros Sem Armas](#) (Warriors without Weapons) program by the [Elos Institute](#) is a 28-day transformative experience focused on self-knowledge, collective participation, and connection with nature. Developed in collaboration with indigenous leader Kaká Werá, the program incorporates activities inspired by regional indigenous traditions without using explicitly spiritual language. It is structured around elements like Water, Fire, Air, and Earth, each linked to personal competencies, and grounded in the Guarani concept of Nhanderekó, a way of being that connects individual purpose to collective consciousness. The program has trained social change leaders from 60 countries.

Founder Rodrigo Rubido describes the decision to use words like skills training and leadership game as opposed to ritual and initiation. "At the time," he says, "we were concerned that we would either attract an audience looking to purchase a spiritual enlightenment experience—which to us is a distortion of the very essence of a sacred process—or alienate others who would turn up their noses and not participate because they considered practices religious or simply unscientific."<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, co-founders Humberto Maturana and Ximena Davila of [Matríztica](#) in Chile describe their programs as co-inspirational leadership, collaborative communication, and individual and cultural transformation, grounded in a biological-cultural understanding of human life. "The power of the spiritual experience is to be lived, not to be explained," says Davila. But she is very clear about the true aim of their school: "for people to realize that they are loving beings."<sup>70</sup>

## Personal transformation

Another secular adaptation of spiritual innovation comes in the form of apps, platforms, programs, classes, workshops, and events dedicated to personal wellbeing and growth. [Skylight](#) is a US-based app dedicated to supporting Gen Z through “spiritual self-care,” with meditations, prayers, playlists, yoga classes, and affirmations directed toward addressing fundamental health concerns including sleep, stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Their [public language](#) and in-app content stays at arms-length from religion, stating: “Whether you’re non-religious, sort of religious, or totally into your religion, we think Skylight can help your spirit thrive.” Despite this public framing, Skylight is actually a project of the Mormon-funded [Radiant Foundation](#), which describes the app as “a path toward God for the next generation.”

By contrast, [GroWin](#), out of Colombia, is not affiliated with any religion, though it promotes “a philosophy of human transformation” through courses and other content in areas such as health, love, and relationships. Laura Herrera created the GroWin platform in order to democratize wellness education by teaching students how to cultivate healthy lifestyle habits. One of Herrera’s visions is to develop AI avatars of spiritual teachers to offer 24/7 customized content and support to students—“like having Deepak Chopra accompanying you in your day-to-day life.” Herrera also plans to integrate new services to foster a sense of community among users. “The issue of loneliness is the new pandemic,” she says.<sup>71</sup>

There are many more examples of innovations in personal transformation around the world. [La Vida Integral](#), with founders from Colombia, Mexico, and Bolivia, provides “transformational tools for growth, healing and awakening,” including instruction in meditation, communication, integral theory and emotion management. [Coming Into Your Own](#), a global network for “women making changes in their lives and in the world,” supports circles of women in Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Turkey, Japan, and the US in realizing their potential through a growth path that addresses physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development. And the [African Character Initiation Programme](#) in Kenya, while rooted in Christianity, accompanies adolescents of all religious backgrounds to develop “confidence and self-esteem and empower them with values and life skills for holistic health and responsible leadership in society,” providing innovative content for physical, mental, social, and spiritual health.

## Spiritual healthcare

A powerful feature of spiritual innovation outside of religion is that it can serve secular spaces, such as healthcare settings. The Australian [Spiritual Health Association](#) uses a scientific evidence basis to advocate for spiritually inclusive healthcare. They have developed a [national model](#) for spiritual care in health that is being piloted across 11 healthcare sites around the country.<sup>72</sup> In the US, the [Chaplaincy Innovation Lab](#) is advancing chaplaincy innovation in healthcare and across sectors.

Beyond healthcare settings, there is an exciting trend of civic, educational, and [military](#) organizations beginning to recognize “spiritual health” as a critical dimension of overall health that must be addressed. Over the last few decades, we’ve seen an increase in researchers developing and statistically validating spiritual health scales that are not religion-specific, such as [this one from India](#). The World Health Organization has grappled with a spiritual dimension of health since its inception, but with increased urgency in recent years.<sup>73</sup> And the US Surgeon General, amidst crisis levels of isolation and despair in the United States, has begun [interviewing spirituality experts](#) on his podcast and even produced a [meditation series](#) in partnership with [Calm](#).

With an uptick of global interest in embodied healing practices, also comes their proliferation in secular settings. Qigong networks are experiencing a revival within the wellness industry in China, relying on [scientific research](#) to underpin their health benefits and distance themselves from the trauma of the [Falun Gong crackdown](#) in the 1990’s and the continued political suspicion around qigong movements. And especially since Covid, nurses from [Turkey](#) to [Peru](#) to [Canada](#) are learning reiki, a Japanese energy healing practice that has proliferated in the [West](#), to support their own stress management and well being. Some have also begun offering it to patients in hospital settings.<sup>74</sup>

## Challenges

Many spiritual innovations in secular settings see the need to prove the validity of their offerings through scientific research and couch them in language stripped of religious reference. This speaks to the suspicion and sometimes outright antagonism toward religion—and even spirituality—in a host of contexts throughout the world. It is a challenge if for no other reason than it constrains innovators and limits the potential benefits for participants, which could otherwise be more overtly directed toward spiritual well-being. It also risks alienating potential participants, either because they detect religious intentions masked by secular language, or because they are put off by frames of reference that *don't* include the sacred.

While the field of spirituality and health is becoming more interconnected, with conferences, institutes, and university courses, the leadership programs and personal growth content featured here tend to be siloed. In general, the landscape of spiritual innovation is highly decentralized. Anthropologist Robert Weller describes it as “thousands of local trials and errors.”<sup>75</sup> On the one hand, this can be liberating, since a wide range of people are engaging in spiritual innovation in secular spaces who might not be authorized in religious contexts or due to constraints from the state. But on the other hand, these thousands of so-called “trials” represent people’s dreams, insights, gifts, and work for the world, and the “errors” are the extinguishing of spiritual innovations that might otherwise have brought about solace, guidance, or soulful community—not to mention important learning that is lost without being shared. Greater movement self-awareness and support infrastructure will be key.

## Opportunities

Given religious disaffiliation and individualization around the world, we see promise in innovations that promote spirituality within secular frameworks that allow for personalization of belief and practice. Our hope is that explorations into the benefits of spiritual health and development, both within and beyond religious traditions, will support a cultural shift toward more innovations that are overtly spiritual and validated based on the inner experience and social outworkings of participants, as much as by scientific research. We envision a future in which such projects freely identify and honor the traditions that inform them, while also benefiting from the scientific inquiry that medical and academic settings can provide.

*We see promise in innovations that promote spirituality within secular frameworks that allow for personalization of belief and practice.*

# Where

# From

# Here



Supporting  
Spiritual  
Innovation (72)



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# Supporting Spiritual Innovation: What needs to be done

ILLUSTRATION:

Enrico Nagel—Germany / France

*“For me, spiritual innovation means the creative combination of traditional wisdom and modern technologies, the dialogue between past and future.”*

# Nairobi, Kenya

In November 2023, thousands of leaders from universities, companies, and development agencies gathered in Nairobi to attend Kenya Innovation Week. The city that launched a slew of successful startups plays host to a thriving innovation sector, with a pipeline of supportive entrepreneurial platforms, innovation prizes, and government policies.

But the experience of one such startup, [Conscious Kenya](#), a holistic wellness platform founded by Narissa Allibhai and Edgar Kimathi, illustrates the challenges for spiritual innovators. First, capital flows to spiritual innovators far less than to other sectors. Second, the systems to distribute and scale new ventures are few, as are the opportunities for leadership development, peer networks, and mentorship.

Spiritual innovators frequently respond to their own experience of a need, and was true for Allibhai. After losing her childhood best friend to cancer in 2017, she was lost in grief. Her search for practices to help process her loss led her to sound healing, an ancient healing modality that activates the body's parasympathetic nervous system through different sound frequencies. She delved deep into the practice, picking up the bansuri, a bamboo flute, and working with singing bowls. "Soon, I wanted to share it with others, because it was what helped me," she explains.<sup>76</sup>

She co-created Conscious Kenya as a directory to help users find alternative therapists, healers, and teachers, as well as a variety of wellness products from across the country. Ironically, while trying to connect practitioners and seekers, Conscious Kenya finds itself with its own distribution challenge. By choosing the frame of wellness, the directory is aligned with a growing global industry, but often at odds with local religious institutions. Like many peers, Kimathi and Allibhai straddle two worlds with competing logics. For example, how does one maintain ethical commitments while facing real economic questions? "Pricing! What is pricing?!" exclaims Allibhai. "How do you know what feels right?"



To make the numbers work, many innovators drawn to the healing arts now need to master marketing and social media influencing. Some have created secondary businesses to keep money and mission separate, such as a group of Transcendental Meditation leaders who set up a cybercafe in Nairobi. Conscious Kenya hopes to build cooperative structures that undo the individualizing influence of capitalism, setting up a bartering system among healing practitioners, as one possibility. But what support structure exists for leaders like Allibhai and Kimathi? How might they share their learnings and struggles with other convenors and platform creators, or even expand across Africa, as is their dream?

*"To make the numbers work, many innovators drawn to the healing arts now need to master marketing and social media influencing."*

– Narissa Allibhai

So during Kenya Innovation Week, Conscious Kenya hosted its own gathering of innovators, the Feel the Joy Festival. There were no prizes, innovation pipelines, or government policies—but a rich shared imagination for a revitalized landscape of community, spirituality, and healing.



## Supporting Spiritual Innovation

Around the world, spiritual innovation stands at a crossroads. Visionary and devoted innovators from Ireland to Indonesia are addressing spiritual longings with creativity and care. But the scale of global need for spiritual well-being dramatically overwhelms the reach of their offerings. And without sustained support, many of their efforts will soon falter or disappear completely.\*

As we have seen, today's spiritual innovators are up against a set of significant challenges that impact their own well-being and capacity to actualize the potential of their innovations toward flourishing. They need support across all three domains underpinning spiritual innovation that does good in the world:

- **Spiritual integrity:** Support for articulating and enacting values that enhance spiritual well-being, and developing and maintaining an approach to the work that matches the values, including a healthy relationship between tradition and innovation.
- **Project sustainability:** Support for reaching those the project intends to serve, developing sound organizational structures, securing resources, and training wise and skillful leadership.
- **Community support:** Support for spiritual innovators to connect with loving communities of kinship, training, mutual learning, and accountability from mentors and peers, and to experience themselves as part of a broader movement toward spiritual well-being in the world.

Each of these areas needs significant attention in the years to come. At Sacred Design Lab, we are committed to helping to convene and catalyze the landscape of spiritual innovation to address these needs. We are eager to collaborate with spiritual innovators and other stakeholders in this work.

Below are our initial commitments for the coming years, which center on two themes:

1. Connecting spiritual innovators to one another globally.
2. Nurturing the field of spiritual innovation in the United States.

## Connecting spiritual innovators globally

Most of the spiritual innovators interviewed for this research project are isolated in their work. Some have a network of allies, but they often lack relationships with other spiritual innovators, especially across traditions. From our previous research in the United States, we know that this puts spiritual innovators at high risk of burnout or of shutting down their projects.

In our experience, spiritual innovators discover profound benefits when they come into relationship with others who share their ethos, vision, and approach—even if the practical activities and religious or spiritual sources of their projects are entirely different.\* These benefits include:

- Friendships that sustain them during the inevitable difficulties of leadership;
- Mutual learning, support, growth, and inspiration;
- Professional collaborations that can lead to new organizational alliances;
- Intergenerational eldering and mentorship;
- The experience of being part of a larger movement;
- And more.

So, in 2024–25, we'll launch:

1. Local gatherings: A series of 8–10 global hub city convenings to help connect local spiritual innovators to one another.
2. Digital storytelling: A digital resource where we share stories from these convenings and about the innovators and organizations gathered, as part of an ongoing effort to raise awareness of this work.
3. A preliminary database: An opt-in, interactive database of spiritual innovators as a foundation for future efforts to facilitate spiritual innovators finding one another.

We recognize that ours are just small steps toward the goal of true community support for spiritual innovators around the world—and that this work cannot, nor should, be centrally organized. We celebrate other efforts to gather and connect spiritual innovators, and we are eager to learn about and amplify them wherever we can.

We also warmly welcome new collaborators in this work! If you are interested in hosting a local convening, with or without Sacred Design Lab, please let us know so we can help spread the word. Email us at: [hello@sacred.design](mailto:hello@sacred.design)

\* This has been our experience in the United States. In a decade of relationships with innovators, the majority of them have closed down or heavily adapted their ventures in the time we've known them, even if they were clearly meeting a need. The primary reasons they cite are the lack of financial sustainability and support infrastructure for their work.

\* See our report [December Gathering: Notes from the Field](#) for an account of gathering spiritual innovators in the US and the significance of their connections with one another.

## Nurturing the field of spiritual innovation in the United States

As an American organization, we know we must also dig where we stand. Our second commitment is to help nurture the field of spiritual innovation in the United States.

Between its secular state and multiplicity of religious cultures, the United States is a global outlier in that its spiritual innovation ecosystem is growing and increasingly self-aware. A small but significant number of organizations, such as the [Fetzer Institute](#), [Wesleyan Impact Partners](#), [Faith Matters Network](#), [Soularize](#), [Beloved](#), and the [Chaplaincy Innovation Lab](#), along with US-based global initiatives like USC's [Engaged Spirituality Project](#) and Ashoka's [Spiritual Changemakers Initiative](#), recognize spiritual innovation and are working to cultivate it. Multi-faith innovation incubators [Glean Network](#) and the [Embrace Impact Incubator](#) are helping new projects to get off the ground. There is palpable energy to cross a threshold into more holistic organizing for this movement.

In 2024-25, together with these and other partner organizations, we'll focus on:

1. Cultivating innovator connection: Identifying ways to support spiritual innovators in connecting with each other, online and off.
2. Supporting spiritual leadership: Prototyping support structures for the ongoing spiritual leadership development of innovators.
3. Expanding economic imagination: Researching and beginning to develop financial models to sustain spiritual innovation and innovators.
4. Developing movement self-awareness: Helping to steward a wider movement toward spiritual well-being in the United States.

These commitments only scratch the surface of what is needed to support spiritual integrity, project sustainability, and community support for spiritual innovation. We hope to join with many other individuals, organizations, and initiatives helping to advance this work in the United States and around the world.

## Collaborating in support of spiritual innovation

By its nature, spiritual innovation is complex and wide-ranging. It spans religious traditions and exists outside of them. It happens in-person and online, in big cities and rural villages, and in most every language on earth.

It won't be easy to bring disparate efforts together, but the promise of spiritual innovation as a movement, once truly allowed to thrive, is to support the flourishing of future generations. This promise necessitates a strategic push toward mutual relationship, learning, and support.

If you are someone innovating spiritually; reach out to connect with others in this field. If you are in a position to support spiritual innovators; gather them together, invest in their work, and let us know about it so we can share your insights.

As we try to address the structural challenges faced by spiritual innovators in the United States, we hope to do so in active conversation with leaders around the globe, so that we are working collaboratively to tend a global ecosystem of innovation toward spiritual well-being. The interlocking crises we face are soul-deep. So, too, must be our response.

*If you are someone innovating spiritually; reach out to connect with others in this field. If you are in a position to support spiritual innovators; gather them together, invest in their work, and let us know about it so we can share your insights.*



# Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse, France

More than 800 years ago, a Carthusian monk sits down at a desk. His name is Guigo II. He's writing a pamphlet. High in the mountains in the south of France, he tries to describe how his readers might climb toward the heart of God.

Guigo II belongs to a lineage of monastic teachers who have offered Christians techniques to decipher the wisdom of their tradition. A hundred years earlier, Saint Anselm advised a wealthy patron that when she read the Bible her goal was not to finish reading it, but instead to read only as much as would stir her mind to prayer. Now Guigo, too, instructs his readers to choose just a sliver of text to dwell on. "Do you know how much juice has come from one little grape...how this small piece of metal has been stretched on the anvil of meditation?" he writes.

In his pamphlet, which he calls *Scala Claustralium*, or *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo articulates four steps on a ladder: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Those who are "God's lovers" may climb the ladder, he explains, ever higher into the clouds and find themselves among a host of "heavenly secrets." This is the practice of *Lectio Divina*, or sacred reading; a practice that will become a staple for Christian spiritual reflection and prayer for generations to come.

Guigo II was a twelfth-century spiritual innovator. He found a novel way to share an ancient tradition that helped his readers flourish.



*In supporting today's spiritual innovators, we are not just preserving tradition; we are actively participating in its evolution.*

Yes, our world looks different from Guigo's. His monastery held a few hundred precious manuscripts, each one painstakingly hand-copied. Meanwhile, our phones can access most of human knowledge in seconds. But the need for spiritual nourishment remains. We grapple with loneliness in a hyper-connected world; environmental crises amidst technological advancements; and ethical dilemmas in the age of artificial intelligence. Our souls, much like those of Guigo's readers all those years ago, yearn for guidance, for practices that help us navigate the complexities of our world with wisdom, love, and connection to the divine.

In supporting today's spiritual innovators, we are not just preserving tradition; we are actively participating in its evolution. The enduring legacy of *Lectio Divina* is a call to action—a reminder that in every era, the human soul seeks new ways to connect, understand, and thrive. It is an invitation to apply the best of our creative imagination to questions of spiritual well-being, ensuring that as we move forward, it is toward a more flourishing future.

# End

# Matter



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# Research Methodology



ILLUSTRATION:

Anaf Mujeeb—India / Kuwait

*“Spirituality in us is an entity that must be nurtured. Being a Muslim, the first word revealed in the Quran is ‘Iqra’ which means to Read! This artwork explores the importance of nurturing our spiritual side through knowledge and critical thought, which will in turn reinforce our morality.”*

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# Research Methodology

This report synthesizes findings from three lead authors, seven area researchers, and three background researchers over an 18-month project, building on a decade of our team's experience studying religion, community, and innovation within the United States. Our lead authors, with academic credentials and practical research experience, have developed an approach that combines scholarly knowledge with real-world applications. This project aims to provide an initial overview of spiritual innovation globally. Our findings should be seen as directional rather than conclusive.

Our area researchers specialized in studying spiritual innovation within specific regions. In total, they and the authors conducted over 100 interviews with both practitioners and academics across 37 countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Oceania, Europe, and North America, and the authors took research trips to Japan, India, Kenya, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Brazil. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically, allowing us to learn directly from innovators and see the regions through their eyes. This method was supplemented by Zoom research debriefs, which added narrative depth to the thematic patterns the researchers identified.

We acknowledge the inherent limitations of this project. First, while we believe this stands as the most extensive current inquiry into global spiritual innovation, it is not comprehensive. It is a snapshot of what we learned over 18 months about a movement that is still forming, rather than a complete or fully representative study. Second, the perspectives of our research team are evident in the report, both insofar as our lead authors are based in the United States, and also in terms of our guiding belief in the importance of a deep spiritual life for global flourishing. We have directed our focus toward types of innovation that we see as having the potential for inclusive and significant impact. Finally, while we draw from academic theory, our work is primarily intended to serve practitioners. We have not built new academic theories, but we hope to lay groundwork for future academic research and welcome scholars intrigued by the themes and questions in this report to continue the work.

# Team

## Authors

Angie Thurston, Co-Founder  
and Executive Director, Sacred Design Lab

“More and more of us are alone in our spiritual lives, and I want to help change that by nurturing the field of spiritual innovation. My passion is supporting spiritual innovators and other spiritually-grounded leaders, especially through networks of small groups focused on their spiritual growth and leadership development.”

Josh Packard, Co-Founder and Head of Research,  
Future of Faith

“The most profound problems in life stem from our disconnection from ourselves, each other, and the world around us. Spiritual innovators give me hope and inspiration for a more connected and enlightened future.”

Casper ter Kuile, Co-Founder, Sacred Design Lab  
and author, *The Power of Ritual*

“Nothing makes me happier than learning from religious traditions to inspire new ways for us to live lives of greater connection, meaning, and depth. In the midst of enormous changes in how we experience community and spirituality, I believe we need new ways to bring people together that ennoble the everyday and build a world of joyful belonging.”

## Regional Researchers

Jonathan Abernethy-Barkley,  
Researcher: Europe

“As someone who had to leave the denomination in which I was ordained because of my sexuality, I have sought to live authentically and honestly in response to both my faith and sexual orientation even at times when that has brought me in conflict with specific institutional expressions of church, family, and wider society.”

Serena Bian, Researcher: Asia

“I have spent the last two years in a personal and community inquiry about how members of the Asian Diaspora reclaim our ancestral spiritualities. Thus, I would consider myself a ‘practitioner’ and ‘seeker’ of diasporic Asian spiritual innovation.”

Nayara Borges, Researcher: Latin America

“I grew up in Brazil in a family where my father identified as Catholic, while my mother followed Spiritism and my best friend when I was a child was Protestant. Eventually, I chose to explore other spiritual paths, such as Buddhism and Shamanism. Currently, I align myself with non-religious but spiritual perspectives.”

Rutdow Jiraprapasuke, Researcher: Asia  
and Oceania

“I think one of the reasons Buddhism has had a firm hold on Thais for more than 700 years is because Buddhism in Thailand has always evolved to meet the needs of the people. It is the willingness to evolve that has kept me dedicated to the practice.”

Inès Mazas, Researcher: Latin America

“In our Western modern culture we tend to take personal credit for inventions. We make entrepreneurs the new idols and even gurus, as if they were the exclusive owners of their genius inventions. I see it from a different perspective and recognize all innovations as the expression of Spirit through individual consciousness.”

Noosim Naimasiah, Researcher: Africa

“I identify myself as an African—both as my spiritual and political identity. My ancestors are my primary spiritual intercessors, and I engage them both as real historical entities and also representatives of the grander totality of consciousness.”

Noor Traina, Researcher: Middle East and  
North Africa

“My maternal grandfather was a Sheikh and scholar of Islam who studied and taught at the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt and all over the Muslim world. This legacy is deeply important to me. I believe that spirituality is the essence of one’s life and that it is crucial to constantly revisit the meanings, beliefs, and practices of one’s faith or metaphysics.”

## Collaborators

Ben Poretzky, Project Manager

Kirsten McColl, Creative Director

Sue Phillips, Project Co-Developer

Joey Leskin, Researcher: Spiritual Innovation in the Jewish Diaspora

Eli Snider, Researcher: Business Innovation vs. Spiritual Innovation

Kate Stockly, Researcher: Academic Literature on Spiritual Innovation

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Jen Bailey, Founder and Executive Director, Faith Matters Network

Wendy Cadge, President, Bryn Mawr College and Founder, Chaplaincy Innovation Lab

Matthew Lee, Professor of the Social Sciences and Humanities, Baylor University and Director of the Flourishing Network at the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

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Vipin Thekk

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Chuck Thurston

Derek Van Bever

Bonnie Zahl

To all who were interviewed, connected us with people, hosted site visits, and coordinated travel, thank you.

To the spiritual innovators of today, for your devotion, imagination, and work in the world, thank you.

To the spiritual innovators of history, for laying paths for us, teaching us to lay our own, and devoting your lives to new spiritual possibilities—often at great cost—thank you.

# Endnotes

1. CNN: [Japan was already grappling with isolation and loneliness. The pandemic made it worse](#), April 2023.
2. The Japan Times: [Japan's parliament enacts bill to tackle social isolation](#), May 2023.
3. From a [nationwide survey](#) conducted by the Tokyo temple Tsukiji Honganji, April 2023.
4. A few examples:
  - Globally, nearly 375 million people live with a mental disorder, with depression and anxiety being the most common, representing a 50% increase since 1990: [Global Burden of Disease Study 2019](#).
  - The level of global peacefulness has deteriorated consistently over the last 15 years with no year-on-year improvements recorded since 2014: [2023 Global Peace Index](#).
  - At least 85% of the world is experiencing the weather impact of climate change: [Nature Climate Change 2021](#); and 99% breathe unsafe air: [World Health Organization 2022](#).
  - Globally, income and wealth inequality is at or near 100 year highs driven by dramatic gains in the top 10% of income earners: [Brookings 2023](#).
  - More than 60% of people in 19 countries view climate change, the spread of false information online, cyberattacks from other countries, the condition of the global economy, and the spread of infectious diseases as major threats to their nations: [Pew Research Center 2022](#).
5. For more background on this framework and our approach to assessing and supporting spiritual well-being, see [Measuring Spiritual Well-Being](#) from Sacred Design Lab, 2021.
6. Certain new religious movements and cults do profound harm, often through damaging theologies, high levels of control, and unethical use of power. Such projects are recognizable because they foster isolation, animosity toward outgroups, and even acts of violence. They typically focus more on enforcing the god-like authority of a human leader than addressing the true spiritual longings of participants.
7. In developing the structure and language in this definition, we learned from the work of James A. Phillips, Jr., Kriss Deiglmeier, and Dale T. Miller in [Rediscovering Social Innovation](#) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Fall 2008.
8. Our definition follows a review of other scholarly and practitioner definitions of spirituality, which, when taken together, tend to include that spirituality a) is personal and innate; b) involves a feeling or sense of relationship or connection with the sacred or something greater than oneself; c) includes action such as seeking / questing, making meaning, or practicing; and d) has outcomes such as meaning, purpose, and well being in life. See this [meta review of definitions](#), for example.
9. Our definition follows a meta-review of scholarly and practitioner definitions of religion.

10. The illustrations on pages 9 and 11 of this [2023 World Agreements for Ecosystem-wide Flourishing Report](#) from the Institute for Strategic Clarity are helpful in illustrating the interdependence of individual spiritual health and ecosystem-wide flourishing.
11. There is a wide and growing literature on flourishing, which is well-described in this 2023 special report from the Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion, entitled [Understanding Flourishing: Developing a Global Community of Practice](#).
12. This phrase was coined by the philosopher and economist [Charles Eisenstein](#).
13. From an interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.
14. Ammerman, Nancy T. "Social Practices and Cultural Contexts: Frameworks for the Study of Spirituality," in *Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power*, edited by B. Steensland, J. Kucinkas and A. Sun. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 33-48.
15. [Key Findings from the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project](#), December 2022.
16. Pew Research Center: [Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe](#), January 2024.
17. Viotti, Nicolás. "Religious Individualization," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, edited by H.P.P. Gooren. (New York: Springer International Publishing AG, 2016).
18. Venerable Yifa interview with Sacred Design Lab, November 2023.

19. Global internet usage is higher among individuals between 15 and 24 years across all regions. Ninety-two percent of the population in countries with high income reportedly use the internet, as opposed to only 26% of low-income markets. North Korea has an internet penetration of nearly zero percent, as the internet remains blocked for its citizens. Statista: [Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of January 2024](#).
20. Technology can be used to monitor, surveille, and control spiritual movements. A notorious example from China is the monitoring of Ughyer Muslims on WeChat, who have been arrested for activities like exchanging verses of the Quran. The Chinese government has imprisoned more than one million Ughyers since 2017 and subjected those not detained to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations. See more from the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), September 2022.
21. Forbes Home: [Internet Usage Statistics In 2024](#).
22. Scholars, led by [Nathan Jurgenson](#), have long been noting the demise of the concept of "digital dualism" or the strict boundary between "digital" and "in-person" lives and identities, with many arguing that a new identity or self-concept is emerging that can be referred to as "augmented reality." For spiritual innovators, this process was expedited by the shift to digital engagement with spiritual community and practice brought on by the pandemic.
23. Dheepa Sundaram interview with Angie Thurston for Sacred Design Lab, January 2023.
24. Fenggang Yang interview with Sacred Design Lab, July 2023.
25. For more, see Religion News Service: [Digitizing sacred spaces: How COVID-19 fueled innovation of Hindu ritual websites](#), 2021 by scholar of Hindu studies and digital religion Dheepa Sundaram.

26. Rodrigo Queiroz interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.
27. Forbes: [Average Salary By State In India \(2024\)](#).
28. For more on religion and the state, see this [Pew study from 2017](#).
29. See this [animated map from Vox](#) for a 500-year history of European colonialism.
30. Pew Research Center: [10 Things to Know About China's Policies on Religion](#), October 2023.
31. Foreign Policy: [Chinese State Media Warns Against 14 "Evil Cults"](#), June 2014.
32. Fenggang Yang interview with Sacred Design Lab, July 2023.
33. Johnson, Ian. *Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*. (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 17.
34. Chau, Adam Yuet. "Introduction," in *Religion in Contemporary China* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 11.
35. Robert Weller interview with Sacred Design Lab, July 2023.
36. From a meeting of the Department of Student Affairs—Student Wellness Services at the University of Cape Town entitled, *An African indigenous Traditional and Spiritual Practices Indaba: The Route of Holistic Justice*. Attended by Noosim Naimasiah for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.
37. Okpaleke, Ikenna Paschal and Kizito Chinedu Nweke. "The Re-emergence of African Spiritualities: Prospects and Challenges," in *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 36 (4): 246-265, 2019.
38. From research by Noosim Naimasiah, Inès Mazas, and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab.
39. Rodrigo Rubido interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.

40. There is wide academic literature on shamanism, but this brief 2019 article on [Cross-Culturally Exploring the Concept of Shamanism](#) by Jeffrey Vadala provides a readable overview.
41. Scuro, Juan and Robin Rodd. "Neo-Shamanism," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 1-6.
42. Hong Kali interview with Rutdow Jiraprapasuke for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.
43. The Washington Post: [In Taiwan, finding solace — and identity — in traditional healing](#), October 2023.
44. Cristine Takuá interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.
45. BBC: [WitchTok: The witchcraft videos with billions of views](#), October 2022.
46. Business Insider: [TikTok witches are accusing each other of being toxic, gatekeepers, and misinformation spreaders](#), April 2022.
47. Eunice Kamaara and Charles Prempeh interviews with Noosim Naimasiah for Sacred Design Lab, April and August 2023.
48. Wall Street Journal: [From Wealth to Health: Rich Chinese Seek Spiritual Fulfillment](#), February 2015.
49. Flanagan, Bernadette and Michael F. O'Sullivan. "Spirituality in Contemporary Ireland: Manifesting Indigeneity," in *Spiritus A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16(2A): 55-73, December 2016.
50. For more on women's changing role in Hinduism, see NPR: [Hindu priestesses fight the patriarchy, one Indian wedding at a time](#), October 2021.
51. Chau, Adam Yuet. "Introduction," in *Religion in Contemporary China*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 11.
52. Master POPO interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, August 2023.
53. See these statistics from the [Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim's Reception Office](#).

54. From [The Euros and Prayers of Camino de Santiago](#) by Andrew L. Yarrow in The Milken Institute Review, September 2022.

55. National Geographic: [Pilgrimages could be the next post-COVID travel trend](#), July 2021.

56. Charaf El Mansouri interview with Casper ter Kuile for Sacred Design Lab, November 2023.

57. Ashutosh Kumar interview with Angie Thurston for Sacred Design Lab, February 2023.

58. Angela Renée de la Torre interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.

59. The China Temper: [Temple Tourism: China's GenZ Urbanites Have a Spiritual Hunger](#), June 2023 and The Guardian: [Temple visits rise in China as jobless young people seek spiritual assistance](#), June 2023.

60. The China Project: [Temple excursions booming among Chinese youth](#), September 2022.

61. Cristine Takuá interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.

62. The China Project: [Temple excursions booming among Chinese youth](#), September 2022.

63. Entire books have been written on this concept, but we use it here to mean non-religiousness. There are more helpful explorations [at this link](#).

64. In the US, for instance, which at least historically has had a more institutional form of religious life, anything that is not overtly religious is secular. Hence the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation among young people being cast as "secularization," when in reality the majority of religious "nones" believe in God or a higher power, per [Pew Research Center](#).

65. This is not to be conflated with beliefs held by indigenous individuals today, which vary widely. In fact, 47% of Canada's indigenous people now identify as "secular", according to a [2022 Canadian Census](#).

66. Thierry Porte interview with Casper ter Kuile for Sacred Design Lab, October 2023.

67. Similar realizations have been percolating around the world, such that the [Wellbeing Project](#), a global network of 400 organizations, now exists to support the inner wellbeing of social change leaders.

68. Raghad Fathaddin interview with Casper ter Kuile for Sacred Design Lab, January 2023.

69. Rodrigo Rubido interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.

70. Ximena Davila interview with Inès Mazas for Sacred Design Lab, November 2023.

71. Laura Herrera interview with Inès Mazas and Nayara Borges for Sacred Design Lab, November 2023.

72. See also the [Global Network for Spirituality and Health](#).

73. Peng-Keller, Simon, Fabian Winiger, and Raphael Rauch. *The Spirit of Global Health: The World Health Organization and the 'Spiritual Dimension' of Health, 1946-2021* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

74. [Here is an example](#) of a reiki pilot with pediatric patients in the US.

75. Robert Weller interview with Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.

76. Narissa Allibhai interview with Noosim Naimasiah for Sacred Design Lab, September 2023.



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