Pop Spirituality in the Context of Nepal

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Pop Spirituality in the Context of Nepal

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Abstract

In this research report, *Pop Spirituality in the Context of Nepal*, I look to add clarity to what it means to be “spiritual” and how that has been applied historically in context of Nepal. This paper focuses on what has led up to our modern day perceptions on spirituality. In the first section of the paper, I briefly describe what I mean when I say, “pop spirituality” or a “modern spirituality.” I define spirituality and how it differs from religion, a religion, and what secularization is. I want to acknowledge that there are many types of spirituality that exist of course, but for the purpose of this paper, I only refer to a narrowly specific kind of spirituality and its history. From there I dive into the religious tourism in Nepal, what its impact is, and why it is lucrative. It is followed up with some of Nepal’s history on the Hippie Trail and how it shaped Nepal’s tourist industry. To explain why Nepal became the final destination of the trail, I had to explain the history of the West’s fascination with Tibet. This fixation that the West held created a distorted image of Eastern spirituality and ruminants of those effects are still around today. Then I address the complexities of commodification in our capitalistic society and how that affects our relationship with spiritual practice. Finally, I emphasize why this spirituality is so attractive and perhaps addicting to partake in. Then I discuss how spiritual bypass may be implicated as a coping mechanism for the stresses that we experience in our lives.

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Introduction

As I lived in Boudha, a neighborhood on the edge of Kathmandu, I kept focusing on all the stalls with “Buddhist merchandise” laid out. You cannot go anywhere in Boudha without seeing several from point A to B. It sparked my thinking into my own experiences with spirituality as I wondered if these objects still carry the same meaning or the same “spiritual energy” if they were being sold to tourists, or if that even mattered. In my day to day life, I am encountering spirituality through my Instagram feed, where I see posts about astrology and various yogic practices. Seeing everything, it felt overwhelming by all the content I was trying to absorb and how it was meant to be “spiritual,” yet I was still drawn to it and wanted to know why. Before I arrived in Nepal, I wanted to learn more about Buddhism and how it existed in the context of a culture where it is integral. However, after arriving and my initial awe, that was not what happened, and I feel almost more lost than I had been before. I am dealing with all this visual information through my environment, studies, social media, and my cultural background. So, I wanted to do research into why that is. Why are people, including myself, so drawn in by these spiritual conceptions and why does it have to be so confusing? While growing up, I consciously and unconsciously learned about New Age theology. As I started getting older with the rise of the internet and accessibility to information, I encountered this “pop” spirituality and I began to pick apart my notions of what “spirituality” is as I had come to know it. In this past month, I wanted to learn what today’s Western spirituality is in its entirety, and what of its origins was being expressed. I examined the relationship that the West has with spirituality and investigated why do we have such a fixation on pop spirituality.

I have no place to make a concrete statement that explains anything as “right” or “wrong” ways for one to practice spirituality, I simply do not have the expertise to know the history of a practice or the specifics of the individual’s reasons for their practice. To paraphrase Andrea R. Jain, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, it may not be a scholar’s place to verify authenticity but to acknowledge the claims and analyze them as religious and critique them in their context. Ultimately, I want to attempt to unpack what it is we are practicing, where it comes from, and why we are still doing so today.

1. Stall in Boudha selling malas, prayer beads, and bracelets. Photo credits to Dvij Sharma
What is Spirituality?

I wanted to define what I mean when I am discussing the type of spirituality that I am researching. I am talking about what you see through your feed, where a young white woman is telling you about the sage she is burning. I am talking about the yoga studios that you find in even small towns and their commercial industry. I am talking about the millions of posts that are about astrology, whether it is classifying what type of cereal your sun sign is to tips on how you can read your birth chart. I am talking about all the renditions of interpretations of Buddhist philosophies that I have heard over the years in the United States. I am talking about the Tibetan singing bowl my dad bought off Amazon. These were the references that I was considering when I first conceptualized my topic. Professor Jain, suggests that this is a part of global spirituality that she calls a religious complex that is upholding neoliberal capitalism.

Defining Spirituality and Religion

Here, I am going to use the crafted definitions for religion, spirituality, and secularism from Wouter J. Hanegraaff, a professor of Hermetic Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Hanegraaff defines religion as “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning.” Objects or imagery belonging to a symbolic system would be encountered throughout one’s daily life, connecting a person to their religion. These symbols are full of meaning and therefore guide a person’s physical actions and experiences. This is different than a religion, which is defined as a social institution. Spirituality involves individual interpretation of the symbols in the context in which they exist, creating a new understanding of symbols and their meaning. By these definitions, anyone with their own take on symbolic objects, imagery, or doctrine is engaging in spirituality. Spirituality is religion but not a religion and anyone who follows a religion can also follow their own spirituality. A new spiritual tradition is formed through multiple interpretations and can exist outside of a religion. Then there is secularization, which Hanegraaff makes clear is not the disappearance of religion, but rather a historical development where religion is going through the process of transformation in a way that has not been seen before. This transformation results in a society where religion is no longer the foundation for collective symbolism; a society where there are several religious institutions. Hanegraaff is saying secularization is changing religion and suggests that religion is shifting away from a religion into spirituality.
Nepal’s Tourism

Religious tourism is the second largest contributor to the industry in Nepal. Religious tourism has generated thousands of jobs in Nepal, ranging from employment in the airline industry, guides, transport providers, food and beverage, accommodations, and local shops. Nepal’s earnings were approximately 502,000,000 USD in 2014 from tourism alone. Most popular tourist destinations after national parks and wildlife are religious sites. It is a competitive industry to be in because it draws in large crowds. For example, in the Hindu religion and culture, it is encouraged to visit numerous religious sites and to give donations. With an open border between Nepal and India, it is particularly easy for people to travel in from India to visit Hindu sites.

One of the appeals to visiting Nepal is to experience the diversity of cultures, and there are always various festivals that one can attend any time of the year you are visiting. As of November 2022, there were about 546,216 tourists that arrived in Nepal, and they expected that that number would reach 600,000 by the end of the year. This number is a large leap from the previous year’s 150,962 tourists. The tourist count of 2022 was from the first year that people could travel more freely since the pandemic and the number is expected to return to previous numbers of 2019, a little over 1 million. Frederick Herzberg theorizes a few motivations for tourist visits including satisfaction with the action of travel itself, social recognition and trend, desire to visit the site, and for pilgrimage.

What Led to Nepal

Why Nepal? How did Nepal become such a huge destination for spiritual tourism? There is no shortage of pilgrimage sites in Nepal for sure. But how did Nepal get on the global radar in marketing itself as a Buddhist and Hindu hot spot? This can be credited in part to the Hippie Trail that led many to Nepal between the 1960s-1970s. What led the hippies there and what was their outcome?
Last Home of Mystery

The Rana family ruling the Nepal government restricted foreign access to Nepal pre-1951 which lead to the Western imagination to run wild. The Rana family’s main concern was not wanting to expose Nepalis to outside knowledge, such as the Indian Independence Movement against the British. They were supported by the British and did not want that support undermined. The British liked that Nepal wanted to be an isolated feudal state that also acted as a buffer on the broader against China. They were guaranteed a reliable source of Nepali Gurkha recruits in their own armies. The British had a cooperative state which was not causing them any trouble. During the late 1910s to early 1930s, the Rana family allowed limited journalist access to Nepal, who wrote and photographed Nepal’s exotic wonders, lack of modern technology, and were favorable of the Rana autocrats. Books were being written about Nepal such as E Alexander Powell’s *The Last Home of Mystery*, where he described Nepal to be a place even more mysterious than Tibet and called Nepali people “backward and ignorant.” In 1947, *Newsweek* magazine published an article on Nepal, and it referred to Nepal as “the Shangri-La Valley of Kathmandu.” 14 Shangri-La is a fictionalized Tibet invented by James Hilton in his book *Lost Horizon*.15 Aside from the fact that Shangri-La is not even a real Tibet, it is telling that there is a comparison drawn between Nepal and Tibet in the eyes of a Westerner.

After WWII, the British were weakened and Indian independence was inevitable, so the Ranas were looking for other outside support. After 1947, the Rana selectively opened their borders to British and French climbers. Even though this did not bolster the Rana’s control as they hoped, it gave Nepal a global reputation. In 1951, the Rana regime ended, and King Tribhuvan began his rule. This coincided with China’s Red Army invasion of Tibet. The invasion closed off Tibet as Nepal’s borders opened, and people shifted their focus from Tibet to Nepal as the new fantastical, mysterious place.16 In 1949 American President, Harry Truman had made a motion to help developing countries by providing technical assistance. America providing this support was a move to gain favor with countries to make sure they would not turn communist and to have them fight against the Red Menace. The United States attempted to establish governance in Nepal that would be reliant on America. However, this did not stop Nepal’s King Mahendra, who ascended in 1956, to undermine the power of the parties to maintain monarchy power. He reached out to other foreign countries for financial support that were vying for Nepal’s political support.17
King Mahendra made a push to modernize Nepal and wanted to embrace a political economy of foreign aid. For his coronation, there was a large influx of foreigners that entered the country to broadcast it, a large development from the previous isolation policy and being closed off to foreigners. Unfortunately, foreign media was less interested in Mahendra’s political campaign for development and more interested in the spectacle of the coronation. Boris Lissanevitch, the father of tourism, was responsible for creating “suitable” housing for all the foreigners. In fact, Lissanevitch was issued the first visa and is responsible for pioneering tourism, marking the beginning of Nepal’s modern day tourism. The coronation proved Nepal’s sovereignty and displayed Kathmandu’s exotic antiquity.

The Hippies’ Arrival

The 1960s was of course a time of extreme political strife and cultural critique that was seen worldwide. Violence and youth protest for compassion defined the 1960s. Many youths thought that they were going to create radical change in the world. But with violent crackdowns against movements, youth were crushed by this, and then many of them choose to leave their countries. An estimated 2 million people traveled overland to the Indian subcontinent between the early 1960s -1979. The average age of tourists dropped significantly and by 1972, 45% of tourists were under 30 years old. A significant increase in tourism is attributed to airlines now offering flights into Kathmandu beginning in 1968. These youths made up a new industry, budget tourism, which affected all of Kathmandu economically and socially. Low caste people were able to take advantage of the influx of low-budget tourists coming in, exploiting this market demand. They had nothing to lose associating with these new arrivals and the elites were not interested in catering to them. In the 1960s, Nepali people were food secure but cash poor. When a tourist paid 1 rupee for a floor to sleep on felt like a deal for both parties. A rupee was 10 cents to an American, while that 1 rupee was helping accumulate wealth for the Nepali. This introduced international currency flow to poor residents. Tourism even affected the architecture of the city and brought about Freak Street.

Nepali craftsmen had been creating souvenirs for centuries before the hippie’s arrival. You can date the first form of “tourism” in Nepal back to the 16th – 17th century with Chinese, Tibetan, and Indian visitors for religious and commercial motives. From cheap mementos for religious pilgrims visiting sacred sites to expensive devotional images that were traded around Asia. Nepali began to sell old rustic objects to tourists, and this gradually changed to selling objects that looked old. Foreigners began to hold flea markets to sell their Western clothing to Nepalis who may trade them for themselves or sell them for a higher price to Nepali youths. There were Nepalis, such as D.D. Sharma, who figured out that selling cannabis directly to tourists was a lucrative business, specifically hashish.

The Hippie Trail had become synonymous with the “drug trail” to the “hash dens of Asia” for some. And for others, Nepal’s “drug trail” provided cheap opiates that could be found in Kathmandu. Selling hash within Nepal was legal, however, exporting it was strictly illegal but that was more lucrative. Many Americans learned of Nepal’s existence from the
hashish packages sold in America. Many Nepalis did not participate in the exportation business due to the risk; it was mostly foreigners since they could escape easily.\(^30\)

Tibetans fared well in the tourist economy because tourists sympathized with them. They would pick a Tibetan business over a Nepali one, which notably annoyed the Nepalis. Tourists would pay the asking price of Tibetans, feeling that they were honest and loyal, which we will see was informed by the centuries of the fantasization of Tibetans. However, Tibetans struggled just as often as the Nepali to make a living.\(^31\)

The World Moves On

On May 4\(^{th}\), I arrived at a yoga retreat up in the hills looking down onto Pokhara. It appeared to be operated by Nepalis and the instructors were Indian themselves. There were not a lot of people attending the retreat during my brief stay, but I venture that there are so many yoga retreats in Pokhara (which I even passed another on the way to my own) that tourists could choose from a lot of options. What I found surprising was that there was a family from India attending the retreat and not just Westerners. There were two yoga classes and two meditation sessions per day, one in the evening and one in the morning, and they offered a nasal cleansing at 6:30 am. There were a few other activities offered upon request, including sound healing, which I did in the evening. By the end, I got an instructor’s YouTube channel for her online classes, and later messaged me on Instagram to write her a review. This was part of the package experience for attending a yoga retreat in Pokhara, a known destination for a built-up tourist industry for all sorts of outdoor activities. Even while in town, I happened to meet an American woman who came to Nepal to become a yoga instructor and lived part-time in Pokhara. This is the image that Nepal has worked hard to create since the 1970s.

After President Nixon visited China in 1972, Nepal’s international financial situation was going to change. There was a shift away from the fight against communism and a focus on developing trade relations. This for Nepal, changed the amount of foreign funding that it was receiving. They were originally receiving \textit{bilateral aid}, a direct contribution from individual countries. After the end of the Cold War, it was shifted to \textit{multilateral aid}, “development” funds distributed by international agencies. King Mahendra’s strategy to leverage Nepal during the Cold War to gain funds from opposing countries was now obsolete.\(^32\) King Birendra, Mahendra’s 27 year old son, and his advisors’ new strategize was to receive foreign currency from tourism.
However, Nepal’s current image was a problem in promoting tourism. It was in 1972, Nepal started to feel President Nixon’s international pressure to illegalize narcotics. Rumor was that when VP Agnew visited King Mahendra in 1970, the US threatened financial support was contingent on illegalizing drugs. The UN criticized Nepal for not delegalizing drugs in 1972. Unfortunately, despite popular belief, the illegalization of cannabis did not lead to Nepal’s hard drug problem. Drugs, like morphine, had already been present in Nepal, in fact, it was a known destination to buy cheap opioids. The hard drug problem may have worsened but was not caused by illegalizing cannabis. The global opinion on Nepal was that it was a place for radical youth to be crazy. The bad press in the West pushed Nepal to delegalize cannabis. King Birendra banned drugs in July 1973 as part of his tourism agenda, however, it was only illegal to sell cannabis at first. Relations between Nepali and foreigners began to sour after the drug ban since it was because of them that foreign influence pressured Nepal. The ban turned Nepali against the presence of hippies, seeing their idealism as “antisocial egotism or even dangerous rebellion.” Visa policy became a way to evict undesirable foreigners from Nepal. Starting in 1974, those whose visas expired had to stay out of Nepal for several months before they were allowed re-entry. For a long time, many foreigners were able to get their visa extensions through bribery but eventually “visa police” got them deported.

Nepal’s efforts became successful, and their image was changing from a backwater for hippies to a landscape of adventure. Nepal’s tourism industry only grew after 1975 when they became members of the World Tourism Organization. Between 1947 and 1962, Time and Newsweek published 32 articles on Nepal, the majority of which were politically focused. Then between 1962-1980, they published 13 articles on Nepal, the majority were focused on topics like mountaineering. Nepalis began to invest in high end and adventure tourism, and between 1966-1970, tourists increased about 40% per year. Aside from the anti-hippie policies, there was just a general shift in youth culture that ended the hippie era.

As time moved on, other trends entered the scene and moved on from the hippie aesthetic. The fashion of the era was changing and wanted something new. The end of the Vietnam War took a lot of the political drive out of the hippie movement and naturally brought it to an end. People’s priorities changed as they got older, people had kids, or they wanted more comfort and security. Being a hippie in Nepal was a hobby to many, just an act of youthful rebellion, adopting lifestyles that were not “respectable” by their parents’ standards, it was a part of their privilege.

Why Nepal?

Kathmandu became another location for the countercultural youth of the world, and it was the most exotic, hence desirable. Among other locations were San Francisco, Greenwich Village, London’s Soho, and Amsterdam. In the early 1970s, Kathmandu was a haven for counterculture which had been attacked back in the West. It represented the continuation of counterculture and young people were not looking to conform to local cultural norms, or any cultural norms for that matter. They did not prioritize cross-cultural understanding. Some moved
to Kathmandu and wanted to learn about the culture and history, and make friendships. Some got involved with local social political issues, but many saw themselves outside those issues and just wanted to exist. Many came to Kathmandu with the belief that it would change them in their journey of self-discovery. Whether or not they came to Kathmandu to “be changed” or use it as a new set for their pleasure, the arrival of these young people fundamentally affected the city, shaping the development that it was already undergoing.

After the disappointment of the premature ending of political movements, a lot of the youths felt discouraged and wanted to escape, distancing themselves from all responsibility. Young people were able to travel abroad with the strong currency, only a few months of work was needed to save enough to travel for months. A lot of people ended up in Kathmandu rather than other countries for various reasons. One was that many people did not like India. People were surprised by the poverty and the stuffy air of India. They found it to be unwelcoming to their eccentric behavior. It was appreciated that Nepali people seemed unbothered, and the merchants did not harass them. Nepal provided more freedom than Western countries and more options than its neighboring countries. Psychedelics were not restricted in Nepal, unlike elsewhere with the rise of President Nixon’s anti-drug policies. Nepal had a lenient import policy, so a lot of foreign goods that people were used to receiving in America or Europe could be obtained in Nepal and not in India. Nepal was far from the US, it was the “end of the line” that a foreigner could access. Kathmandu was the closest a tourist could get to Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and Tibetan people, which was a fascination in the Western view.

Fantasization of Tibet

At around 11:30 in the morning when I entered Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling Gonpa into a crowded room. Everyone was grabbing cushions and trying to claim a good spot on the floor. The room had monks seated in the center, split by an aisle leading up to the throne for the Lama. Around on either side were foreigners and locals alike listening to the Lama give his lecture. Nearly the entire service was in Tibetan, with the first hour and a half of a lecture, and the last three and half hours was the prayer service. I was not able to understand much of what was being said, but the Lama would take pauses in his lecture to speak in English. One of the few things that he did inform us was that wished for us to respect Buddhism and everything it encompasses, including monks, nuns, lay people, and the dharma. Then, if I understood him correctly, explained that just buying the Buddhist souvenirs from the shops around Boudha is not respectful on its own, but we must truly understand and be able to read the dharma. - April 15th 11:30 am-3:00 pm
Faith and Tibet

Here I follow this with the history of how the West, which was the audience he was addressing, did exactly the opposite of what the Lama implored us to do. One of the prominent reasons that Nepal became a hot spot for hippies was because of its association with Tibet, which I hinted at in the last section. This is a history that can date at least back to the 15th century. It was rumored that the Tibetans were Christians and the first documented Western missionary decided to travel to Tibet, to confirm this or convert them. Jesuit, Father Antonio de Andrade, held the notion that Buddhism was a sect of Christianity. The origin of this rumor is not entirely known. One theory is that there were some Muslims that were in contact with Father Andrade who may have likely encountered the Tibetans at some point. Another theory that the idea came from the legend of the Christian priest king, Prester John, who lived in a paradisal realm in central Asia; a theory connected to the idea that originated in the 19th century that Tibet was the promised land where wise men lived. Then there is the idea that Andrade’s own journey to Tibet was in search of the mountains where people would survive during the apocalypse.45

In his first accounts of Tibetans, Andrade compared Tibetan Buddhists to Catholics and described them as peaceful, pacifist people that were devoted to their religion. Of course, there is a contradiction in his own statement since Tibetans were in active war with each other in Western Tibet during his time there. The miscommunication and lack of understanding of language led to misunderstanding one another, likely bringing about misconceptions and myths of Tibet that we see today. A few examples of this in his comparison with “Lamaism” include Three Jewels to the Holy Trinity, singing in a choir, doing penance, and fasting.46 The king that Father Andrade was close with likely thought that Andrade was a Buddhist monk, allowing him special treatment. Andrade took the hospitality that he was receiving to be a sign that Tibetans wanted to convert; and after his visit in 1630, more missionaries came. However, many that followed did not feel the same fondness for the Tibetans, believing that they were uncivilized.47 There continued to be comparisons drawn between Tibetan and other cultures including Egyptians, Incas, Indians, and Gnostics.48
What was unique about the colonialism of Tibet was that it was never directly controlled by Europe, nor did it attempt to “modernize,” this led to the feeling that Tibet needed to be “protected” from outside influences.\(^{49}\) \(^{50}\) Europe was deterred from colonization because, in 1792, the Manchu Emperor Qianlong declared control of communications with foreign countries in Tibet, creating mysticism.\(^{51}\) In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, the British believed there was gold in Tibet, but were fairly closed off to outsiders except for nearby countries. They feared the Russians were in close relation to the Tibetans and attempted to conquer it in 1904. They won but Tibet closed itself off as soon as they left, further pushing the European narrative. Missionary literature went further to emphasize the exotic and eccentric nature of Tibet. There were even British officers stationed in Sikkim and Tibet in the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) century who published and promoted a positive image of Tibet for political favor with India’s colonial administration.\(^{52}\) For the Western world, Tibetan culture was an alternative to their ideology, a civilization that could cure the West and restore its spirituality.\(^{53}\)

**Theosophy**

In the 19\(^{th}\) century, Europe was experiencing a spiritual crisis in the face of dissatisfaction with the Church and the rise of science, and people began to search for alternatives to their faith. The Third Great Awakening took place between 1850s-1900s, it was defined by a combination of new religious movements and criticism of Western society.\(^{54}\) People were breaking away from the Church and attendance dropped due to the corruption of the clergy. With the growth of the natural sciences and scholarly research, their influence and atheists criticizing Christianity challenged Christ’s authority. This doubt paired with the internal infighting over interpretations of doctrines brought down the Church’s validity. This breakaway from religious institutions had not been seen since the 17\(^{th}\) century when people were searching for religious guidance that they were not receiving. It was not so much that religion was being questioned, but rather where one was placing their faith and becoming vulnerable towards charismatic leaders.\(^{55}\)

During the Victorian Era, there was one woman who founded her own spiritual movement which would grow to influence the New Age and many of the myths that we know of today. Madam Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, claimed that she uncovered a “higher science” which combined science and religion. She further her claims stating that this was the key to the profound truth. Some notable followers of Theosophy included Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Edison, Carl Jung, and Gandhi.\(^{56}\) Theosophy came at a time when people were searching for alternatives, people who were losing faith in the Church establishment but wanted to believe in something more yet wanted it to be proven by science, an
Those searching for harmony between their faith and science found a place with Madam Blavatsky.

To bolster her credibility, Madam Blavatsky had her retelling of how she came to discover Theosophy and its mystical powers. In 1851, she met her “Master,” a Hindu named Morya, on the astral plain. He arrived in London to meet her specifically and told her she needed to find the Theosophical Society. Morya asked Blavatsky to travel to Tibet and stay for three years to prepare her for the future. Blavatsky was chosen to take on the hidden knowledge from Tibet and bring it back to Europe and America. She went to India in 1856 and managed to reach Tibet in 1868 according to her accounts. In Tibet, she met her Master and lived in Tashi lhunpo Monastery in Southern Tibet between 1868 to 1870. From there, she brought back the “secret knowledge.”

In her theological system, Blavatsky crafts a distinctive hierarchy; despite the rejection of the Church, people were still looking for comfort in another familiar system. At the top, you have ‘Lord of the World’ who resided in Shamballa in the Gobi Desert. Below him are his helpers, such as the Buddha, and these helpers then have a Master assistant, saintly mortals, who have all spent time in Tibet at some point. Blavatsky herself was a ‘chelas,’ a servant that is committed to learning the hidden mysteries of nature. The chelas have Masters, or Mahatmas, that act as the link to the divine plane, and they can materialize anywhere. This top-down hierarchy is a continuing theme in theosophy literature, where one emphasizes the spiritual leader, like the Dalai Lama. In her system, Blavatsky is appealing to her European audience by providing stages of progression towards the accessibility of “the truth” of the world.

Based on her contradictory accounts and the evidence, it suggests that she was never present in Tibet and her secret knowledge is not grounded in any Buddhist teachings. For starters, people who traveled to Tashi Lhunpo never saw any Indian Masters present, much less Morya, whose own name is questionable. Blavatsky claimed that Morya was Rajput or Sikh depending on her account, but the name is neither however it could possibly be Jain. Then there is the painting, which claimed to depict Tibet, which actually depicts a valley in China. There are no prayer flags, stupas, or the Wheel of the Doctrine which are typically found in Tibet. However, she likely went to Darjeeling and possibly to Sikkim where she would have met Tibetans and Bhutanese. Here, she would have learned her prejudice against those she called ‘Dukpa,’ who she was likely referring to the those following the Kagyu sect. She attributed them to be followers of Bon religion, which she believed to be a religion that practiced necromancy, sorcery, and fortune-telling.

Blavatsky spread her “teachings” as direct knowledge from the source, and those misguided teachings would shape the entire West’s view on what Buddhism and Tibet were. The teachings she gathered were reminiscent of wise Tibetan sayings at best. If she had come across any knowledge that she disagreed with she would disregard it completely in favor of her own ideas. She even gets a lot of basic terminologies wrong, like she thought a Lama was a road and that Tibet meant the land of Wisdom Deity. With this, she published several works of these teachings, such as The Secret Doctrine. Whether she meant to be misleading or believed in her
own stories is unclear. There is evidence that suggests that it was likely that Blavatsky had schizophrenia and possibly a dissociative identity disorder. Either way, her works went far and had a much larger compounded influence on Western culture and ideas on what a lot of Eastern philosophy is.

Theosophy grew in its influence on a global scale which would draw a greater audience interested in Tibet and Buddhism. The spirituality craze appeared in the US after the Civil War; theosophy became part of a countercultural to scientific findings. America has a strong tradition of self-governing religious communities dating back to the Puritans. With the increasing number of immigrants coming in, there were more influences from various European ideologies. Madam Blavatsky moved to the United States in the early 1870s and met Henry Steel Olcott. Together in 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York City. Theosophy has always thrived in times of tension against the establishment, whether religious or societal. This continued and was exasperated after the end of WWI, more people were turning to alternative faith and critiquing the current society. With that, there was a revived interest in Tibetan Buddhism in the early 20th century.

Western literature began to turn its attention toward understanding Tibet and its perceived magical qualities as told by Theosophy writings. After the 1904 invasion of Tibet by the British, Francis Younghusband, leader of the invasion, claimed his spiritual awakening while in Tibet and went on to write many books on free love to psychic abilities. Russian author, Georgei Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, continued to perpetuate the idea of the peace-loving Tibetan in his writings. He emphasized that Tibet can only guard its secrets if it is uninfluenced by other nations, however, the invasions of the British compromised that and left Tibet less pure. Then there was esoteric writer Rene Gurnon who wrote that the Dalai Lama represented pure spirituality. The author of Siddhartha and follower of Theosophy, Herman Hesse, wrote numerous books on Buddhism. Various writings have Tibet as a backdrop or referenced Buddhist philosophy in their books. A lot of authors cite Theosophical writings for their information on Tibet, thus spreading a lot of false, misconstrued, and misinterpretations of Tibet to their readers. Then it was the 1960s when this body of literature experienced a revival in popularity which laid the foundation for the New Age movement.

It should be noted that there were some truths written by European authors layered under the tales they spun. There are plenty of written and oral accounts in the Tibetan hagiographies that have counterparts in the Theosophy mythos which does explain some of the misconceptions that were written. The literature does describe the abilities of the supernatural by various Tibetan figures, such as Guru Rinpoche and Milarepa, such as longevity and the ability to control the elements. There are even stories of Tibetan figures transforming into younger versions of themselves. Even Lobsang Rampa’s “third eye” can be seen in depictions of deities, however, this is never applicable to a human being to have. As Martin Brauen beautifully put it, “they are true in the sense that they are found in Tibetan accounts and many Tibetans have believed in them and still believe in them today. They may also describe psychological states and processes, but not actual events in the outside world. Our European fairy tales are also full of miraculous
deeds, and yet scarcely anyone would call them true, in the sense that the supernatural deeds 
described in them were actually performed or indeed are still performed today.”

Why Tibet?

The fixation on Tibet is based on early notions that it was a mysterious land in seclusion, 
full of people with high morals and ancient wisdom, an appealing utopia for frustrated 
Westerners. It was believed that Tibet was a country full of kind, honest people. A place with no 
crime, beggars, and immortality was a possibility. Madam Blavatsky may have had earlier 
encounters with “Lamanist” thought. She was likely influenced by English occult novels and 
drew some of her knowledge from those sources. She thought that Tibetans were advanced in 
their projection and mastered longevity through special means. The spiritual imaginary looks 
enlightened, mystical, or otherworldly because it draws from non-Anglo cultures. Another 
function of Tibet being central to Theosophy because it wasn’t central in the West. If you are 
starting an “ancient” religion with sage masters, you would want them to be inaccessible to the 
general public so they cannot be verifiable. There were not any Tibetans participating in the 
Theosophy scene and could not correct Blavatsky. With approximation aside, Tibet felt like a 
great place where mysterious masters would reside in. Blavatsky credited the Indian Masters in 
Tibet for curing her of her illnesses. If this utopia really did exist, people wanted to aspire to it 
and learn to craft a society that can emulate this spirituality that can cure everything wrong with 
the West and themselves.

Arrival of New Age

A few decades later in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War 
spurred the New Age movement to admit the social strife of the 1960s. On the surface, the 
counterculture movement was conscious altering experimentation through drugs and meditative 
practices. Known as the “Age of Aquarius,” an astrological reference, representing the era of 
peace, love, and unity that followed the hate filled “Age of Pisces.” This was a period where 
there were inspiring motivation for social change under the tensions. Christians in particular 
criticized New Age for heathenistic qualities and labeled it a pseudoreligion. Similarly, scientists 
criticized it for its divinations and alternative healing methods that had not been proven by the 
Western medical establishment, and thus also labeled it a pseudoscience. Many New Age 
practices derive from religious, spiritual, psychic, or magical traditions and are thus criticized by 
both religious institutions and scientists. However, New Age has mostly taken only the surface 
of traditions and is not representative of the practice. New Age is a descendant of Theosophy and 
draws influence from other religious and occult movements of the 19th century.

New age spirituality has developed into a widespread folk religion from its subcultural 
roots of Europe. It is commonly believed that they are deriving inspiration from “Western 
esoteric” traditions that have been suppressed, blaming the dualistic and reductionist nature of
Christianity and science. Esoteric is the true spirituality that has been overshadowed by Christianity, but the knowledge had been kept alive secretly. The argument is that New Age had derived from secret knowledge that originated in the early Renaissance. There is a belief that modern esoterism is not so different from its earlier forms because modern esotericists believe that there is a universal spiritual presence that is unaffected by cultural contingencies. Hanegraaff disagrees with this notion because modern esoterism is mixed with modern rationality and scientific ideas of the Enlightenment period and other traditional thought. Another aspect is that the idea of esoterism cannot be separated from the concept of Christianity, thus esoterism is not timeless and has since been impacted by secularization (occultism) and combined with Gnosis, the idea that spirituality is based on personal inner experience. By drawing inspiration from “lost” traditions and beliefs, New Agers are creating a new tradition, combining their rediscovered old knowledge and modern scientific findings to structure meaning into their lives and the community they hope to create.

What is New Age?

New Age is an eclectic group of beliefs that is rooted based on cultural criticism that takes the form of a spirituality. People were drawn to alternative practices from non-Western philosophies to older Western magic and healing traditions, accepting only practices that would help in one’s daily life or spiritual growth. New Agers see that a religion as a domineering power structure over others based on blind faith, and wanted to resist that. Since there is no religious authority, people made their own interpretations. The idea is that the “self” holds answers to life’s mysteries, truth, inner peace, meaning, and purpose rather than receiving guidance externally, like the Christian God. They may refer to several popular written works for reference, including Theosophic works, but there was never a clear doctrine to follow nor a correct interpretation. New Age, unlike other spiritualities which were rooted in “a religion,” is rooted in a secular culture dealing with several sources of influences with their own symbolic systems being pieced together.

Here are a few characteristics and qualities that were more foundational for the broad umbrella term known as New Age. David Spangler defined two interpretations of the New Age. The first is a metaphor for existing in the world where we can feel the presence of love and possibility (God) within the mundane. The second being that it was apocalyptic and pursuing pagan religions, eastern philosophies, the occult, or involvement with “channeling”, crystals, reincarnation, and other psychic phenomena. It suggested that there may have been an aim to formulate a global consciousness, which could be affirmed for New Agers by drawing beliefs and practices from multiple sources. With that, Hanegraaff provides two other characteristics he identified as part of general New Age thought. One being that there are no dualities or separated, everything is “whole.” For example, there is no separation between God and created beings. The second is that there is no reductionism, meaning that there is something greater and not simplified, like the universe is a living organism with spiritual energy, and not just a mechanism.
Predicting the Trend

The New Age movement is not just something that happened upon or a fad that will recede in time, but rather part of societal development in belief systems. Hanegraaff argues that New Age was predictable and inevitable based on trends of secularization. New Age is ultimately a form for providing the means to craft one’s own spirituality depending on their preferences. Jeffery L. MacDonald argues that this reinvention that is displayed in the New Age is nothing new and has been repeated throughout time, over and over in history. Hanegraaff goes as far as to state that New Age, or perhaps something like it, is not a fad. In his line of logic, they would not likely turn to Atheism because they desire to find some greater meaning to their surrounding world. They are also unlikely to return to a religion such as Christianity because statistics show that people are generally moving away from religious institutions. Overall, there is an increasing trend to emphasize personal inner experience for one’s spirituality. There is both a rejection of religious institutions and the rational mind in favor of intuition. These two combined demark what represents Western culture; thus, New Agers are rejecting Western culture in search of an alternative and wanting to find those alternatives potentially in the marginalized areas of society.

Commodification of Spirituality

“The “spiritual but not religious” are known for their individualistic self-understanding and tendency to appropriate freely from different cultures and religious traditions to meet personal goals.” People will pick and choose various objects, images, or ideas from other religions to suit their “lifestyle” or spiritual needs. The spiritual model that we see today allows for individually centered spirituality in the commodification framework. Jane Mulock describes that spirituality can be used as a modeled framework in which people can “understand the world and their place in it.” New Age placed importance on a “subjective truth” following the Theosophy legacy. It uses spirituality as a self-help tool and focuses on personal transformation, something that can be incredibly appealing to anyone.

The spread of information is similar to what was seen before, but with new technology, the content is spreading faster and there is just more of it. It was books and then it was online spaces that allow the spread of “wellness” practices that are picked up by social media and popular influencers. Siani Abrahams compares it to a legacy reminiscent of colonialism where when new knowledge is encountered, it is “commodified as property belonging to the cultural archive and body of knowledge of the West.” During the process of commodification, knowledge is carried as misinformation and is skewed in the Western mind. This process causes misconceptions and often harmful stereotypes over the communities. When others outside the community recreate their practices and rituals through commodification, it is a loss of authenticity and possibly someone’s livelihood. You can see many modern advertisements that
play on the Western perceptions of what Tibetan Buddhism is that continue to exoticize the community.

Presentation of Commodification

Commodification can be witnessed through experience, also known as tourism. In fact, it is best if you travel and consume various products and services. There is also a strong desire to see things authentically “in their place.” Historically this was seen only through pilgrimages. Modernity and capitalism have changed the landscape of pilgrimage in the West. All tourists desire a deeper involvement with the society and culture they entered, this is one motivation for one’s travels. Everyone wants to go beyond the other ‘mere’ traveler to have a more profound experience. This leads to that commodification and exoticism that plagues us. There are certainly Western Buddhist practitioners who come to Boudhanath as a pilgrim rather than another tourist who may be visiting for an “enlightening experience.” However, Peter Kevin Moran brings up an interesting point in his book *Buddhism Observed.* "Just how superficial is the resemblance between tourists and pilgrims? After all, both tourists and Western pilgrims arrive in Boudhanath with desirous expectations ... that create ‘Tibet’ as an object of the Western gaze. Isn’t the very mobility of both groups enabled by similar, if not identical, economic processes?" 

For some, presenting themselves as spiritual people is about showing how advanced they are over others. In mid-April, I spoke with a Lama in Boudha who discussed this at a cafe. He recounted how the practice of the dharma and the methods of it have been changing from what he learned growing up. He came from a context where you have complete faith in the Buddha without question. They try to be virtuous and avoid negative action which has been a practice for generations. However, foreigners do not come from that context and do not understand that there are steps that must be taken before getting to a higher level of practice. We discussed how many people come to Nepal that are genuinely trying to learn the dharma and become true practitioners. However, there are also many who are just there to show off, making a performance out of it, and are only actors. He attributed this to foreigners coming from fast-paced developing countries, where they are used to convenience and not very patient. That there becomes this notion that one can just have knowledge once they can have access to it, however, dharma is slow and is not convenient. From these “actors,” you can often see that they just want to say that they have something more with all of their symbols of spirituality.

The “Tibetan” inspired products are marketed to satisfy one’s own needs in their goals. People often feel that they are getting some sort of “healing quality” from them, such as Tibetan singing bowls. The products promoted include lengthening of life, youthfulness, and peace of mind. Products also legitimize themselves as “authentic” by anchoring themselves to a part of Tibetan history. Ironically, Tibetan singing bowls are not Tibetan or for sound healing originally. They were bowls from northern India and Nepal for food and happened to be beautifully decorated. They are thought to be adopted by a businessman that marketed them as ritual objects. Plenty of other ritual objects are already misused through their reproduction to the market for anyone’s purchase. This includes featuring symbols that were once sacred and
kept secret printed onto tote bags and the like. Tibetans have also caught on to the merchandising and are making efforts to earn revenue by featuring rituals or selling the same tote bags. Much of this dreamworld is rooted in “Tibetan” imagery, however, it is dictated by the viewers from an outsider audience with their own conflated perceptions.

You can see the outsider’s perception even play into advertisements that are made reaffirming their perceptions of what it means to be “Tibetan.” For the past several decades, there have been many renditions of advertisements that play to sell Western products by featuring monks. At least prior to 2004, it was very common to see monks coincide with technology in advertisements, like the famous Dalai Lama with Apple. Having monks and modern technology being presented together, is attempting to bridge a relationship between the two, placing them in “spiritual harmony” with one another. They can fulfill their desire to continue buying their products all the while these companies get to make a profit. For the Western audience who worry about being too materialistic, they are comforted by these “opposites” coexisting, showing that the “spiritual world” can be brought together with the “modern” one. According to Guy Redden, this commodification and commercialization can occur in the liberal market and globalization culture while offering the “antidote,” or alternative, to capitalist consumption.

Capitalism and Spirituality

Capitalism has a calculated effort in crafting the market for commodified spirituality and it should not go unnoticed. Late stage capitalism relies on, using Jean Baudrillard’s term, simulation, the reproduction of images to represent exotic Other for profit. Professor Jain argues that commodities are utilizing the orientalist fantasy, playing off the nostalgia of some lost cultural norms and enlightenment themes, to appeal to Westerners who are working under increasingly more demanding positions. Peter Doran states that this commercial mindfulness is marketed towards the individuals who are struggling under capitalism; this “mindfulness” is being marketed to encourage those workers’ productivity so that they can better operate in the capitalist scheme. Though they are not completely blameless as consumers of material products to reach spiritual fulfillment, rather than placing blame on consumers for their escapism, there should be more analysis into the pop spirituality that is perpetuated by entrepreneurs and corporations.

When a company is trying to sell you a product, they do it through promoting a message to appeal to their audience when in reality it is an empty gesture to contain any protest. Mark Fisher refers to this as a gestural subversion, when a company offers a product that represents self-care or spirituality, they are only there to make a sale, not because they believe in helping
people come to a better place. You can even see this done ironically to anticapitalist rhetoric in media, it is then commodified and profited from. The problem is being acknowledged but its message is being undermined when no real change is being acted upon. These entrepreneurs and corporations focus on marketing self-care and personal improvement products to middle to upper class consumers with the fallacy that they will feel better so they can make a profit. This sounds rather daunting that no matter what, there will be someone trying to make a profit from your practice, however, it is not all entirely hopeless.

It may also be easily as true that there are people who are genuinely attempting to create real spiritual practice. Mike Featherstone puts forth that “if we focus on the actual use of commodities, it is clear that in certain settings, they can become de-commodified and receive a symbolic charge, over and above that intended by the advertisers, which makes them sacred to their users.” There is always potential for spiritual growth to occur, taking on the objects that may have been misused be reclaimed by respectful means. “Spiritual” groups can be found outside of consumerism. Professor Jain suggests that these groups can include civil rights groups, environmental movements, immigrant movements, or even college campuses. They too could be spiritual while protesting against neoliberal capitalist social structures. Commercial spirituality is only one form of spirituality; it is just the most visible and powerful by nature.110

Why Pop Spirituality?

The draw that pop spirituality provides is in fact that it is an alternative that provides comfort to the individual in this society. Michael York described New Age spiritualism as an “outgrowth of liberal Western capitalism.”111 To quote Paul J Conover and Dallen J Tomothy, the New Age movement was “fueled by people’s dissatisfaction with life, growing stress levels, and struggles with the fast pace and uncertainties of contemporary society,” much like the modern concepts of spirituality.112 We see how dating back to around the 19th century, people look to Tibet as the antithesis of Western civilization. It was symbolic of a spiritual haven where traditional or ancient qualities still existed that embraced a semblance of humanity.113 This was a fantasy crafted for people that imagined an alternative world to Christianity and it provided the validation that there were truths beyond science.114 The spiritual and social freedoms that Tibet was providing was something that was hoped for in the West and later became a feeling that was sought for.

Before continuing on, we also have to acknowledge that pop spirituality is also just another trend for some to follow. I can go on from my earlier accounts and talk about how the internet there are plenty of people who are just enjoying it as fun. “It” being burning sage, reading astrology posts, yoga, crystals, and so on. However, this is not just a trend that is stuck in the West. Nepali youths have also adopted this trend of the Western notion of spirituality. One of
my Nepali friends told me about how, from the internet, they would also go out and buy those crystals or experiment with astrology. However, this is not some sort of modernization of their own religion but rather a part of globalization.

After the devastating failures of the 1960s political movements, people were broken and wanted to just move on from their disappointment.\textsuperscript{115} Even some Nepalis living in Kathmandu had thought that hippies were not only political but religious rebels, dissatisfied with Christianity, and explored Buddhism and Hinduism.\textsuperscript{116} The New Age movement came about due to the “upheavals accompanying the alienation and spiritual emptiness of post-industrial and post-modernist America and Europe.” There began a search for meaning and people sought it through embracing alternative and past symbolic systems which were discarded.\textsuperscript{117} Counterculture youths wanted to “free their minds” and maybe some believed that that could change the world if they could begin from within.\textsuperscript{118} Scholars see these youths functioning as a consumer, fulfilling their need for self-actualization and not true seekers but instead trying to ease themselves under the realities of capitalism.\textsuperscript{119}

This line of thinking aligned with the shift of the relationship with the individual and self-actualization. Warren Susman, author of \textit{Personality and the Making of the Twentieth Century Culture} (1984) explains that in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century United States’ discourse, “character” reflected one’s spiritual state of being. It was in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that the concept of “personality” came into its own which emphasizes self-development. This is where you start to see self-help books, therapy, commodified products, and services that help development. It turns the “self” into a project of improvement. In 1991, Anthony Giddens expands on this with the claim that “self-identity” has now become a fixation. It turned life into a quest that you are responsible for in securing a successful future.\textsuperscript{120} This is where you can see how commercial mindfulness is successful in being marketed toward individuals.\textsuperscript{121}

There are many different neo-spiritual practices, and here I have chosen to focus on astrology in a contemporary context to explain the general theme of comfort in self. Astrology attracted psychological explorations and was compared to psychoanalysis and therapy for some.\textsuperscript{122} Carl Jung drew inspiration from Walter Evan-Wentz’s \textit{Tibetan Book of the Dead} in his psychiatric practice and popularized birth charts, believing that it provided deep insights into the human psyche. This follows the Theosophic notion that Eastern religious practices were a form of healing and thus therapy.\textsuperscript{123} 124 Now, astrology is experiencing a resurgence of popularity that has not been seen since the 1970s, which can be credited to the internet for the audience it has reached. WGSN, the trend forecasting company, declared that modern spirituality was the new norm in 2017. “The popularity of astrology is often explained as the result of the decline of organized religion,” economic instability, and an aspect of the general resurgence of New Age spirituality.\textsuperscript{125} During times of stress and crisis, people are looking to believe in something, which is particularly true in a secular society. Comparing two Pew Research studies, one from 2014 and one from 2020, people who identify as religiously unaffiliated have increased from 22.8% to about 30% of the population, including adolescents, in 6 years.\textsuperscript{126} 127 It was also found
that during the Covid pandemic, there was an influx of people contacting astrologers for readings to bring them comfort.\textsuperscript{128} Even with secularization, humans will always seek some sort of symbolic framework to work out from, and astrology has become a popular one where people have adopted it as a multifaceted tool.

During my research period, I recall back to a conversation that I had with a Vedic astrologer. He had told me that he had burned his own chart. When I asked why he explained to me that people who follow the planets and seek out the advice of an astrologer because they lack strength in their spiritual perspective. You are relying on them and surrendering yourself to them. But as you grow in your spiritual practice, you feel more confident in it and do not need to take refuge and seek out help. At a certain point, you follow your own practice, and the deities will willingly support you in that endeavor. People refer to religion and spirituality for guidance in their lives often, and with the influence of Jung, it is used for mental healing. However, there have been more recent concerns from contemporary psychology experts about the over reliance on religion or spirituality.

**Spiritual Bypass**

In recent decades, the term “spiritual bypass” has been introduced to the psychology world and explains a phenomenon that they have noted. Spiritual bypass was first coined in 1984 by a psychologist and, coincidentally, a Buddhist practitioner, John Welwood. In his definition, spiritual bypass is the avoidance of dealing with personal or emotional issues through the use of spiritual practices and beliefs. Later, Charles Whitfield, a medical doctor and psychotherapist who specializes in trauma uses the term similarly when an individual avoids the necessary work that needs to be addressed on the psychological plain by going straight to the spiritual plain. Spiritual bypass is an avoidance function that occurs when a person tries to adopt the attitude that their human issues are trivial, and then neglects their own relationship and other aspects of life.\textsuperscript{129}

From a study interviewing 10 experts published in 2018, they discuss their experience with patients who experienced spiritual bypass, explained it, and prescribed solutions. People experiencing spiritual bypass are typically excessively emphasis positive emotions, try to detach, are overly tolerant, and disregard personal needs. Not addressing this may result in people becoming codependent or overly controlling of others or themselves. In spite of this, some experts expressed that spiritual bypass could lead to one’s natural spiritual development and could be a useful short term coping strategy. Ideally, their clients would learn how to feel more connected to their own emotions, pay attention to different aspects of their lives, engage with people in their lives, and have compassion for themselves and others. Some experts also recommended integrating spirituality into their therapy or finding a community or support system in a healthy environment that would encouraging their patients.
Conclusion

The big question that has been my guide and curiosity for this paper is why, why have people grown invested in modern forms of spirituality. I have gone through this paper giving background to what spirituality is and how it came about, but why has it stuck around, even if it is questionable? To reiterate it bluntly, it is because people are unhappy with the current state of the world. It felt like a very simple answer, but time and time again when I was researching, this was the same conclusion that many had come to. Of course, there was literature that touched on the history of the colonial desire for something exotic, but the reasoning for why it is being utilized in this depiction still relates to dissatisfaction. From attending the lecture at the monastery, I could see many Westerners there trying to learn more, even if they did not know Tibetan. At my yoga retreat, people spoke to me in depth about yogic practices. I may not have understood what they were telling me, but I knew they were invested. People are trying to do it the right way, by coming for experiences and teachings they would not otherwise have. There has been an extensive history tracing the West involvement in the Indo-Tibetan regions which began with missionaries trying to explore a possible extension of their own faith. Centuries later, people are still trying to figure out what they believe and what to place their “faith” in. What much of the West knows about Eastern philosophy is so skewed due to the transmission of inaccurate teachings. Thus, putting us at a disadvantage in understanding religious practices while trying to sift out the misinformation we are pummeled with.

With what I know now, I am not sure what direction I will go next in terms of what spirituality means to me. The Lama had an observation that he found that everyone want something different from where they started, then he asked me what had brought me to Nepal. I had grown up in a fairly non-religious environment. If I am going to be honest with myself, I was curious to learn more about Buddhism in an environment where it is integral to the culture that I was going to be living in. I had grown up hearing about the praise of Buddhist philosophy so coming to Nepal seemed like a good direction to take. However, I also grew up with Atheist ideology at home too, so there is another part of me that is skeptical of learning beyond an academic setting. A part of me wants to learn more about what it means to be “spiritual” while another thinks that it is all nonsense. Following so many others, I came to Nepal to see what I could learn from the people around me while still feeling that bit of resistance within myself. I wanted to gain a sense of validity or lack thereof. Knowing how Theosophy has impacted my worldview so deeply, I find myself more confused about Eastern philosophy now than I did before I arrived in Nepal. All I know is that I have gained some perspective and what I would like to see is more accessibility to knowledge for those who are also trying to sort this out too.
Future Research Recommendations

I only had a limited time to conduct the research that I did, and I could easily see the potential research that could continue for years with the published material that already exists. Originally, I wanted to focus on the topic of spiritual materialism, examining the different relationships that foreigners and locals have with the same material. However, I realized that this is a very wide topic and would realistically need to focus on one material object and its history. This could take the form of religious tourism activities that range from attending Buddhist seminars at a monastery to sound healing sessions. One could attend these functions, possibly interview other attendees who are participating, and then go to talk to someone who is a “traditional” practitioner. I think there could also be a deeper exploration into the connection between the colonial and egotistical desire to possess objects and knowledge.

Another angle I was interested in was researching more in depth about how corporations market “mindfulness” to the consumer. I attempted to briefly touch in *Commodification and Spirituality* section, but I wanted to look at the potential case studies that are available. You can examine how this takes shape in the wellness and spiritual industry, everything from self-help books, mindfulness and healing classes, online classes, and social media posts, to travel packages. This itself is also an examination of how material culture gets intertwined with spirituality in the present day.

I think a continuation of these relationships is a crucial part of our current understanding of globalization’s effects on spirituality. In my research, I hope that I have highlighted that a driving force behind pop spirituality is that people are discontent with their lives, so I want to examine this obvious fact and learn why that is in more detail. I cannot fathom an effective way where this research is practically helpful for future action. But I hope that fellow Westerners could take something away from this realizing how maybe spirituality does not need to look like something found in some “exotic” or “otherworldly” place. It should not stop them from learning about other religion’s theologies, but it can also look like deepening a connection with your own context and helping the people there. This understanding can assist an individual in creating a connection with their journey into spirituality and connecting on a deeper level with the world around them.
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