

“The Samaritan’s Inn: Preliminary Reflections on Carrette and King’s Critique of Religion as Therapy in Light of Orthodox Therapeutic Theology”

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Recent years have seen a proliferation of books on the subject of spirituality, both positive and negative in assessment. In their 2004 book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*,¹ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King embody the latter perspective, taking issue with the popularity of the terminology of spirituality in today’s linguistic landscape. Their primary critique is that such language functions to establish a privatized form of religion that is rebranded as spirituality and often made to serve corporate interests. They also complain that this strictly interior phenomenon eschews social involvement and concerns itself only with satisfying the individual needs of spiritual consumers. The contemporary focus on religion as therapy is yet another aspect of this troubling privatization of religion for Carrette and King. They also suggest that “Offering therapy may have important individual and social values” if the goal is not to “sell business ideology itself as a form of ‘spirituality,’” but they doubt that this can be said of much spirituality today.² One might be tempted to write off such criticism as unduly harsh. While this is certainly the

¹ Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

² *Ibid.*, *Selling Spirituality*, 141.

case in their categorical dismissal of many important contemporary religious trends, I believe some of Carrette and King's points warrant further consideration. How does Christian spirituality fare in their assault? Does it escape unscathed or is it laid to waste along with the many other forms of spirituality mentioned? Here, I will limit the discussion to consider the specific relationship between their critique of spiritual therapy and a therapeutic strand in Orthodox Christian theology that describes Christianity as essentially a form of therapy for the illness of sin. In this interpretation, the Church is compared to a hospital and likened to the inn in the parable of the good Samaritan, with Jesus Christ as the head physician. We begin by considering several arguments made by Carrette and King in *Selling Spirituality* against the language of spirituality and religious therapy. Following this is a description of the therapeutic theology of the Orthodox Church based on several representative theologians and then a consideration of how the criticisms of Carrette and King relate to this theological perspective.

In *Selling Spirituality*, Carrette and King give an account of what they call the "silent takeover of religion" by individualistic and corporatist ideologies through the use of the language of spirituality, therapy, and psychology in both popular and professional discourse. The authors claim that religion has gone through a process of privatization in two stages: a first stage in which religion is redefined as primarily an interior and individual matter and called spirituality, and a second stage of where this individualized religion is employed as a marketing tool for commercial interests.

For Carrette and King, privatizing religion is made possible partly due to the fact that the language of spirituality is ambiguous and adaptable. The authors suggest that these qualities partly explain its widespread success and lack of specific content. Spirituality is said to be marketable to a diverse range of groups with diverse interests. The language used may sometimes be identical to the language found in more traditional religious settings but in these cases, the terms are psychologized and "recast ... in terms of the modern psychological

self.”³ While the authors do not offer their own definitive understanding of spirituality, they express concern about the monopoly over the term by individualist and corporatist ideologies. Furthermore, they desire to see more socially-engaged forms of spirituality emerge as correctives to this trend. These socially engaged and this-worldly versions of spirituality are praised as revolutionary or anti-capitalist and the authors see these as lacking in today's spiritual scene. They go on to categorize several other versions of spirituality based on their degree of accommodation to the ideology of capitalism, which makes for a caustic but limited critique that is less than satisfactory in many ways. One may agree with their call for more socially aware forms of spirituality, but their disdain for any such activity that hints at personal therapy appears based on a simplistic understanding of therapy and of the self that undergirds therapy, a point which will be later elaborated.

In the authors' view, after being long privatized, religion has recently been reintroduced into the public sphere in a new socially defanged and commercially exploitable version. It has been stripped of its social relevance and its power to transform conditions in the world. In this new form of spirituality, there is no mention of the reality of suffering and no mention of ethical values such as self-denial, self-discipline, and social responsibility. The authors claim that the transformative social and ethical aspects of religious traditions have been either ignored or retranslated according to the values of individualism and consumerism to which these religious ideals were initially opposed. Rather than challenging the social order as they once did, religious ideals are made to refer only to the well-being and pleasure of individuals considered in isolation from their wider social environment. This trend, rather than reaching down to cure the social roots of individual ills, actually perpetuates the crisis by encouraging the notion that individuals can find their wellbeing in isolation from the wellbeing of society. The authors contrast this way of shaping the self based on the “psychologisation of the western world” and the “modern psychological self” with what they call “religious models

³ Ibid., 54.