

# Meaningless spirituality?

Citation for published version (APA):

Vliegenthart, D. (2023). Meaningless spirituality? The Satsang Network as a Grassroots Response to the Modern Western Crisis of Meaning. In K. Heidemann (Ed.), *Combating Crises From Below: Social responses to polycrisis in Europe* (pp. 147-174). Maastricht University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.26481/mup.2301.06>

## Document status and date:

Published: 29/06/2023

## DOI:

[10.26481/mup.2301.06](https://doi.org/10.26481/mup.2301.06)

## Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

## Document license:

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# Meaningless spirituality?

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### Citation for published version (APA):

Vliegthart, D. (2023). Meaningless spirituality? . In K. Heidemann (Ed.), *Combating crises from below: Social responses to polycrisis in Europe* (1st ed.). Maastricht University Press. <https://doi.org/10.26481/mup.2301.06>

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**Document status and date:**

Published: 30/06/2023

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**DOI:**

10.26481/mup.2301.06

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**Document version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known  
as Version of record

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**Document license:**



## CHAPTER 6:

### MEANINGLESS SPIRITUALITY?

#### THE SATSANG NETWORK AS A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE TO THE MODERN WESTERN CRISIS OF MEANING

*Dave Vliegthart, Maastricht University*

There is a buzz in the room. It is a conference room, this time. Next time, it may be a rented space in a small church or at a retirement home. The location changes, but the air is always charged with anticipation. About a hundred people are seated in rows, the majority white men and women of middle or senior age. Many are regulars, who attend every one of these monthly meetings and some of the annual residentials. Others heard or read about these gatherings and searched online for the next event in their area. All visitors parted with a small entry fee at the door to gain entrance to the "satsang" inside, which could begin any minute now. Some are chatting away. Others are silently sitting with their hands folded in their lap and their eyes closed or fixated on the floor. Now and then their gaze darts in the direction of the grandfatherly figure who is sitting in front of the audience, with a glass of water and a bouquet of flowers on the table next to him. Except for his place in the room and the table at his side, nothing sets him apart from the rest. His eyes scan the room but avoid contact. After the buzz died down, he rises. "Hellooo," he cheers, now looking directly at his audience with a cheeky smile on his lips and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Over the next hours, the man alternates between monologues and question-and-answer dialogues with members of his audience, whom he addresses as "friends." As always, the topic is "enlightenment." Yet, he says right away, "I am not enlightened" (Parsons, 2003, p. 1). Nor can they become enlightened. That is the whole point, he keeps reminding them: a person cannot become enlightened since there is no person. The idea of a separate "me" is an illusion.<sup>1</sup> All there is, is this. "What is being suggested here is that there is only boundless energy, which has absolutely no purpose or meaning of any kind" (Parsons, 2019).

The grandfatherly figure is British "satsang teacher" Tony Parsons. He belongs to a growing satsang network in Europe and North America. This network is spreading

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<sup>1</sup> "The pretense of 'me' goes on being reinforced even in the search for enlightenment, because what a so-called master will say to you is, 'I have become enlightened—I am an enlightened person and you can become an enlightened person.' You—this pretend 'you'! It's a total, utter fallacy, because awakening is the realisation that there is no one—it's as simple as that" (Parsons, 2003, p. 3).

Hindu-inspired non-dualist teachings, which have been described as “Neo-Advaita.” Neo-Advaita claims that your life has no meaning or purpose because there is no separate “you” to begin with, which means that there is nothing for people to do, gain or obtain. This message is drawing more and more “spiritual seekers,” who are searching for a deeper meaning and purpose in life. The question is *why* such a “meaningless spirituality” has emerged and *how* it can provide a source of meaning in life, when it portrays life as meaningless.

This chapter answers these questions in reverse order. It consists of three parts. The first part introduces the satsang network, with a focus on recurrent themes in question-and-answer dialogues between satsang teachers and their students. The second part answers how the meaningless spirituality of Neo-Advaita is still able to provide a source of meaning in life by relating these recurrent themes to a philosophical definition of meaning and a psychological explanation of the search for meaning, against the socio-historical background of a modern western “crisis of meaning.” The third part answers why this crisis of meaning has given rise to a meaningless spirituality such as the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network.

## PART 1: The Satsang Network

The late Liselotte Frisk (2002) was among the first scholars of religion to note the rise of a network of loosely affiliated “enlightened”<sup>2</sup> western teachers holding similar types of meetings or *satsangs* with spiritual seekers in Europe and North America, towards the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century. Though its members do not comprise an actual movement, in the conventional sense, she said, they can still be seen as such. The teachers use a similar vocabulary derived from the same sources, many of them recognize each other as “enlightened,” and most of their “unenlightened” students attend satsangs of more than one teacher (Frisk, 2002, p. 66). In other words, these teachers and students identify as loosely affiliated members of the same “satsang network.” Before we turn to examples from the satsang network, I will explain its practical and intellectual roots. This general background should help to better understand these concrete examples later.

Practically, the satsang network continues an ancient Indian religious custom. “Satsang is a sitting together with an enlightened person who usually gives a short speech and then answers questions” (Frisk, 2002, p. 67). In a modern western context, these meetings range from a handful of visitors in a living room to hundreds of people in a conference hall. Based on his ethnographic study, sociologist Keith Abbott (2011, Chapter 3) observes that most of these meetings feel like public lectures, though

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<sup>2</sup> “Enlightened” here refers to Indian concepts such as the Buddhist *bodhi* and the Hindu *moksha* and *atma- or brahma-jnana* (Cf. Jacobs, 2020, pp. 378 & 394-395).

some take the form of therapeutic workshops. Meetings cost between fifteen and fifty pounds or euros to cover the teacher's travel and accommodation expenses, but workshops and retreats can run into hundreds of pounds or euros. The teachers often speak the same language as their students, but a (growing) number of them are holding satsangs abroad in English, sometimes with an interpreter present. The question-and-answer dialogues that are at the center of these satsangs revolve around personal problems and existential anxieties, which, we will see later, often concern a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in life. This lends the satsang network its quasi-therapeutic flavour, with students openly discussing their private lives with teachers in a public setting (cf. Gilmore, 2010, pp. 670-673). At satsangs, students sit in rows whereby questioners either take a seat next to the teacher or stand up but stay in the audience. Recordings of satsangs are usually shared or sold on the teacher's website and turned into books. This focus on talks and texts shows the intellectual nature of the satsang network.

Intellectually, the talks and texts of the satsang network are "translating an Eastern religion into a contemporary Western culture" (Frisk, 2002, p. 74). More specifically, they draw on Advaita Vedanta (Frisk, 2002, p. 75). Vedanta is a tradition within "Hinduism."<sup>3</sup> It belongs to the six orthodox schools that deem the Vedas the divine or divinely inspired, and therefore incontestable, starting point of their worldview.<sup>4</sup> *Vedānta* means "end of the Vedas," as in both the conclusion and culmination of the sacred canon of traditional Indian culture. The name underscores its scriptural focus on the final parts of the Vedas, known as the Upanishads. Advaita is a tradition within Vedanta. *A-dvaita* means "not-two." Taken together, Advaita Vedanta refers to non-dualist interpretations of the Upanishads.

The Indian philosopher Shankara (circa 700-750 CE) systemized these non-dualist interpretations through highly technical exegeses. Based on these exegeses (e.g., Shankara, 1956), the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta may be summarized as follows: as consciousness (*cit*), the self (*atman*) is the divine (*brahman*), which is "one without a second." This is realized by heeding the advice of the Upanishads, which is to reflect on the fundamental question "Who am I?" (Olivelle, 1996/2008, p. 319). Through such "self-enquiry" (*atma-vicara*), in which one discriminates between the absolute and the relative, one knows directly what one is—consciousness—by knowing what one is not—(only) the content of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Though most satsang teachers refer to Shankara, many (unwittingly) rely on modernized versions of his philosophy, as summarized above, which either downplay or discard its doctrinal and praxeological parts. Dennis Waite (2007, p. 8), a non-

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<sup>3</sup> I use quotation marks because some scholars have (convincingly) argued that "Hinduism" is an orientalist construct based on European conceptions of "religion" (e.g., King, 1999; Pennington, 2005; Schwab, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> i.e., Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, *Mīmāṃsā*, Vedanta.

<sup>5</sup> Note that this simplified summary is already tailored to the modernized Advaita discussed in this chapter.

academic authority on Advaita, explains that one of the first modernized versions made its way to the West via Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Indeed, in 1893, Vivekananda presented a modernized Advaita, under the guise of "Hinduism," at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (Koppedrayer, 2004). However, academic and non-academic pundits (e.g., Lucas, 2014; Renard, 2017; Waite, 2007) agree, the most popular modernizations of Advaita in western spiritual circles today were introduced during the second part of the twentieth century by western students-turned-teachers of Indian sages Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) and his student Hariwanshlal "Papaji" Poonja (1910-1997), Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981) and his student Ramesh Balsekar (1917-2009), and Krishna "Atmananda" Menon (1883-1959).

Unlike the doctrinal and praxeological focus of "traditional" Advaita, modernized "non-traditional" Advaita relies solely on self-enquiry (Lucas, 2014), if that. Ramana (1902/1982; 1985, pp. 45-91) and Poonja (1995/2000, pp. 153-280), for instance, urged their students to reflect upon "Who am I?" Atmananda (Menon, 1973/1991) did the same, albeit arguably with more intellectual rigour. Nisargadatta (1973/2005, pp. 297-300) and Balsekar (1999, pp. 39-41; 1992, pp. 225-227, 243-247, 260-261) were the most radical non-dualists, who insisted that even self-enquiry can sustain the illusion of a separate "me," if it is perceived as something that a person can do to become enlightened.

According to Waite (2007, pp. 378-426), the Indian philosophers and sages above have fostered five types of Advaita Vedanta in the West: Traditional Advaita (Shankara), Neo-Vedanta (Vivekananda), Direct Path (Ramana, Atmananda), Neo-Advaita (Nisargadatta), and Pseudo-Advaita. All five types of teachers give satsangs, but Waite (2008, p. 7) mostly associates the satsang network with Neo-Advaita, which will therefore be our focus.

Traditional Advaita essentially takes its authority from the Upanishads, as well as the great Indian teacher Shankara. It postulates that there is a "path" that we must follow, albeit an apparent one, which helps us come to know the essence of our true selves, to realize the Self within us. Practices are undertaken to aid this discovery, which may include study of the scriptures, meditation, surrender and self-enquiry. Neo-Advaita (of which Tony Parsons is its greatest exponent) says there is no path. You are already that which you seek. You are THAT. (Marvelly in Waite, 2007, p. xvi)

This quote by British spiritual seeker cum journalist Paula Marvelly sums up the difference between "traditional" Advaita and "non-traditional" Neo-Advaita. She picks out Tony Parsons, who is the "grandfatherly figure" from the opening passage of this chapter. In 2004, Marvelly (2004, p. 58) noticed that "On the London Advaita circuit, Tony Parsons is one of the most popular teachers there is, his meetings seem to

attract an ever-growing collection of people in search of the ultimate truth." Ten years later, in 2014, American scholar of religion Arthur Versluis (2014, p. 228) even counted Parsons among the most influential Neo-Advaita teachers in the West.<sup>6</sup> It is safe to say that Parsons is the "eminence grise" of Neo-Advaita, who has influenced many other satsang teachers (Van den Boogaard, 2012, p. 15). Though most of them prefer to call themselves "non-duality teachers," Waite (2007, p. 384) refers to Parsons and former students of his, especially Nathan Gill, Jan Kersschot, Leo Hartong, and Richard Sylvester,<sup>7</sup> as "key teachers of Neo-Advaita."

Next, I will give an impression of recurrent themes within the satsang network based on examples of dialogues between these Neo-Advaita teachers and their students. These themes will later guide our discussion about why the satsang network has emerged and how its Neo-Advaita can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers, when it presents life as meaningless.

## Tony Parsons (British, 1933)

According to Parsons (2003, p. 6), "the world and our apparent lives [are] not going anywhere and [have] absolutely no purpose or meaning," but they are "so beguiling and fascinating that the mind is absolutely sure it has meaning and that it will lead somewhere."

*Q: Yes. But to say that it's purposeless or meaningless or pointless is somehow ... doesn't sound quite right.*

*A: [...] You see, the great difficulty people have with, let's call it enlightenment, is that they've been conditioned to think they've got to go somewhere or become something for that to happen. And what's being said directly now is that that isn't the case. It's got absolutely nothing to do with you at all, or you going anywhere or anything happening to you in that way. What you are is totally the divine expression. (Parsons, 2003, p. 13)*

Everyone already is enlightened, Parsons says. Rather, "the realization of enlightenment brings with it the sudden comprehension that there is no one and nothing to be enlightened" (Parsons, 1995, p. 7). Not only that, "Doctrines, processes and progressive paths which seek enlightenment only exacerbate the problem they address by reinforcing the idea that the self can find something that it presumes it has

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<sup>6</sup> More accurately, Versluis calls Parsons "one of the most influential of the immediatist spiritual teachers," whereby "immediatism" includes but is not limited to "Neo-Advaita" or "the satsang network" (Versluis, 2014, p. 227).

<sup>7</sup> In his book, Waite also mentions Roger Linden, whom I left him out because he has not published any of his satsangs. On his website Advaita Vision, Waite also mentions Richard Sylvester, whom I included because he has published many of his satsangs.

lost" (Parsons, 1995, p. 4 & 5). Based on a quote by Shankara, Parsons (in Waite, 2007, pp. 387-388) claims that this "open secret" aligns with the hidden message of Advaita scriptures. In fact, he thinks that this is "what all the religions and all the scriptures are about," but which has been lost or buried in the belief systems and religious institutions people have built around it over time (Parsons, 2003, p. 122 & 216). "People put such an investment in belief systems," Parsons (2001, p. 340) goes on to say, while "enlightenment" has nothing to do with beliefs. Therefore, he adds, "One of the functions of my teachings is destroying belief systems" (Parsons, 2001, p. 336).

## Nathan Gill (British, 1960-2014)

Gill (2004, p. 19) agrees with Parsons that "life appears as a great play" and "The whole play has no purpose or point beyond present appearance." Whatever appears in this play, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary, is the content of awareness, he says, while you are both this content *and* awareness itself (Gill, 2004, p. 18), what he calls consciousness.

There is only ever *knowing*, but this knowing is seemingly veiled by the mesmerization with the "I" thought and all the other thoughts that appear as "my" story. Our true nature as Consciousness is awareness *and* the appearances. The "I" is simply a part of the scenery, as are all the other various images, and when it is seen through—or seen for what it is—then seeking and tension fall naturally away. (Gill, 2004, p. 16)

**Q:** *So really, we can't do anything?*

**A:** No, because the "I" that would do something *is* the mesmerisation. (Gill, 2004, p. 139)

**Q:** *Why is it that Ramana Maharshi recommends self-enquiry, while you and others like you say that nothing needs to be done?*

**A:** [...] Whenever there's the idea that there are entities of any kind that should meditate, enquire, understand or do anything else to transcend the sense of separation, it's actually that idea of a separate entity that can do or needs to do something that reinforces—within the story—the very sense of separation it seeks to overcome. (Gill, 2006, pp. 67-68)



## Jan Kersschot (Belgian, 1960)

Inspired by Parsons and Gill, Kersschot (2007) also speaks of the “myth of self-enquiry.” He rhetorically asks, “What if there is no spiritual path at all? What if there is no spiritual liberation? What if the person who feels locked up is just a construction of the mind?” (Kersschot, 2007, pp. xi-xii).

**Q:** *If that were true, there would be nothing left to do on the spiritual level. All these religious dogmas lose their meaning. Everything is possible then.*

**A:** That's exactly why some call it liberation [...] the idea of being on a spiritual path is just a concept of the mind. An illusion. Not only the spiritual path is illusory, also the seeker is an illusion. In other words, it's the complete end of the spiritual search. (Kersschot, 2007, pp. 37 & 38-39)

## Leo Hartong (Dutch, 1948-2018)

In a similar vein, Hartong talks about “the myth of enlightenment.” According to him, “The belief that awakening is about such a state—that it is an experience for someone—constitutes the enlightenment myth. It continues the illusion of a separate seeker and keeps you trapped in the search for the desired awakening” (Hartong, 2001/2007, p. 136). Among his students, such bold statements beg the question about the meaning of life and death.

**Q:** *Why are we born into this world and why do we die?*

**A:** [...] The question may sound reasonable but is in fact not very meaningful. You are asking for the meaning of life, while everything that has meaning is a relative position within life. It is like asking “Where is space located?” whereas everything that has a location occupies a relative position within space [...] I would suggest that you first inquire “who” you really are, before attempting to answer “why” you are. (Hartong, 2005, p. 50)

## Richard Sylvester (British, c. 1945)

The above themes also recur in Sylvester's satsangs. Like Parsons, Sylvester (2016, p. 39) says, for instance, that “At the root of many religious traditions there may have been the realisation that All Is One. But this has become much obscured.” His critical stance towards religious institutions is shared by many of his students, some of whom consider organized religions “poisonous” and “more of a curse than a blessing” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 268 & 288).

Like Gill, Sylvester sees the quest for meaning and purpose in life as entertainment. He reduces all secular and religious belief systems to "stories," which try to "either make sense of the mess inside me, the psychological mess, or the mess outside me, the mess of the world" (Sylvester, 2008, pp. 56, 77, 122). "Some of the stories [...] require us to believe in a God whose intentions and preferences we know [...] some of the stories might be scientific ones," which, for instance, reduce consciousness to the brain and the universe to a Big Bang (Sylvester, 2008, p. 48). In the end, they are nothing but stories we tell ourselves to find meaning and purpose in our life. At satsang, he says, "We're inviting the end of meaning, the end of purpose and the end of all the stories that we have ever been told and ever believed in" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 78), including Neo-Advaita's own story about non-duality.

*Q: What is a human being? What is its meaning?*

**A:** A human being is Oneness expressing itself as a human being. It has no meaning. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 286)

*Q: But what is the purpose of being human?*

**A:** There is no purpose, although the mind will often invent one. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 284)

*Q: You say [when] the person falls away and [then] the stories are seen through. Can we also say that everything is seen as story?*

**A:** Yes. Paradoxically, all that's left is story. And what we're talking about here is also a story, the story of non-duality. Let's make no mistake about that [...] Of course, they [the stories] can still be taken as entertainment. (Sylvester, 2008, p. 59 & 58)

By fictionalizing them, Neo-Advaita relativizes or even destroys literally all belief systems, including itself, which deprives spiritual seekers of an absolute source of meaning in life.

*Q: Does non-duality reveal all religions and philosophies as interchangeable, as valuable or as valueless as each other?*

**A:** Yes [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273)

Like Kersschot and Hartong, Sylvester destroys the common concepts or myths spiritual seekers have about spiritual beliefs and practices in pursuit of enlightenment or liberation.

*Q: I've heard and read several people communicating about non-duality. Some of them [...] make liberation sound terrifying. My concepts about spirituality have been blown apart. Have you found liberation terrifying?*

*A: The seeing of liberation here [for "me"] hasn't been terrifying. But it has nothing to do with most people's concepts of spirituality. In a way, spirituality can be regarded as another entertainment in the funfair of life, whilst there's nothing particularly entertaining about liberation. Here life simply goes on [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 129)*

Aware of the relativity of every belief system and therefore deprived of any absolute source of meaning and purpose in their life, many satsang students suffer from existential despair.

*Q: I too have spent decades following gurus—in fact, many of the gurus who are famous in the West. I was always looking for some special kind of bliss [...] looking back, I feel the pain of seeing all that searching as a waste of time [...] I recognize the impossibility of my doing anything to make "it" happen, to bring about the seeing of "This." I feel despair and complete frustration. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 228)*

*Q: The amount of despair I feel seems to depend on how much I hold on to my outdated beliefs. But the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life, certainly cause me big trouble! The loss of meaning in my life is especially painful [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239)*

According to Sylvester, despair occurs when a person loses a source of meaning. "Often we deal with this by simply finding another meaning," say, through religious conversion; "We give up Catholicism and become a Buddhist. Eventually [...] meaning might run out altogether and leave us in despair" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 58). Many satsang students imagine that enlightenment or liberation brings freedom from despair, in "a state of perfect peace" (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). As one of them says, "the appeal of liberation to me is that it offers the promise of improvement to my personal experience of life" (Sylvester, 2016, p. 104). For Sylvester, there is no despair in liberation, not because it adds meaning to a person's existence, but because the existence of the person who requires meaning is seen through.

More and more people are drawn to the satsang network. The growing interest in its Neo-Advaita teachings is reflected in a proliferation of publishers,<sup>8</sup> websites,<sup>9</sup> podcasts<sup>10</sup> and vodcasts.<sup>11</sup> Members of the satsang network have also noticed this rising popularity. Reminiscing on its early days, one student remembers, for instance, how, in the mid-1990s, “The satsang circuit was littered with new names, and it looked as though there would soon be more teachers than students” (Gill, 2006, p. 50). Satsang teacher Tony Parsons (2007) even speaks of “a sudden explosion of non-dualism in the last ten years [...] with thousands of books and teachings under the heading of Advaita.” His student-turned-teacher Richard Sylvester (2016, p. 272) slightly nuances that “In general, few people are interested in non-duality. However, amongst spiritual seekers, it has become very popular in recent years.”

Despite its rising popularity, besides Frisk (2002), only a few scholars have studied the satsang network. Among them are Thomas Forsthoefel (2002/2007; 2005), Ann Gleig (2010; 2013), Philip Lucas (2011, 2014), and Arthur Versluis (2014). Yet, they focus on the satsang network in North America to explain how Advaita has been introduced to a western audience. I focus on Europe to explain why the satsang network has emerged and how its Neo-Advaita appeals to a western audience. I will do so in reverse order, starting with the paradox of how an ancient Hindu-inspired non-dualism that presents life as meaningless can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers in modern Europe. I will base my answer on a philosophical definition of meaning and a psychological explanation of the search for meaning, against a broader socio-historical background of a crisis of meaning.

## PART 2: The Modern Quest for Meaning

### What provides us with meaning in life?

Satsang students are often searching for an alternative source of meaning in their life because traditional sources of meaning have lost their value for them, due to socio-historical developments that we will come back to below. They believe that life must have a meaning, because saying it is “*meaningless* [...] *doesn't sound quite right*” (Parsons, 2003, p. 13), but that the meaning provided by organized religions is “*poisonous*” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 268). Many of them turn to contemporary “spirituality.” Yet, satsang teachers such as Tony Parsons (1995, 2003) tell them that life (Hartong, 2005, p. 50), religious beliefs about life (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273) and

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<sup>8</sup> e.g., Samsara (NL, 2003); Non-Duality Press (UK, 2004); Viveki (NL, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> e.g., Satsang.nl (NL, 2000); Advaita Vision (UK, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> e.g., Praten over Bewustzijn [“Talking about Consciousness”] (NL, 2009); Non-Duality Podcast (UK, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> e.g., Jetzt.tv [“Now.tv”] (GER, 2006); Conscious.tv (UK, 2007).

spiritual paths in life (Kersschot, 2007, pp. 38-39) are all meaningless. How can their Neo-Advaita provide a source of meaning for spiritual seekers, then?

This question begs a more general question about what it is that provides meaning in life. Philosopher Thaddeus Metz (2013) has come across three types of answers to this fundamental question in English philosophical literature: naturalist and supernaturalist answers, whereby the former can be further subdivided into subjective and objective views.

Naturalism does not necessarily deny the existence of a divine being, but it does deny that a divine being is necessary for a meaningful existence. Subjective naturalism, on the one hand, consigns meaning to the obtainment of objects towards which one has a positive attitude, such as fulfilling a desire or feeling proud of an achievement (e.g., Taylor, 1970/2000). Objective naturalism, on the other hand, maintains that this is not sufficient for a meaningful life because there are objects that should be valued in themselves. Most forms of naturalism blend these views. Susan Wolf (2010, p. 8), for instance, argues that "meaning arises from [subjectively] loving objects [objectively] worthy of love, and engaging with them in a positive way." Among Metz's (2013, Chapters 9-11) counterarguments to this view is that subjective attraction to objective attractiveness remains an elusive criterion.

Supernaturalism asserts that a meaningful existence does rely on (a correct relation to) a divine being, which often implies alignment with a higher purpose (e.g., Cottingham, 2005). Among Metz's (2013, Chapters 5-8) counterarguments to this view is that it is inconsistent for supernaturalists to claim to know for certain that some lives have meaning without being able to know for certain if a divine being exists. In addition, he says, divine beings are typically said to be unchanging and timeless, which would mean that they could not engage in purposeful activities, because that would require change over time. Metz (2013, p. 81) does admit that his critique is based on concepts of the divine derived from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which differ from, say, Hindu and Buddhist concepts of the divine.

Metz's fundamentality theory brings these views together. In his own words, "supernaturalists who prescribe communing with God or honouring one's soul, subjectivists who advocate striving to achieve whatever ideals one adopts upon reflection, and objectivists who recommend creating artworks or promoting justice, are all indicating ways to connect with value beyond one's animal self" (Metz, 2013, p. 30). Metz (2013, p. 222) concludes,

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

Why is this philosophical definition of meaning relevant for the satsang network? This definition explains why satsang teachers can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers, despite claiming that life is meaningless; because their intellectual talks and texts employ reason in ways that orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence by enquiring into the self or consciousness. Simply put, reflecting on the meaning of life lends meaning to life, even if life is found to be meaningless. This answers the question of what it is that provides meaning in life and why the satsang network meets that criterion. But it begs yet another question of why people search for meaning to begin with.

## Why do we search for meaning in life?

One of the most profound questions people ask is about the meaning and purpose of their existence. Spiritual seekers attend satsangs to find answers to such questions. For instance, "*Why are we born into this world and why do we die?*" (Hartong, 2005, p. 50). They feel that something is missing from their life (Parsons, 2003, p. 14), which they believe can be fulfilled by enlightenment or liberation. Based on decades of his own spiritual seeking (Sylvester, 2018), satsang teacher Richard Sylvester (2016, p. 312) speaks from experience when he asserts:

The fundamental problem that many of us face is a core sense of dissatisfaction with whatever is the case. This can persist no matter what may be happening in our lives [...] At a deep level, this sense of dissatisfaction manifests as a search for meaning, an insistent and persistent feeling that there must be more than "just this," that "just this" must be about something. Oh, if only we could find out what that meaning is, at last, we would feel fulfilled [...] Liberation brings an end to this search for meaning.

Spiritual seekers are missing a feeling of meaning and purpose for whatever is happening in their lives. As Sylvester (2008, p. 122) argues elsewhere, people search for meaning in religious and secular belief systems "to make sense of the mess inside me, the psychological mess, or the mess outside me, the mess of the world." Social psychologists such as Roy Baumeister (1991, pp. 17-19) agree that human beings search for meaning to gain a feeling of control over their inner and outer world. The key word here is "feeling." Studies show that the mere understanding of (inner) states and (outer) events can already provide people with a *feeling* of control, even if they cannot influence these states and events (Baumeister, 1991, p. 42). This is called interpretive control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982, pp. 24-27). Belief systems provide people with interpretive control by projecting a constant meaning and purpose onto the changing states and events in their life. This allows them to understand their inner and outer world, which reduces their existential uncertainty and anxiety.

Why is this psychological explanation of the search for meaning relevant for the satsang network? It explains why the satsang network can be a source of meaning for spiritual seekers, even though its Neo-Advaita present life as meaningless. The answer lies in interpretive control: *any* understanding of life can function as a source of meaning, even when it presents life as meaningless, if it fosters a feeling of control that reduces existential uncertainty and anxiety. However, some belief systems do seem more powerful than others.

According to Baumeister (1991, p. 182) and many other psychologists (e.g. Emmons, 1999/2003, p. 8; 2009, p. 12; Silberman, 2005, p. 647), religious belief systems appear to be a uniquely powerful source of meaning in life. Religions prove so powerful, psychologist Crystal Park (2005) claims, because they provide both "global" and "situational" meaning.

Global meaning pertains to a person's most basic beliefs, goals, and feelings about themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997). Global *beliefs* comprise a person's worldview, which includes assumptions about, among others, the fairness, coherence and controllability of their world and the people in it. Global *goals* are inner and outer states and objects that people value most in life—such as work, wealth, and well-being—which they strive to gain and sustain. Global *feelings* refer to a pervasive sense of purpose that is directed towards these desired goals in the future.

Situational meaning pertains to the interaction of a person's global beliefs and goals and their concrete circumstances (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997), which implies three stages: the *appraisal of meaning* is the initial evaluation of the significance of an event for their beliefs and goals. If there are discrepancies between global and appraised meaning, this sparks a *search for meaning*. A successful search for meaning results in a realignment of their global and appraised meaning, either by changing the appraisal of the event or by changing the beliefs and goals to accommodate the event, with new *meaning as outcome*.

Most relevant for our discussion is that a search for meaning is often a response to a crisis. For instance, the death of a loved one can bring someone to question their belief in a benign world. If they are religious, they might lose faith in the benevolence of their God or the existence of a God altogether. As Park (2005, p. 304) says, "Crises trigger processes of meaning making through which individuals struggle to reduce the discrepancy between their appraised meaning of a particular stressful event and their global beliefs and goals."

If someone fails to reduce the discrepancy between their appraised meaning of a stressful event and their global beliefs and goals they may convert to another belief system (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 129). Given the stability of belief systems, they are more likely to change their appraisal of the event than to change their global beliefs

and goals (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 125). Still, fundamental shifts do occur. For instance, in religious conversions. If a person faces a stressful event that their current religion is deemed unable to resolve, it creates an existential crisis, which fuels a search for another religion that is felt to offer (more) meaningful answers (Paloutzian, 2005). Satsang teacher Richard Sylvester (2008, p. 58) also said that people often deal with a loss of meaning by finding another source of meaning, such as converting from Catholicism to Buddhism. Yet, he added that meaning may eventually run out altogether. What happens then? What happens when an existential crisis cannot be solved by adopting another religion, or any other belief systems for that matter, because the crisis is caused by a bankruptcy of belief itself? Such a crisis of belief or meaning has in fact occurred to a growing number of modern western spiritual seekers.

## When did we lose meaning in life?

Many spiritual seekers in the satsang network experience despair because *"the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life, certainly cause me big trouble! The loss of meaning in my life is especially painful"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). They cling to their beliefs as a source of meaning but have also come to believe that beliefs are meaningless, mere "stories" about their inner and outer world. As a result, *"All these religious dogmas lose their meaning"* (Kersschot, 2007, p. 37) and *"all religions and philosophies [become] interchangeable, as valuable or as valueless as each other"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273). Some spiritual seekers find this loss of meaning or belief *"terrifying"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 129). By relativizing or even destroying belief systems, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network seems to be the cause of their existential suffering. Why are spiritual seekers drawn to it, then? To answer that question, I must first show that Neo-Advaita does not so much create as exaggerate a broader problem within modern western culture.

As sociologists Paul Froese (2016, p. 16) puts it, the problem is that "modernity has made the idea of purpose a choice. Only then could meaninglessness become a possibility." Froese conflates meaning and purpose, which are not the same. According to Login George and Crystal Park (2013, p. 366), meaning involves a feeling of overarching significance and value in life, while purpose pertains to a sense of direction and commitment to goals in life. Nevertheless, Froese is right that meaning and purpose in life have both become a matter of conscious choice within modern western culture. How has this happened and why is this a problem?

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1995) maintain that meaning and purpose have come into question because an increased pluralism in modern societies has brought belief systems into competition with each other. This has decreased the power of social institutions. Berger and Luckmann (1995, p. 17) elaborate that the



function of social institutions is “storing and making available meaning for the actions of the individual both in particular situations and for an entire conduct of life.” Social institutions provide the individual with what Park described above as situational and global meaning, which in turn fulfil the need for what Baumeister referred to as a feeling of (interpretive) control. As historical reservoirs of meaning, institutions convey collectively approved beliefs and goals from one generation to the next. This relieves the individual of having to work out from scratch solutions for the natural and social challenges they are faced with in life (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 8-18). As such, “institutions are substitutes for instincts: they allow action without all alternatives having to be considered” (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 41).

Individuals are unconsciously embedded in the collectively valued beliefs and goals of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 42). The problem with modern western societies is that a growing pluralism has been chipping away at this unconscious embedding (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 40)—in what sociologist Charles Taylor (2007, Chapter 3) has described as “the great disembedding.” This great disembedding has occurred not merely because different belief systems have emerged, but mainly because different beliefs systems are no longer spatially separated (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 28-29). Contacts and clashes between belief systems have made people (more) aware of alternatives, which has made their own beliefs a matter of conscious choice. However, the modern world has become so crowded with belief systems that people do not know what to believe anymore (Froese, 2016, p. 41).

Why is this socio-historical background of the loss of unquestioned beliefs in modern western culture relevant for the satsang network? It shows that the relativization or even destruction of beliefs in the satsang network merely reflects a broader “crisis of meaning” (Berger & Luckmann, 1995). Though this crisis of meaning has affected all belief systems, it has had the largest impact on organized religions. Organized religions long provided our most basic beliefs and goals but are now in decline due to a growing competition between different religious and secular belief systems. Especially in Europe, more and more people identify as non-religious (Voas, 2009). Considering that the satsang network draws many spiritual seekers for whom religion is “*more of a curse than a blessing*” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 272 & 288), it is important to understand what their non-religion entails. A closer look at their allegedly non-religious spirituality may be able to explain why the crisis of meaning has given rise to the satsang network and why its Neo-Advaita appeals to spiritual seekers.

# PART 3: The Grassroots of Meaningless Spirituality

## Spiritual, but not Religious

According to Berger and Luckmann (1995), a competition of belief systems has caused a crisis of meaning, which has led to a decline of religion in modern western culture. Based on the 2002-2003 European Social Survey, sociologist David Voas (2009) confirms a concomitant incline in non-religion among Europeans with each passing generation. Globally, non-religion is even estimated to be the fourth largest belief system, after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Zuckerman, 2010, p. ix). Sociologist Colin Campbell (1971) already noticed this rise of non-religion half a century ago. However, the academic study of non-religion only recently gained traction (Bullivant, 2020; Bullivant & Lee, 2012). Sociologist Lois Lee (2015, Chapter 1) explains that academic studies variously employ "non-religion" as synonymous with "humanism," "agnosticism," "atheism," "areligion," "irreligion," "anti-religion" and "indifference to religion." Looking for an inclusive term for non-religions that could also apply to religions, Lee (2015, pp. 159-160) introduces "existential cultures," as

incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death [...] These existential beliefs are bound up with distinctive notions of meaning and purpose in life, as well as with epistemological theories about how it is that humans are able to take a stance on existential matters. Finally, these existential positions are manifest in particular ethical practices.

Scholar of religion Ann Taves (2018, 2019) agrees that religious and non-religious existential cultures address the same "ultimate questions" (Lee, 2015, p. 160) or "ultimate concerns" (Emmons, 1999/2003; Tillich, 1957) about the meaning and purpose of life.<sup>12</sup> However, she deems "worldview" a more recognizable term for religious and secular belief systems as well as everything in between, such as what I call "secular religions" (Vliegenthart, 2020).

Part of the fuzzy middle ground between religion and non-religion is contemporary "spirituality" (Bregman, 2004; Huss, 2014, 2015; Jespers, 2014; Ness, 1996; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Though spirituality is not limited to this group, studies of people's worldviews show that 19% of the population in Europe (Berghuijs, Pieper, & Bakker, 2013) and North America (Fuller, 2001; Fuller & Parsons, 2018) identify as "spiritual,

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<sup>12</sup> Based on Vidal (2008), Taves (2019, p. 2) captures these ultimate concerns into "six big questions":

REALITY (ontology): What is (ultimately) real?

ORIGINS (cosmology): Where do we come from and where are we going?

KNOWLEDGE (epistemology): How do we know this (about reality and ourselves)?

SITUATION: In what circumstances do we find ourselves?

GOAL (axiology): What is the good or goal for which we should strive?

PATH (praxeology): What do we need to do to reach this good or goal?

but not religious." For these "spiritual seekers" (Sutcliffe, 2000), the dogmatism of organized religions in conjunction with the excessive rationalism and materialism of mainstream sciences have caused the modern world crisis (Hanegraaff, 1996/1998, p. 517). Psychologist Christopher Peet (2019, pp. 5, 38) explains that spiritual seekers often use "the world crisis" as a blanket term for a combination of entangled economic, socio-political, and ecological crises, including an energy crisis, a growing inequality between rich and poor, refugee crises, terrorist attacks, rapid climate change and mass extinction of species—a polycrisis, if you will. The point is, what sociologist Linda Woodhead (2016, p. 45) also emphasizes, that "spiritual, but not religious" seekers reject something specific, namely: the "'dogmatic' religions of modern societies," and this means that "They do not necessarily become atheists, or abandon the belief that there are things beyond this life which give it meaning." In fact, many of them are searching for alternative sources of meaning in "eastern mysticism" (Campbell, 2007; Heehs, 2019, pp. 226-229) and "western esotericism" (Hanegraaff, 1996/1998; Von Stuckrad, 2005) or a combination of both (De Michelis, 2004/2008; Hanegraaff, 2020; Sedgwick, 2004), which some might still call "religious" (Popp-Baier, 2010). These quests for meaning have given rise to new religious movements and spiritualities such as the satsang network and its Neo-Advaita, which could be regarded as grassroots responses to the modern western crisis of meaning.

## Grassroots spirituality

Berger and Luckmann (1995, p. 53) do not see a solution to the modern western crisis of meaning, but they do see a rise of "secondary institutions," which they consider responses to it. With the decline of primary institutions such as organized religions, secondary institutions such as psychotherapy, "self-help" literature, and new (religious) movements have emerged to provide alternative sources of meaning, which prevent individual crises from culminating in a collective crisis of society at large (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 62-63).

Sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2001, p. 62) find the rise of secondary *spiritual* institutions—a loose network of online and offline outlets and experts that convey alternative beliefs and practices outside conventional religious frameworks—"one of the most striking (though least explored) features of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century religious scene." According to Heelas and Woodhead, the decline of primary religious institutions has been confirmed by numerous studies. However, this has not led to a rise in secularity, they say, but to a rise in spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2001, p. 59). In other words, some of the secondary institutions that Berger and Luckmann interpret as responses to a crisis of meaning Heelas and Woodhead (2001, p. 70) interpret as signs of a spiritual revolution in modern western

culture.<sup>13</sup> Of course, these phenomena could be related or even considered two sides of the same coin (Cf. Campbell, 1972; Partridge, 2004).

Focusing on the notion of a "spiritual revolution," independent scholar David Tacey (2003/2005, p. 3) considers it a people's revolution that is "rising from below and not from above [...] because society's loss of meaning is becoming painfully obvious." Since it is rising in a spontaneous and disorganized manner among ordinary people, religion-scholar-turned-spiritual-teacher Robert Forman (2004, p. 26) calls it "grassroots spirituality." He ascribes several socio-historical causes to its rise (Forman, 2004, pp. 109-134), but regards the loss of a shared theocentric source of meaning and purpose in life—"the death of God"—as its overarching cause (Forman, 2004, pp. 205-211). In more sociological terms, grassroots spirituality is a response to the modern western crisis of meaning, which is the result of a growing competition of belief systems that has led to a decline of organized religion.

In many ways, the satsang network fits Forman's description of grassroots spirituality. Like grassroots spirituality (Forman, 2004, pp. 109-134), the satsang network emerged from below as a response to changes in modern western culture that weakened powerful belief systems such as organized religions and sciences. Like grassroots spirituality (Forman, 2004, pp. 26-27), the satsang network does not have a single founder but multiple teachers, who rarely refer to themselves "spiritual leaders" or "gurus" but relate to spiritual seekers as "friends." Grassroots spirituality centers on "open not-strictly-rational self-reflection, self-enquiry, heartfelt conversations, and sincere and ongoing questioning about what is real and who we are in relation to our larger self and to each other" (Forman, 2004, pp. 208-209), just as the intellectual talks and texts of the satsang network.<sup>14</sup> Finally, grassroots spirituality does not require spiritual seekers to buy into any belief system (Forman, 2004, pp. 209-210), similar to the relativization of belief systems in the satsang network.

In one way, the satsang network significantly differs from grassroots spirituality. Grassroots spirituality provides spiritual seekers with meaning and purpose in life (Forman, 2004, p. 134), while the satsang network deprives them of meaning and purpose in life. Satsang teachers such as Tony Parsons (2003, p. 6) repeatedly tell them that "the world and our apparent lives [are] not going anywhere and [have] absolutely no purpose or meaning."

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<sup>13</sup> In a later study, they tempered their bold statement: "the claim that a spiritual revolution has taken place is exaggerated. Nevertheless, we have demonstrated that a major shift has occurred in the sacred landscape since the fifties and sixties, and is still continuing" (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p. 149).

<sup>14</sup> Much of this entails what I call "reasoned flights beyond reason" (Vliegthart, 2022).

## Meaningless spirituality

The satsang network is a grassroots spirituality whose Neo-Advaita teachings present life as meaningless. What should we call such a worldview between religion and non-religion (Taves, 2018), whose not-strictly-rational enquiry (Forman, 2004) into ultimate questions or concerns (Emmons, 1999/2003; Lee, 2015) about the fundamental conditions of human existence (Metz, 2013) leads one to perceive life as devoid of any overarching significance (meaning) and direction (purpose) (George & Park, 2013; Park, 2005)? An obvious name for it would be “meaningless spirituality.” But there is a catch. Is it actually meaningless?

Not from the perspective of spiritual seekers. For them, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network *is* meaningful; not just because it orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of existence (Metz, 2013) or because it provides an understanding of ourselves, the world and the relation between the two that fosters a feeling of control over life (Baumeister, 1991), but because it may lead to enlightenment (Cf. Jacobs, 2020). No matter how often satsang teachers hammer down on the “myth of enlightenment” (Hartong, 2001/ 2007, p. 136)—“that there is no one and nothing to be enlightened” (Parsons, 1995, p. 7)—spiritual seekers still go to satsangs in the hope of finding enlightenment. They believe that enlightenment holds out “*the promise of improvement to my personal experience of life,*” as “*some special kind of bliss*” or “*perfect state of peace*” (Sylvester, 2016, pp. 104, 228, 239). Given the recurrent theme of a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in their dialogues with satsang teachers (e.g., Hartong, 2005, p. 50; Parsons, 2003, p. 13; Sylvester, 2016, p. 284 & 286), the “bliss” or “peace” that they are projecting onto enlightenment clearly presumes a liberation from “*the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life*” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). Thus, for spiritual seekers, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network is only meaningless in the sense that its supposed promise of enlightenment is perceived as a liberation from belief (Parsons, 2001, p. 336).

## Conclusion

More and more spiritual seekers in Europe and North America derive meaning in life from the satsang network, which is surprising given that its Neo-Advaita teachings present life as meaningless. Satsang teachers say that there is “just this,” which has no meaning or purpose for a person to become, gain or obtain. This begs the questions of *why* such a “meaningless spirituality” has emerged and *how* it can provide a source of meaning in life. This chapter answered these questions in reverse order, in three parts. The first part introduced the satsang network based on examples of five key teachers of Neo-Advaita from Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Excerpts from their question-and-answer dialogues with students revealed a recurrent focus on a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in the satsang network.

The second part explained how the Neo-Advaita of this satsang network can still provide a source of meaning in life, while claiming life to be meaningless, because it meets philosophical and psychological criteria for meaningfulness: its texts and talks concerning an enquiry into the self or consciousness orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of existence and provide an understanding of life that fosters a feeling of control. It further showed that spiritual seekers in the satsang network experience a loss of meaning because their beliefs are relativized or even destroyed. Neo-Advaita appeared to cause this relativization and destruction of beliefs at first, but we later found that it merely reflects a broader crisis of meaning in modern western culture. This crisis of meaning stems from a growing competition between belief systems, which has weakened long powerful sources of meaning such as organized religions.

The third part explained why new religious movements and spiritualities have emerged, as grassroots responses to the crisis of meaning. When primary institutions such as organized religions declined, people looked for meaning in secondary spiritual institutions, which straddle the boundaries between religion and non-religion.

As a secondary spiritual institution, the satsang network appeals to spiritual seekers because its Neo-Advaita does not require them to buy into any religious or secular belief system; for its supposed promise of enlightenment is perceived as a liberation from belief. But why is that appealing to spiritual seekers in modern western culture? It is appealing to them because if enlightenment has nothing to do with beliefs, then it also escapes the competition of belief systems that caused their crisis of meaning. In other words, by divorcing enlightenment from beliefs, Neo-Advaita seems to offer a solution to their crisis of meaning. Paradoxically, then, the "meaningless spirituality" of the satsang network appears meaningful to spiritual seekers because they believe that its Neo-Advaita promises an enlightenment beyond belief that will liberate them from their painful loss of meaning and purpose in life.

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