



# The challenge of spiritual and religious organisation

Dione Hills [d.hills@tavinstitute.org](mailto:d.hills@tavinstitute.org)

Leslie Brissett [l.brissett@tavinstitute.org](mailto:l.brissett@tavinstitute.org)

Tavistock Institute of Human Relations

THE  
TAVISTOCK  
INSTITUTE®

# The project

## Aims

- To explore the challenges experienced by spiritual and religious organisations
- Understand what resources (internal and external) they have for addressing these challenges
- Examine outcomes from addressing - and not addressing – challenges, for organisations and their members

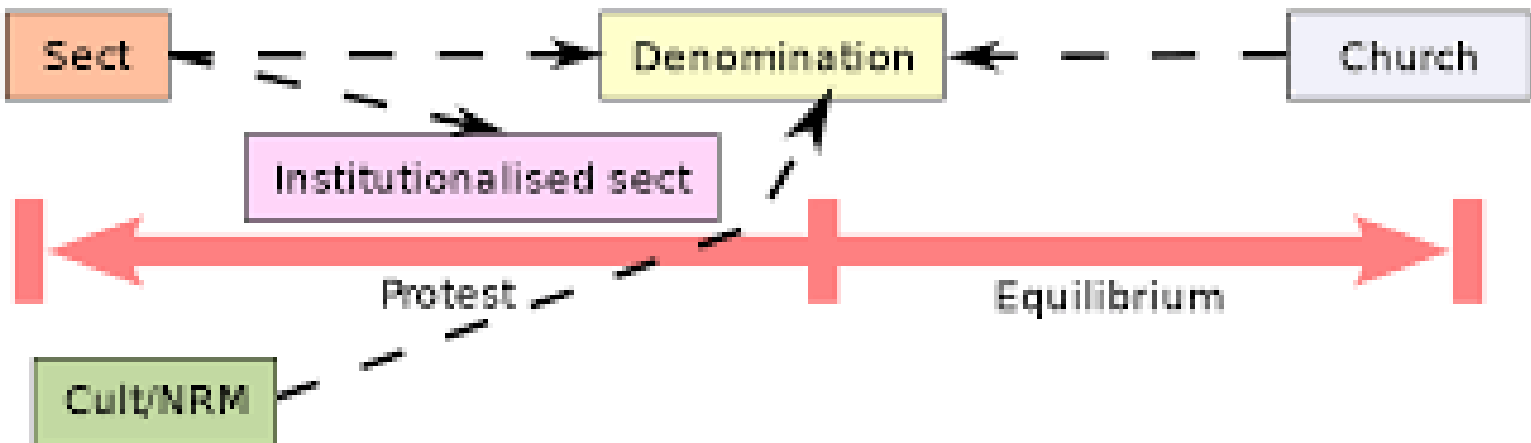


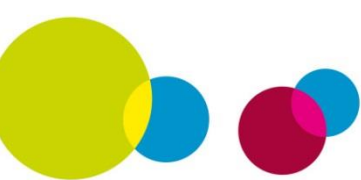


# What kind of organisation?

- Organisations with a primary task of creating, supporting and promoting spiritual or religious insights, teaching and/or practices
- May also encompass other 'mission based' organisations if the same insights apply

## The Church-sect continuum





# The term 'spirituality'?

- 'Spirituality' is not so much a unitary concept as a signpost for a range of touchstones: our search for meaning, our sense of the sacred, the value of compassion, the experience of transcendence, the hunger for transformation'
- The value of the term spiritual is that it gives permission to speak of things that are unknowable'
- *From RSA report 'Spiritualise: revitalising spirituality to address 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges':*





# How?

- Literature review
- Interviews
- Group discussions
- Case studies
- Workshops
- Collaborating and sharing :papers and articles, books, blogs, videos.....





## Why (1)?

- Growing interest in spiritual dimension in mainstream organisations
- Fewer resources (books) adapting mainstream organisational insights for spiritual and religious organisations
- Mainstream organisational theory /practice often viewed as 'inappropriate' or missing the point
- Opportunity to provide new resources: seminars, written material, links, consultancy





## Why (2): the paradox

- Bringing spiritual insights and practices to mainstream organisations seen as strengthening ethical principles, staff wellbeing, social responsibility and sustainability (enriching work experience)

But

- Spiritual and religious organisations can suffer organisational and ethical failures that leave followers damaged, disillusioned, disengaged, and/or impoverished



# Organisational challenges

## Internal

- Leadership and vision
- Structure, organisation and management
- Internal coherence and continuity
- Obtaining and maintaining buildings and facilities
- Financial probity/sustainability

## External relations

- Legal and ethical frameworks
- Promotion/recruitment/marketing
- Relationship with other organisations:  
networks and neighbours







# Spiritual organisation challenges

500 + profiles on World Religions and Spirituality website

<https://wrldrels.org/>

- Leadership and succession
- Splinter groups
- Ethical lapses
- Continuity v change - adaptation of original message/vision
- Fluctuations in size - rapid expansion and contraction
- Becoming 'mainstream' and overly bureaucratic
- External attacks: from 'anti cult' movements, medical, scientific, legal and political communities and other religious and spiritual groups
- Accusations of fraud, unethical behaviour,





# Causes of ethical failure

- Individual or organisational failure?
- Failings more evident and shocking because of contradiction with teaching?
- Lack of ethical policies and processes?

## Particular risks:

- Tension between spiritual and material
- Lack of interest in organisation/structure
- Charismatic leadership
- Spiritual bypassing
- Ignoring the shadow side



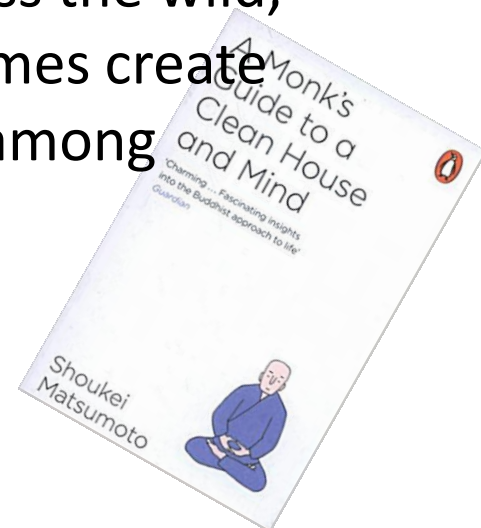


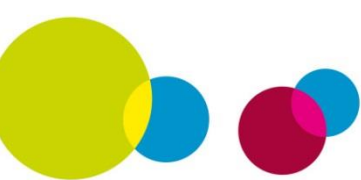
# Tension between spiritual and practical

- The highly spiritual have difficulty with the practical
- The highly practical have difficulty with spiritual

‘Some spiritual institutions have attempted to create formal charters of ethics to minimize spiritual abuses, but such movement can also have a stifling effect on teachers whose job it is to support the practitioners to personally access the wild, unbounded mystery of creation, and can sometimes create safety at the expense of creativity and freedom among practitioners’

Marianne Caplan (2009)





# Lack of interest in organisation

‘We do things differently’ .....challenging mainstream ‘norms’

‘We’re not an organisation, we are a.....’

- Family
- Community
- Movement

‘We don’t need.....’

- Leaders
- Structures
- Ethical policies and procedures
- Training

‘God/Spirit/Universe/Being will take care of it .....’





# Charismatic leadership

Weber's three types of authority – legal, traditional and charismatic

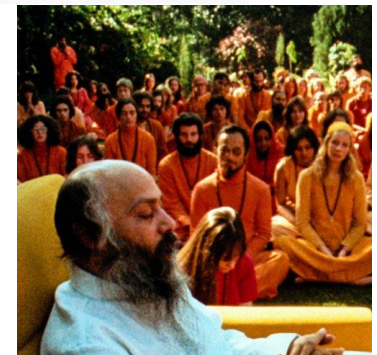
Charismatic leadership a strong feature of New Religious Movements (but also present in main stream churches, denominations, sects)

Advantages :

- Emotional appeal
- Positive impact/capacity for change
- Creates shared identity

Risks

- Leaders become addicted to charisma
- Organisation becomes addicted to charisma
- 'Power 'corrupts' (or is misused)
- Small central group/strong hierarchy (guru centric)
- Lack of challenge





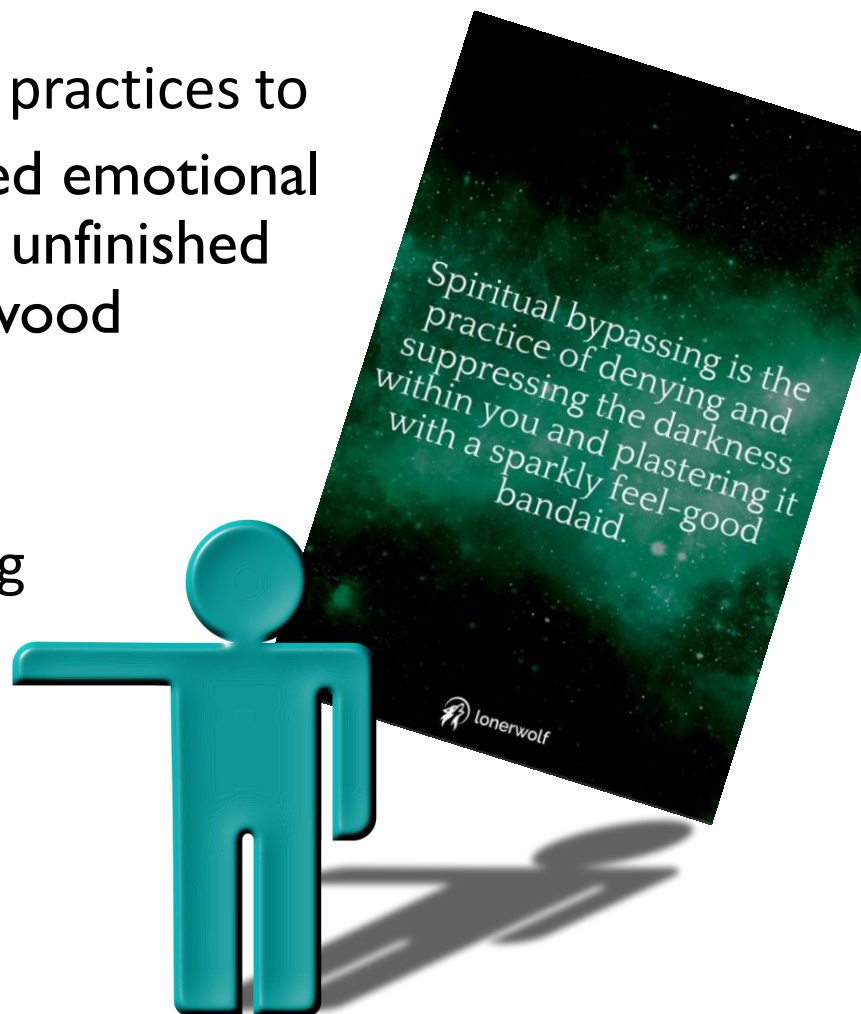
# Challenges

## **Spiritual bypassing :**

“Tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks”. John Welwood

## **Ignoring the shadow side:**

Focusing on the positive and uplifting while ignoring hidden, repressed, shameful or guilt laden aspects of human nature

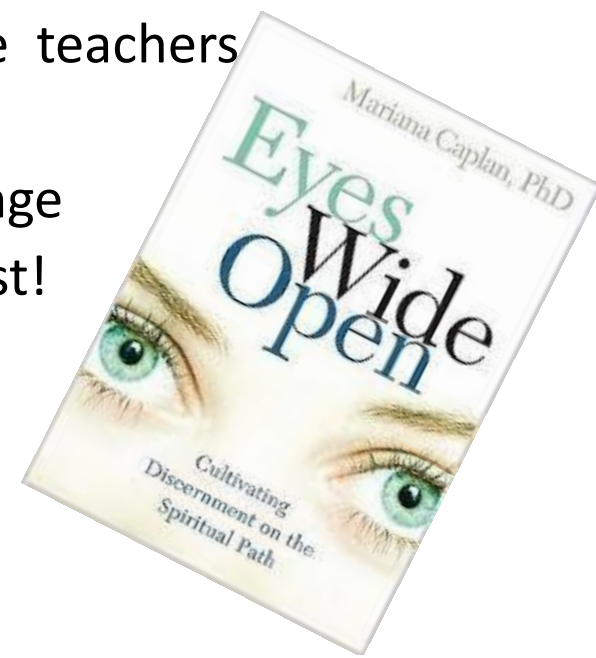




# STD's

## (Spiritually transmitted diseases)

- Fast food spirituality: offering instant enlightenment
- Faux spirituality: donning spiritual clothes
- Confused motivations: wanting to belong, be loved
- Identifying with spiritual experiences: lack of integration of spiritual insights
- Spiritualised ego: 'its all about me'
- Mass production of spiritual teachers: immature teachers
- Spiritual pride: Feeling spiritually superior
- Group mind: co dependence and lack of challenge
- The chosen people complex: we are the greatest!
- Marianne Caplan (2009)





# Three hopeful hypotheses

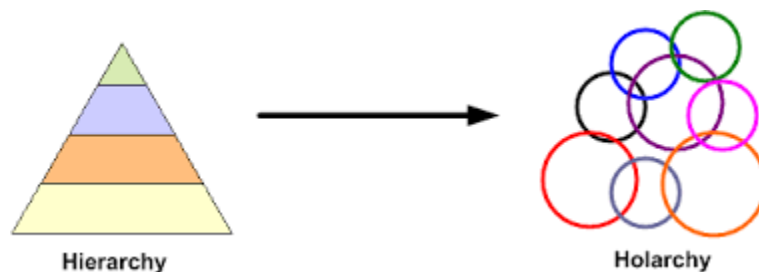
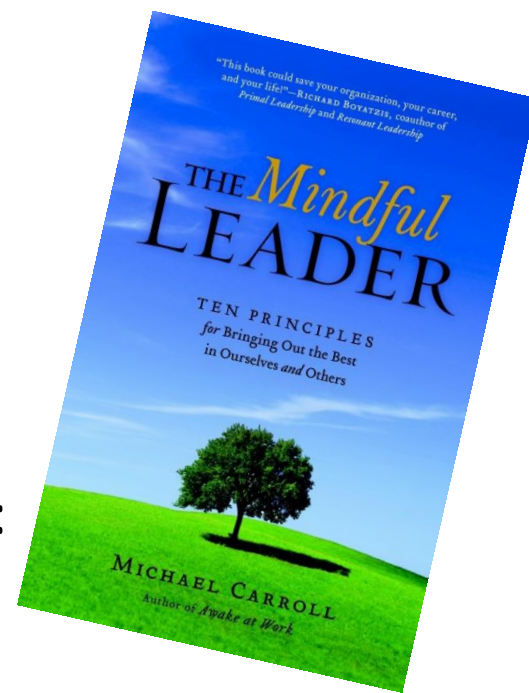
- Organisation challenges relatively predictable (so not necessarily cause for shame and guilt, or be covered up)
- Resources are available (but perhaps need to look in new directions for these)
- Challenges can be a crucible for spiritual growth





# New resources for new ( and old) spiritual organisations

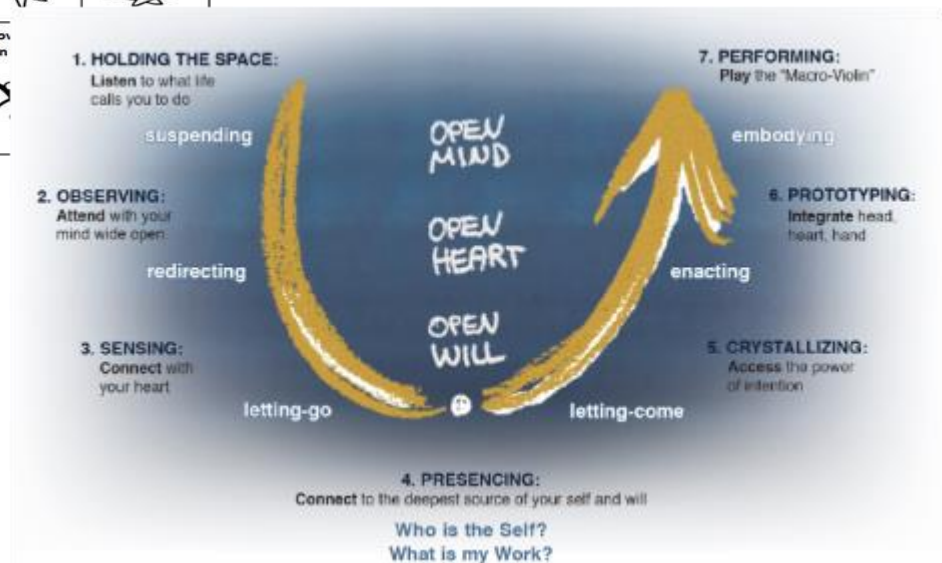
- Different ways of structuring an organisation :  
e.g. Holacracy, Agile working
- Different leadership styles : e.g. servant leadership, feminist leadership styles
- New ways of addressing organisational challenges: e.g. liberating structures, theory U
- Learning from other religions/spiritual groups: e.g incorporating mindfulness and other spiritual teachings





# New resources

Impromptu networking 	TRIZ 	What's debrief 	Conversation café 	Appreciative interviews 	1-2-4 rapid conversation 	5-whys 
Ecocycle planning 	Shift & share 	25 > 10 cloud sourcing 	Min-specs 	Wise crowds 	Wicked Q's 	Purpose to practice 
Agree/certainty matrix 	What I need from you 	User experience fishbowl 	Heard, seen, respected 	Smart network webbing 	Design with storyboards 	Open space technology 
Integrated autonomy 	Generative relationships 	Critical uncertainties 	Graphic recording 	Panarchy 	Troika consulting 	Helping heuristics 
Celebrity interview 	Stories To Patterns 	15% solutions 	LS 	Improv prototyping 	Discovery action 	





**QUESTIONS?**

**COMMENTS?**

**THANK YOU!**



# Resources

- World Spirituality and Religions <https://wrldrels.org/>
- Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion <https://www.tandfonline.com>
- RSA: Spiritualise project: <https://www.theresa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/spiritualise-report.pdf>
- Marianne Caplan (2009): *Eyes wide open: Sounds True*, Boulder, Colorado. <https://www.soundstrue.com>
- Michael Carroll: <http://awakeatwork.net/>
- Holacracy: <https://www.holacracy.org>
- Liberating structures: <http://www.liberatingstructures.com>