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The Rise of Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Arabia

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Notes on transliteration and translation

Dates of publication are presented as they appear in the reference, with the Gregorian calendar date added when not provided.

Arabic reference titles are translated in the bibliography and, for the first time in the footnotes.

Arabic initials are written only the first time they appear, except for Hayfā' al-Rashīd and Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid. Their initial names are used consistently throughout the thesis to avoid confusion, as their last names are quite similar.

The transliteration of Arabic references and terms follows the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES), with some important adjustments:

- Widely used Arabic terms in the English language, such as 'Qur'an', are written without diacritical marks like hamzas and 'ayns. This is based on the belief that certain terms are now firmly embedded in the English language, though this approach may involve some subjectivity.
- A similar approach is followed in using the name of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, without diacritics.
- All other Arabic/Islamic terms and phrases are transliterated in accordance with IJMES guidelines. This includes 'ayns, hamzas and diacritical marks. This applies to historical figures and thinkers, sources titles, books, and institutions.
- Adjectives derived from Arabic terms are written with an 'ī', such as Sunnī, Salafī and Sufī.
- Different transliteration systems are maintained when citing secondary sources in this study to preserve their integrity. For example, Sa'ud.
- The term 'ibn' is spelt out to indicate 'son of' rather than being abbreviated as 'b.'

Abstract

This thesis investigates the emergence of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. It seeks to understand the nature of spirituality disseminated in the region and the factors that have motivated its increasing popularity in an unusually conservative society in its attitudes towards religion. Using qualitative research, this thesis examines semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals engaged in spiritual activities in Saudi society. Prior to examining the reasons for its growth, this thesis provides a brief view of the historical development of the term 'spirituality' and traces its introduction into Saudi society in the mid-1990s. In so doing, this thesis reveals that contemporary spirituality, which developed in the 19th century, is frequently referred to as a repackaging of traditions that differ from traditional organised religions in order to accommodate the needs of modern societies. It is a combination of different cultures' traditions, ranging from specific physical practices to elements of Sufi faith and Eastern philosophy concepts. The majority of participants believe that their use of spiritual teachings is influenced by their repackaging through forms of ambiguity, Islamisation and scientific frameworks. Additionally, they explain that their use of spiritual activities is a response to the need for solutions to unresolved issues and the ignorance of Islamic teachings. Finally, many external authorities introduced contemporary spirituality to participants and reinforced their use of its practices. Participants discussed not only how Western spiritual teachings are transmitted by various means, but also how they are marketed and distributed, contributing to their popularity. In addition, spiritual instructors have been responsible for conveying these teachings in a variety of ways.

Lay Summary

This PhD thesis explores the growing popularity of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, a society often known for its conservative approach to religion. The research examines the experiences of eleven individuals engaged in spiritual practices to understand the nature of spirituality and the factors behind this trend.

The thesis begins by providing a brief history of the term 'spirituality', and tracing its introduction to Saudi society in the mid-1990s. Contemporary spirituality, which has its roots in the 19th century, is often seen as a modern repackaging of religious concepts that deviate from traditional organised religions. It combines elements from various cultural traditions, including Sufi beliefs and Eastern philosophies.

The participants in this study attribute their engagement in spiritual activities to several factors. Firstly, these practices are often modified using ambiguity and association with Islam and science, making them more appealing to modern societies. Secondly, people turn to spirituality for solutions to unresolved issues in their lives. Thirdly, spiritual teachers and sources have played a crucial role in introducing these teachings in diverse ways, further enabling their widespread adoption in Saudi society. Last but not least, the research highlights how contemporary spirituality is marketed and distributed through various channels, contributing to its popularity.

Introduction

In this thesis, I explore the rise of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, a country that is based on the Salafī form of Sunnī Islam and is still known for its religious conservatism. According to Muḥammad al-Salūmī:

Salafī doctrine is the driving force that simultaneously invigorates and pacifies Saudi society. This ideology is disseminated through standardised educational curricula, public advocacy initiatives led by ‘Ulamā’ (religious scholars) and both traditional and contemporary preaching mediums. As a result, Saudi society is often perceived as Muḥāfiẓ (conservative) and Mumāni’ (reluctant).¹

In other words, Saudi Arabia has long emphasised the role of ‘*Ulamā*’, an advisory body to the king in religious matters and a source of knowledge for society. This body enshrines the Islamic religion in Saudi society and tries to combat ideas that conflict with its views on Islam. Throughout the history of Saudi Arabia, Sufī practices were proscribed for many decades as they have been considered to be *Shirk* (association with God) and *Bid’a* (heresy or innovation). According to Maḥmūd al-Ṣabbāgh, ‘The teaching of Sufism in the region has often been perceived as a call to misguidance, heresy, as well as pagan and *Shirk* rituals’.² Consequently, Sufī practices have become taboo, and their gatherings have often been held in secrecy. According to *al-Mawsū’a al-Muyassara*, Sufism is:

A mystical branch of religious practice emerged in the third century AH [19th century AD] within the Islamic world, advocating asceticism and heightened devotion as a response to indulgence in the luxuries of civilisation. This trend evolved into various paths aimed at cultivating the soul to

¹ Muḥammad Al-Salūmī, ‘Ideologyā al-Mujtama’ al-Su’ūdī wa al-Taghīr: Qirā’a fī Kitāb Muqāwamat al-Taghīr fī al-Mujtama’ al-Su’ūdī’ (The Ideology of Saudi Society and Change: An Overview of Resistance to Change in Saudi Society Book), *al-Bayān*, 299 (2012).

² Maḥmūd al-Ṣabbāgh, ‘Al-Ṣūfiyya wa al-Majālis al-‘Ilmiyya fī al-Ḥijāz’ (Sufism and Knowledgeable Councils in Hijaz), in *Al-Taṣawwūf fī al-Su’ūdiyya wa al-Khalīj*, 5th edition (Dubai: al-Misbār, 2013), 179-185.

achieve divine knowledge through *Kashf* (unveiling). Consequently, Sufi methodologies became interwoven with a range of Indian, Persian, and Greek philosophical traditions.³

This source of knowledge became a central tenet of Sufi thought and practice, where the individual could access mystical comprehension through contemplation and personal experience. By rejecting the material world, Sufis sought to transcend it and reach a state of spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment.

Against this socio-religious background, this thesis explores the rise of contemporary spirituality in a country often resistant to external religious influences, an area for which, to my knowledge, no prior studies have been conducted. Contemporary spirituality is the result of many historical events and developments. It is a phenomenon that emerged in the 19th century and matured over the 20th century. It is viewed as a reinterpretation of older traditions. As Sutcliffe and Bowman write, it is 'An emic repackaging of popular and vernacular religion to suit the peculiar condition of industrial and post-industrial societies'.⁴ As such, contemporary spirituality can be defined as an incoherent adaptation of historical religions that differ from traditional forms of organised religion to accommodate current needs. It is an emic concept oriented towards the modern context, incorporating old traditions and developing updated practices suitable for the current era. In this sense, contemporary spirituality is both an ancient and contemporary concept, as it draws from ancient sources and incorporates them into a modern context.

The Arabic-speaking literature refers to this type of spirituality as '*al-Rūḥāniyya al-Mu'āṣira*' (contemporary spirituality) and '*al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha*' (new spirituality). As Hayfā' al-Rashīd states, '*Al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha* is a new orientation that ... crowds out traditional religious

³ *Al-Mawsū'a al-Muyassara fī al-'Adyān wa al-Madhāhib wa al-'Aḥzāb al-Mu'āṣira* (*The Facilitator Encyclopedia of Contemporary Religions, Sects and Parties*), ed. Mānī' al-Juhānī, 4th edition (Riyadh: al-Nadwa al-'Ālamiyya, 1999), 'Sufism', 1/249.

⁴ Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 8, cf. 6. See also Marion Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion', in *Religion: Empirical Studies: A Collection to Mark The 50th Anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe (Milton Park: Routledge: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 3-4. Also, Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), Xii.

discourse by offering non-religious alternatives ... It attempts to transform people from within rather than through prophetic mediation or revelation restrictions'.⁵ This form of spirituality emphasises self-authority, encouraging individuals to take control and explore their beliefs, values and experiences to find meaning in life rather than relying on external sources and others' beliefs. It also encourages individuals to look beyond traditional religious beliefs to find their spiritual truth.

The rising popularity of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia first caught my attention when I was working on my Master's thesis on *Theosophy: Qaḍiyyat al-'Ulūhiyya fī al-Fikr al-Theosophy al-Ḥadīth* (*Theosophy: The Concept of Divinity in New Theosophical Thought*) (2015) which explored theosophy as an esoteric philosophy emphasising the unity of existence as its core concept. The growth of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia has also attracted the attention of Arabic-speaking scholars in religious studies. Since the early 2000s, a growing body of research has contributed to a better understanding of this phenomenon. Fowz Kurdī's *Waqfa Mawḍu'iyya ma' al-Barmaja al-Lughawiyya al-'Aṣabiyya* (*An Objective Pause to Reflect on Neuro-linguistic Programing*) (2003) was the first article written on the subject.⁶ Her *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilhādīyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu'āṣira* (*Spiritual Atheistic Philosophical Doctrines and their Contemporary Applications*) (2004) was the first research published on the subject. 'Abdulla al-'Ajīrī's *Khurāfat al-Sir* (*The Superstition of The Secret*) (2008) was also among the first books written on the subject; it was dedicated to evaluating and criticising the concept of the law

⁵ Hayfā' al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta'wīlī fī al-Ta'āmul ma' al-Naṣ: al- Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadīthah 'Unmūdhajan*, (*Interpretive Approach in Dealing with the Text: Modern Spirituality as a Model*) (Qaṣīm: al-Qaṣīm University, 1437), 11. See also Muzūn al-Qaḥṭānī, *Al-Wa'y, Mafhūmuha wa Ḥaqīqatuha: Dirasa 'Aqadiyya Naqdiyya* (*Consciousness, its Concept and Reality: a Critical Doctrinal Study*) (Riyadh: PhD thesis at al-'Imam Muḥammad Ibn Su'ūd Islamic University), 361. Also, 'Amānī Bardīsī, *Al-Da'awāt al-Bāṭiniyya 'Ilā al-Salām fī al-'Aṣr al-Ḥadīth: Judhūruha al-Fikriyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Rūḥāniyya - Dirāsa 'Aqadiyya Naqdiyya* (*Esoteric Calls for Peace in the Modern Era: Its Intellectual Roots and Spiritual Applications*) (Jeddah: Master's thesis at Jeddah University, 2019), 28.

⁶ See Fowz Kurdī, *Waqfa Mawḍu'iyya ma' al-Barmaja al-Lughawiyya al-'Aṣabiyya* (*An Objective Pause to Reflect on Neuro-linguistic Programing*) (24 May 2003). Available: <https://alfowz.com/وقفه-موضوعية-مع-الرمجة-اللغوية-العصب/> (Accessed 14 Nov 2022).

of attraction, particularly what was presented in *The Secret* by Rhona Byrne.⁷ Hayfā' al-Rashīd's published research followed a few years later, beginning with her Master's thesis, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-'Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya* (Contemporary Applications of Eastern Healing Philosophy) (2011), and then her PhD thesis titled *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd: Maḥmūhā wa Nash'atuhā wa Taṭbīqātuhā* (The New Age Movement: its Concept and Applications) (2014). A more recent contribution is 'Abīr al-Ḥamza's *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya* (Spiritual Cosmic Laws) (2020), a Master's thesis employs a quantitative methodology to investigate the prevalence of spiritual practices in Saudi Arabia, specifically focusing on the cosmic laws, within the context of contemporary spirituality. Various aspects have been discussed in these studies, focusing on the sources from which contemporary spirituality draws its teachings, their philosophical foundation, the basic principles and beliefs held in spiritual practices, their impact on Islamic identity and their conflict with Islamic belief. By examining the philosophical origins and analysing their impact in light of Islamic doctrine, Arabic-speaking studies have shed light on a wide range of spiritual concepts and practices and explored the relationship between Islamic faith and spiritual concepts.

In her research, Al-Ḥamza conducted a survey that asked more than 12,000 Saudi residents about spiritual practices, finding that 66% had heard of contemporary spirituality and about 809 respondents used its practices, which included energy practices, Yoga and the law of attraction.⁸ In accordance with, Hayfā' al-Rashīd, who points out that in the last ten years, due to the increased interest in health and self-development, contemporary spirituality books have become widely available in Islamic and Arab countries.⁹ Since the mid-1990s, spiritual concepts and

⁷ Law of attraction is based on the premise that human thoughts, feelings and words are what attract reality. See Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Beyond World publishing), 7.

⁸ See 'Abīr al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya: Dirāsa Naqdiyya fī Ḍaw' al-'Aqīda al-'Islāmiyya* (Spiritual Cosmic Laws: A Critical Study in Light of Islamic Doctrine) (Riyadh: Master's thesis at al-'Imām Muḥammad Ibn Su'ūd Islamic University, 1442), 345, 396.

⁹ See Hayfā' al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd: Maḥmūhā wa Nash'atuhā wa Taṭbīqātuhā* (The New Age Movement: its Concept and Applications) (Jeddah: Markaz al-Ta'sīl li al-dirāsāt wa al-Buḥūth, 1435/2014), 572-573. See also 'Abdulghani Malībārī and Muḥammad al-'Awadī, *Al-'Ilhād al-Rūḥānī - al-Bāṭiniyya* (Spiritual Atheism - Esotericism), 2018, Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yhuuGK-iQE>, (Accessed 31 Oct 2018).

practices have spread in Saudi Arabia, starting with human development practices through healing and energy techniques, followed by metaphysical philosophy, as will be further discussed. While there are many definitions of philosophy, this study uses al-Ḥamza's definition; 'It is the study of divine matters, metaphysics and existence, that develops a way of life based upon that viewpoint distinct from the Abrahamic religions' revelation'.¹⁰ In other words, philosophy attempts to understand the nature of existence, the purpose of life and its relationship to beings. It does this without relying on the traditional form of organised religion.

To better understand this phenomenon and its prevalence in Saudi Arabia, I argue for the need to take a few steps back, examine the reasons that contributed to this rise and investigate how contemporary spirituality is implemented in everyday life in Saudi Arabia. I have not yet found a study that focused specifically on Saudi inhabitants' experiences with contemporary spirituality using a qualitative approach or traced its historical emergence in Saudi Arabia. As such, throughout this study, I aim to fill a research gap in analysing the rise of this phenomenon by answering the research questions: What kind of contemporary spirituality has risen in Saudi society today, and what are the reasons behind this rise? In my research, I conduct a qualitative investigation to understand how and why Saudi citizens have been drawn to contemporary spirituality and engaged in many of its practices, to what extent these practices have a hold on a largely conservative society.

¹⁰ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 15. See also Muḥammad Darrāz, *Al-Dīn: Buḥūth Mumahhida li Dirāsāt Tārīkh al-'Adyān* (Religion: Preliminary Research for the Study of Religions' History) (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1410-1952), 59-73. Also, Fowz Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilḥādiyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuhā al-Mu'āṣira* (Spiritual Atheistic Philosophical Orientations and their Contemporary Applications) (Riyadh: King Fahad National Library, 1430/2009), 10. Also, Hayfā' al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya* (Contemporary Applications of Eastern Healing Philosophy) (Riyadh: King Fahad National Library, 1432/2011), 30 – 32.

Methodology and Outline of The Thesis

This study aims to identify and analyse the kind of contemporary spirituality that has been growing in Saudi society and investigate the factors that have contributed to this vigorous growth. As such, the thesis examines the *what* and *why* behind the emerging phenomenon. To achieve this goal, the current study uses qualitative research, which is, according to Creswell, ‘an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’.¹¹ As Creswell argues, this approach should be used ‘if a concept or phenomenon needs to be explored and understood because little research has been done on it’.¹² In the current study, qualitative research is particularly useful since the topic of contemporary spirituality is both new and has not been addressed in the chosen sample. In addition, it allows us to go about understanding ideas in an exploratory manner. As Bremborg writes, ‘Qualitative interviews within religious studies are useful for studying people’s complex conceptions of religion and beliefs. They allow individuals to express their personal and intimate views and thoughts in substantial ways’.¹³ Qualitative research provides more room to hear from individuals’ own experiences and in their words as well as more depth in understanding the meanings of specific concepts in the eyes of participants. Therefore, the research uses a semi-structured interview format with individuals involved in spiritual activities in Saudi society.

The study also draws on qualitative audio and visual materials, which Creswell describes as data that ‘may take the form of videotapes, website main pages, text messages, social media text or any forms of sound’.¹⁴ These include Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube channels. The study also uses qualitative documents, which, according to Creswell, refer to public and private documents.¹⁵ Public documents include newspapers and official news and reports, whereas

¹¹ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³ Anna Bremborg, ‘Interviewing’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London: Routledge, 2012), 319.

¹⁴ Creswell, *Research Design*, 240.

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*

private documents include personal journals and handbooks that, in the case of this study, were collected during several interviews. Three participants shared private documents, two of whom shared personal written stories and articles to educate and warn others about contemporary spirituality. The third participant shared a hard copy of a handbook for a course she had attended. Private documents are useful for clarifying respondents' responses to interview questions. However, Creswell notes that a possible limitation of such materials is the incompleteness or inaccuracy of their data.¹⁶ Consequently, private documents are not used solely in the current research but as additional interviews sources. That is to say; they were used to provide insight into the participants' words.

Positionality and Reflexivity in the Research Process

The research process is inherently influenced by the researcher's positionality, which encompasses personal experiences, beliefs and perspectives. My own journey with Sufism, initiated long before the commencement of this research, was not the direct catalyst for this study but profoundly influenced my perspective and approach. This transformative experience enriched my methodology, offering a unique lens through which I navigated the research. Merging this personal connection with my academic endeavors resulted in a seamless integration of experiential knowledge and scholarly rigour. This synergy deepened my understanding and empathy towards the participants, allowing me to perceive the intricate links between contemporary spiritual practices, Sufi traditions, esoteric teachings and Eastern philosophies. The fusion of personal experience and academic exploration provided a comprehensive grasp of the subject, enabling a thorough and empathetic analysis of the participants' experiences within the wider landscape of contemporary spirituality.

Being situated within a Sunnī context, my interpretation of the research findings was naturally shaped by this perspective. The Sunnī backdrop provided profound insights into the religious and cultural nuances of Saudi society. This foundational understanding guided the crafting of research questions, interactions with participants and the subsequent interpretation of their feedback.

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 242.

This context also underscored the interplay between the social construction of knowledge and Islamic teachings, highlighting the dynamic nature of spiritual understanding within Saudi society. It allowed for a deeper resonance with the participants' traditional beliefs, paving the way for dialogues rooted in shared understanding. While this Sunnī lens enriched the research, it was imperative to approach varied spiritual practices without bias or preconceptions consciously. Maintaining this equilibrium was key to adopting a methodological approach that was both meticulous and inclusive, enabling a comprehensive exploration of contemporary spirituality in the Saudi context.

A pivotal aspect of the research process was establishing trust with the participants. My emphasis on confidentiality, combined with a transparent, non-imposing and empathetic conversational style, facilitated richer data collection and fostered genuine trust. Participants appreciated the safe space created for them, where they could freely share their spiritual journeys without fear of judgment. While some expressed relief in the non-judgmental environment, others showed curiosity about my perspectives. However, to maintain the authenticity and integrity of the research, I deliberately refrained from expressing my personal beliefs, faith, or opinions on contemporary spirituality. This ensured that the participants' narratives remained the primary focus, allowing them to convey their values and experiences. The overarching goal was to ensure that the research findings reflected the participants' experiences and beliefs, conducted with the utmost respect for their understanding.

Framework

This thesis focuses on exploring the factors contributing to the popularity of contemporary spirituality among a sample of Saudi citizens. The study specifically examines the engagement with spiritual practices among participants who identify with the Sunnī branch of Islam, were educated in Saudi Salafī schools and are part of a society that generally resists foreign religious beliefs and philosophies. In the initial stages of this research, the primary objective was not to directly address the relationship between contemporary spirituality and Islam or to determine the alignment or contradiction of these spiritual practices with Islamic principles. However, as

the research progressed and insights from participants were gathered, it became evident that the interplay between contemporary spiritual teachings and traditional Islamic beliefs was a recurrent theme. Consequently, while not the primary focus, the research does touch upon areas where spiritual teachings may intersect or diverge from Sunnī Islamic tenets.

To investigate the reasons for the spread of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, I first traced its historical emergence to grasp a wider context picture. In the second chapter, I identified some factors contributing to its popularity. I gathered data from primary and secondary sources. I used public documents and video materials produced by spiritual teachers as primary sources.¹⁷ These include books, newspapers, magazine articles and different kinds of media, e.g., TV programs and interviews, websites, online forums and social media. Then, I conducted an interview-based study in which interview questions and data analyses were based on a combination of two approaches (see Appendix A). Firstly, they were influenced by the research model of contemporary spirituality and the background of Saudi Sunnī culture since all the interviewees were born in Saudi Arabia and belonged to the Sunnī branch of Islam. For example, one interview question asked respondents about their interest in learning about the philosophy behind contemporary spirituality. This approach was applied to understand the extent to which participants' conception of contemporary spirituality was similar to that of this research.

The second approach was to observe and explore what kind of contemporary spirituality interviewees have used and why without assuming a specific background. As Creswell explains, it is a research process that 'involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data'.¹⁸ This approach was applied to generate new ideas emerging from data—to serve as an open gate to observe and explore emerging areas within the growth of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. It was

¹⁷ The term 'spiritual teachers' is used in this study to refer to a person who teaches any concept or practice of contemporary spirituality. In this study, this term is also referred to as spiritual trainer, spiritual instructor or spiritual coach.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

also utilised to build research themes and patterns by organising the interviewees' information into data units, as explained in the procedures section. For example, most of the interview questions focused on the general story of the interviewees, e.g., asking about the concepts and practices of contemporary spirituality in which they were engaged. Some questions also emerged during the interviews, prompted by participants' experiences. These questions aimed to discover what was happening on the ground in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they studied interviewees' expressions without implying the research model of contemporary spirituality.

Procedures and Challenges

- **Sampling and recruiting procedures**

This study used snowball sampling to select a sample of interviewees who experienced spiritual activities in Saudi society. This way of sampling, according to Vogt, is ‘a technique for finding research subjects. One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on. This is ... also called network sampling’.¹⁹ A snowball sample is taken from a known network. Initially, researchers identify several individuals who meet the study’s criteria; subsequently, they ask the individuals for the names of others who may also be suitable participants. This method was particularly appropriate for the COVID-19 lockdown conditions, making meeting participants in person impossible. As Dattalo notes, ‘Snowball sampling is used to identify participants when appropriate candidates for a study are difficult to locate’.²⁰ As such, it is possible to have persons of a particular interest help identify others of the same interest. As finding people who embraced spiritual practices during the COVID-19 lockdown period is difficult, one person who participated in spiritual courses and practices could be recruited to assist in finding others who are willing to participate in a study.

In qualitative research, snowball sampling has the added benefit of increasing participants’ comfort and trust in the researcher, which can increase their willingness to participate. It may ease them into the interview process when they are told by a trusted acquaintance how the interview took place. Participants’ satisfaction with the current work shows the significance of this method. One interviewee stated, referring to the researcher, that ‘Malak’s acquaintances are always welcome’.²¹ However, obtaining consent from potential participants was not always easy. Some individuals refused to participate in the study, while others initially agreed to

¹⁹ W. Paul Vogt, *Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005).

²⁰ Patrick Dattalo, ‘Basic Terms and Concepts’, in *Determining Sample Size: Balancing Power, Precision, and Practicality*, Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods (New York: Oxford Academic, 2009), 6.

²¹ Malak is not the real name of the participant but a pseudonym.

participate but later refused to cooperate. For instance, one energy healer was very cautious about the interview process. Instead of agreeing to participate in the interview, she requested a written copy of the interview questions, intending to provide her responses independently and submit them. When informed that the preferred data collection method was an interview, she ultimately decided not to participate in the study. Consequently, the sampling process became more time-consuming and challenging due to the need to locate other participants. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that certain individuals may have exhibited reluctance to participate in the study, given the controversial nature of the subject matter within Saudi society. These individuals may have had fears of judgment or criticism, despite the researcher's efforts to reduce such concerns. In summary, although snowball sampling can be a valuable method in qualitative research, it is essential to address potential challenges and limitations associated with its application carefully.

To mitigate the potential for bias in snowball sampling, scholars have underscored the importance of avoiding soliciting participants from the same network. As Bremborg explains, 'One way to reduce the risk of bias is to spread one's entrances into the group'.²² The current study accomplished this by expanding the initially sampled groups and commencing the recruitment process with eight contacts in different cities across Saudi Arabia. These contacts were then requested to solicit potential participants for the study. The subsequent wave of participants was generated through the same procedure, with each participant soliciting additional individuals. Upon receiving consent and phone numbers, a WhatsApp message was sent to thank prospective participants, introduce the researcher and provide a brief overview of the study's topic. After questions were answered, interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time.

²² Bremborg, 'Interviewing', 314. See also Anjana Narayan, Bandana Purkayastha and Koyel Khan, 'Intersectionality', in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2021), 79.

As for the sample size, several authors indicate that it is determined based on 'theoretical saturation'. As indicated by Bremborg,

It is not possible to know in advance how many persons you have to interview ... The sampling strategy and the selection of each new respondent are based on the assumption that he or she can contribute with relevant knowledge. When nothing new of significance emerges from the interviews, theoretical saturation of a category or group has been reached'.²³

To achieve this in the current study, a database of eleven interviews was utilised. The interviews were of sufficient length to allow for in-depth analysis, and the point of theoretical saturation or data redundancy was reached after the tenth interview. According to Anjana Narayan, 'Snowball samples are generally small, as the objective is not to generalise but, rather, to get an in-depth and contextualised perspective of how people make sense of their life experiences'.²⁴ It is acknowledged that the experiences shared by participants in this study may not be applicable to all individuals in the Saudi community. This is because their experiences may be unique and different. The aim here is to present a snapshot of the range of experiences that a select group of participants shared. These accounts are seen as a starting point for further exploration of the region to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and complexities of spirituality in Saudi Arabia.

In the current study, eleven participants were interviewed to explore their individual experiences of contemporary spirituality. Two of the participants also shared their sisters' experiences, who could not be interviewed.²⁵ The participants were between the ages of 20 and 50, with a mean

²³ *Ibid.*, 313 – 314. See also Greg Guest, Kathleen MacQueen and Emily Namey, 'Writing Up Thematic Analysis', in *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 11.

²⁴ Narayan, Purkayastha and Khan 'Intersectionality', 79.

²⁵ In the case of one individual, according to her sister, she suffered mental problems from specific energy practices and was treated outside the country; therefore, her sister chose not to remind her about anything related to her experience and preferred to share her sister's experience instead. A second individual is an energy healer who has refused to participate in an interview.

age of around 30 years. Nine of the participants were Saudis, while the remaining two were non-Saudis who were born and lived in Saudi Arabia, namely a Jordanian and a Yemeni. The participants were from diverse regions of Saudi Arabia, including Jeddah, Riyadh and al-Khobar. They all identified themselves as Sunnīs, and their educational backgrounds varied from undergraduate degrees to doctoral degrees. Moreover, their educational experiences included both private and public education, as well as study abroad programs. This diversity among the participants ensured that the results were not influenced by any particular population group. To ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. This measure serves to protect participants and prevent their identities from influencing the results.

The present study employed a sample of individuals divided into two distinct segments: the first segment consisted of enthusiasts of contemporary spirituality who actively engaged in its practices during the interviews, with two participants reporting to have ceased some of these practices. The second segment comprised ex-enthusiasts who had previously been involved in spiritual practices but were no longer engaged in them. Notably, both segments included individuals who were or had been spiritual instructors. Table 1.1 presents a detailed description of the study sample. It is worth noting that the sample was not initially intended to be divided into these two segments; instead, they resulted from the sampling procedure. Nonetheless, by combining the two segments, the researcher was able to develop a more nuanced understanding of how spiritual practices have shaped the beliefs and behaviours of individuals. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to gain insight into how different types of spiritual practices are experienced differently by different people.

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Career	Engagement with spiritual activities
Samar	20-30	Saudi	PhD	University lecturer	Ex- enthusiast
Maram	20-30	Saudi	Masters	Semi-government sector	A current enthusiast
Zeena	20-30	Saudi	Bachelors	Masters' student	Ex- enthusiast
Arwa	31-40	Saudi	PhD	University lecturer	A current enthusiast (Quit specific practices)
Karima	20-30	Saudi	Bachelors	Freelancer	A current enthusiast
Lama (Shared her own experience and her sister's)	41-50	Saudi	Masters	Consultant	Ex- enthusiast (The sister is a current enthusiast)
Wisam	31-40	Yemeni	Bachelors	Unemployed	Ex- enthusiast
Ekram (Shared her own experience and her sister's)	31-40	Saudi	Not clarified	Social worker	A current enthusiast (The sister is an Ex-enthusiast)
Malak	31-40	Saudi	Bachelors	Unemployed	Ex- enthusiast
Muna	41-50	Saudi	Masters	Unemployed	A current enthusiast (Quit specific practices)
Dalal	31-40	Jordanian	Bachelors	Private sector	Ex- enthusiast

Table 1.1 Description of the study sample

- **Data Collection procedures**

Creswell asserts that 'The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent'.²⁶ This suggests that the initial research plan cannot be rigidly outlined, and the researcher may modify some or all stages of the research process during data collection. Data collection methods, questions, and potential participants, as well as research sites may change. In this study, the plan was to carry out face-to-face interviews from March to May 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed, remote interviews became essential. Consequently, interviews were conducted remotely, depending on the participants' preferences. While some interviewees opted for online video interviews via platforms such as Skype or Zoom, others preferred audio interviews over the phone. Nevertheless, due to poor internet connectivity, all interviews were conducted via telephone.

Remote interviews offer several advantages that make them a valuable tool in research. One significant benefit is the flexibility they provide in terms of scheduling, as participants are not limited to specific days or times. This allows them to plan their day accordingly and accommodate any unexpected changes that may arise. Additionally, the absence of physical presence means that researchers can reach people in different parts of the country. This makes the interview process smoother and more efficient without the need for travel. While concerns were raised about the potential impact of the absence of visual communication on understanding, this was not observed in practice. On the contrary, remote interviews were found to be less stressful and better suited to the needs of participants. This is because they were in a familiar environment and had time to think through their answers. The interviews elicited a range of emotional responses from participants, from tears to excitement, and many proceeded on to share additional comments and materials after the interview. Overall, remote interviews offer a valuable and effective means of conducting research.

²⁶ Creswell, *Research Design*, 235.

In his scholarly work, Kozinets argues that 'Long interviews might be difficult to obtain within certain sites, such as social networking sites or virtual worlds, where culture members are too busy to stop for one or two hours to be interviewed'.²⁷ Nonetheless, in the present study, most interviews lasted between one and two hours, with one interview spanning around four hours. It is plausible that the length of interviews was influenced by the depth of the participants' experiences with contemporary spirituality, or by the lockdown conditions enforced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter may have provided participants with ample free time, even for those working from home, thereby enabling them to engage in extended interviews without a sense of time passing. The long interview was carried out in a single four-hour session, during which the connection was lost after two hours, necessitating a follow-up call to resume the conversation. The durations of both regular and long interviews were deemed adequate to elicit comprehensive information from each experience. The length of interviews was, therefore, a strength of the study, contributing to the depth and adequate explanation of each experience, which enhanced the research. However, the process was sometimes time-consuming, not only during the interviews but also during the transcription and translation of the recordings. As Bremborg points out, 'Interviews have limitations because they are time consuming, and because it is easy to end up with lots of data, which can be challenging to structure and analyse'.²⁸ The interviews had to be carefully planned and structured in order to ensure that the information collected was relevant and useful. Furthermore, the process of transcription and translation was quite labor-intensive, as it involved carefully transcribing the recordings into a format that could be easily analysed and then translated.

Bremborg recommends that researchers develop a set of primary questions before conducting interviews because it is 'a template and an aid for the interviewer'.²⁹ However, Bremborg also acknowledges that in 'semi-structured interviews new questions ... can arise during the

²⁷ Robert V Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2020), 252.

²⁸ Bremborg, 'Interviewing', 319.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 314, 315.

interview’.³⁰ Thus, interviews conducted in semi-structured formats tend to proceed organically, with tangential questions being asked. Additionally, researchers need not ask all questions on the list, as the information sought may already have been provided in previous answers. This study prepared a list of basic questions as prompts for the interviewees. A hard copy of the question list was used as a guide to ask questions and take notes. However, not all questions were answered by each interviewee, and some interviewees provided longer responses to certain questions. This is because the questions on the list were used as a starting point for discussions with the interviewees. As the interview progressed, the researcher could ask more in-depth questions or follow the discussion more naturally rather than sticking to the list of predetermined questions. The introductory questions, in accordance with Bremborg’s recommendations,

Aim to make the respondent comfortable with the situation and get him or her to begin talking ...
When it comes to questions within the field of religious studies, it is often rewarding to let the person start talking about his or her life and thoughts.³¹

An icebreaker was used as a preliminary measure to facilitate the interview process. The researcher introduced herself, provided an overview of the thesis subject matter and clarified ethical issues. Open-ended questions were predominantly used during the interview process, as the aim was to generate discursive responses, allowing interviewees to articulate their experiences and understanding of the topic. The intention was to allocate adequate space for the storyteller and concentrate on the participant’s unique voice. The interview questions were structured in a progression from general to specific, focusing on two key aspects. The initial questions sought to elicit the respondents’ general narrative. This was done to explore the notions of contemporary spirituality and how they integrated these practices into their daily routines. Subsequently, questions were designed to investigate the reasons behind respondents’ interest in contemporary spirituality.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

- **Data Analysis Procedures:**

Data analysis is a process that continually takes place throughout the entire research process. According to Creswell,

Data analysis in qualitative research will proceed hand-in-hand with other parts of developing the qualitative study, namely, the data collection and the write-up of findings. While interviews are going on, for example, researchers may be analysing an interview collected earlier.³²

This process helps researchers identify emerging themes from the data, which could be explored further in subsequent interviews. Data analysis enables researchers to make informed conclusions about the research topic. I followed Creswell's data analysis procedures in this study and employed thematic analysis to examine the data. After obtaining explicit permission to record the interviews on a specific recording device, I transcribed the audio recordings, which is, according to Guest, 'expensive and time-consuming. However, when done properly, transcription makes analysis easier and provides more analytic opportunities'.³³ Using transcriptions, I grasped the general concepts offered by participants and reflected on their significance before I began coding. Coding, according to Rossman and Rallis, is the process of organising the data by 'bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margin'.³⁴ Coding involves categorising and labelling data. I coded each line of the interview transcription by highlighting words, sentences, and phrases relevant to the research question and labelled them with words. I identified commonalities and dissimilarities and categorised the common features into codes. Then, I combined and clustered common codes to identify patterns that could be formulated as themes (see Appendix B). In some cases, several themes were combined into overarching themes. For instance, some participants expressed confusion and ignorance of the term 'contemporary spirituality', saying phrases like: 'the word spirituality was not mentioned'; 'I did

³² Creswell, *Research Design*, 245.

³³ Guest *et al.*, 'Writing Up Thematic Analysis', 13.

³⁴ Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Learning in The Field*, 4th edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2017).

not know what to call this field'; 'we called it the topic of energy'. These responses demonstrate the ambiguity of the term 'contemporary spirituality'—which is part of the broader theme of the ambiguity of contemporary spirituality. These themes were used to organise the data from participants' interviews, and quotations from participants' interviews served as supporting evidence.

The analysis was conducted through MAXQDA2 software, which facilitated the process. However, a significant challenge during the analysis was losing substantial data. I retrieved some of the lost data using the software's backup feature, albeit at the cost of significant time and effort. Moreover, some of the data had to be manually restored as the backup option failed to recover all the missing data. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the software in the original Arabic language. Subsequently, the extracts were translated into English for presentation and further analysis. This was done to ensure that the nuances of the language were accurately captured and that the analysis was conducted in the same language as the participants. This approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of the participants' responses.

Ethical Considerations

This study entails critical ethical considerations to be anticipated and addressed in four distinct phases: pre-fieldwork, the commencement of fieldwork, data collection and data analysis. During the preliminary phase prior to fieldwork, the required approvals were secured from The University of Edinburgh, allowing for the research to be conducted within Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the Level One Ethics (Self) Assessment Form was submitted for evaluation. The study also secured local permission from King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. KAU, being the university responsible for the scholarship, designated a local supervisor to oversee the fieldwork study. The supervisor was responsible for supervising the study and submitting a report to the university after the fieldwork period.

Bremborg has highlighted that the primary ethical concern in the research process arises 'Before the interview starts: the respondent must be aware that the situation is an interview. An

interview is not a common talk; it is a way of creating data for analysis'.³⁵ In this study, four weeks prior conducting the fieldwork, I contacted potential participants via the WhatsApp mobile application and obtained their consent to participate in the research. During each interview, I explained the purpose of the study, the manner in which the interview data would be used, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' information and their right to withdraw from the study or decline to answer a particular question. Participants' consent was acquired to record the interviews using a specified recording device and to retain the recordings for an indefinite period. Additionally, equitable treatment of all participants was ensured throughout the process. Finally, I took measures to preserve the security of the interview transcriptions and audio recordings by storing them in a secure cloud storage with a password. This guaranteed that they would not be disclosed to unauthorised individuals.

Bremborg highlights the importance of confidentiality in research, suggesting that 'Anonymity should be aimed at in the report, which could be done by giving each person a code name or a number'.³⁶ In the present study, confidentiality and anonymity for all participants were prioritised during the data analysis and reporting stages. Pseudonyms were used, and composite profiles were developed to protect participant identities. Furthermore, the disclosure of potentially harmful information was avoided, adhering to the ethical principle of confidentiality in research.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of this research offers a historical overview of the term 'spirituality', aiming to establish a clear understanding of the subject before delving into the meaning of contemporary spirituality in both English and Arabic literature, as well as the definition used throughout the thesis. The second chapter investigates the emergence of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, which occurred over three distinct historical phases. This chapter seeks to elucidate some of the reasons behind this phenomenon by examining when and how these practices began to

³⁵ Bremborg, 'Interviewing', 319.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

thrive in Saudi Arabia. The third and fourth chapters present and analyse the research findings. Chapter three outlines the prevalent concepts and practices of contemporary spirituality among the study's participants in Saudi Arabia, while chapter four delves into the factors that drew participants to this phenomenon. In the fifth chapter, the findings are summarised and discussed within the context of five overarching categories. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the primary findings of the research, addressing the research question and offering recommendations for future work in this area of study.

Chapter I: An Overview of Contemporary Spirituality

This chapter examines the development of the concept of spirituality, starting with its emergence around the fifth century within a Christian framework as a way of life guided by God. From there, the term took on a variety of connotations and associations throughout history until it reached its current meaning. Contemporary spirituality developed in the West, but it has migrated to many parts of the world in various forms, including Saudi Arabia.³⁷ Therefore, it is important to examine the definitions and views of English-speaking and Arabic-speaking literature and assess where they are similar and different. This chapter is not exhaustive as it does not attempt to deconstruct all aspects of contemporary spirituality, but it does provide a brief overview of its interpretation.

Spirituality: Development of The Concept

In his article titled 'Toward Defining Spirituality', Principe provides a comprehensive overview of the historical progression of the term 'spirituality'. However, the scope of Principe's work was limited by its publication date (1983), which lacks a discussion of subsequent developments surrounding the term, including its contemporary usage which constitutes the primary focus of this thesis. The term 'spirituality' is associated with various connotations and historical associations that precede its current application. Principe's analysis facilitates the tracing of the key stages of the term's conceptual evolution. The author elucidates that the English term 'spirituality' derives from the Latin term *Spiritualitas*:

The word *Spiritualitas* has not been found earlier than the first part of the fifth century when an anonymous author in a letter ascribed to [Christian priests] ... urging a life according to the Spirit

³⁷ Several studies have indicated that contemporary spirituality has experienced widespread dissemination in various Western countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden. See Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981–2000', *Journal for The Scientific Study of Religion*, 46 (2007): 305 - 320, and see Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 42.

of God. Thus, the Pauline sense of *Spiritus* [spirit] and *Spiritualis* [spiritual] stands behind this first appearance of the word ... For Paul ... The “spiritual” person (*Spiritualis*) is one whose life is guided by the Spirit of God [as opposed to] the “carnal” person, one whose life is opposed to the working and guidance of the Spirit of God.³⁸

To put it simply, the first meanings of spirituality found in Christian contexts describe a manner of living that is influenced by the Holy Spirit. Here, the contrast was not made between ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical’ or ‘material’, but between two ways of life. The ‘spiritual’ person, influenced by the Holy Spirit, is distinguished from the person who rejects this influence and lives according to their heart, mind or will. At this time, being spiritual meant to live under God’s guidance and to overcome self-desires and bodily pleasures. The theological sense of ‘spiritual’, which means life guided by the Holy Spirit, continued to shape the use of the term ‘spirituality’ until a second meaning emerged in the ninth century, one opposing spirituality to materiality. According to Principe,

A rare ninth century use of *Spiritualitas* by Candidus, probably a monk of Fulda, foreshadows a new meaning that would be given the word in the 12th century and that would become increasingly important in later centuries ... Opposing *Spiritualitas* to ... *Materialitas*, this new use of the word changed its Pauline moral sense.³⁹

Here, the Latin term *Spiritualitas* was used to oppose the spiritual and the material. Carrette and King comment that this usage of the term spirituality was influenced by Greek philosophy: ‘We find evidence of a distinction between “spirit”, and “matter”, influenced by various strands of Neoplatonic and Hermetic thought, but mostly through the medium of Greek terms’.⁴⁰ There is a clear shift from the previous theological, moral and biblical interpretation of the term

³⁸ Walter Principe, ‘Toward defining Spirituality’, *Studies in religion*, 12 (1983):127-141. See also Sandra Schneiders, ‘Spirituality in the Academy’, *Theological studies*, 50 (1989): 676 – 697. Also, Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell publishing, 2007), 1 - 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130-131. See also Schneiders, ‘Spirituality in the Academy’, 681. Also, Sheldrake, *A brief History of Spirituality*, 3.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Carrette, Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge: Taylors and Francis groups, 2005), 35.

spirituality to the philosophical dualism between spirit and matter, a devotion to spirituality and a disregard for physicality. This shift places an increased emphasis on the spiritual aspects of life and a focus on the metaphysical – the intangible, non-physical aspects of reality. It also asserts that the spiritual realm is of greater importance than the material realm. In the 13th century, a third usage of the term emerged that relates spirituality to the church or its clergy. As Principe describes,

The word took on another nuance when it came to be used of ecclesiastical jurisdiction or of persons exercising such jurisdiction: they were the *Spiritualitas* or “lords spiritual” as opposed to the *Temporalitas* or “lords temporal” who exercised civil jurisdiction. From this came a further development whereby *Spiritualitas* designated ecclesiastical property by contrast with the property of king or prince, *Designatedas Temporalitas*.⁴¹

This development is rooted in the notion that spiritual matters were distinct from secular matters. The distinction between the spiritual and the secular was seen as a way to define the authority of the Church and its power over the state. In 17th century France, a fourth meaning emerged with the development of the French term *Spiritualité*: ‘*Spiritualité* seems to have been used more frequently than before in its religious sense of the devout life’.⁴² During this time, the term signified the ‘devout life’ in general, but it also referred to the ‘interior life’ as well. As indicated by Schneiders, ‘In the 17th century, ... the term came to be applied to the interior life of the Christian ... [and] by the 19th and early 20th centuries, ... [this meaning] was firmly established’.⁴³ A new sensibility developed during this period, which associated spirituality with the individual’s inner life. The emergence of such a meaning, according to Carrette and King, is associated with the Protestant Reformation, which emphasised ‘the individual’s unmediated

⁴¹ Principe, ‘Toward defining Spirituality’, 131. See also Schneiders, ‘Spirituality in the academy’, 681. Also, Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 3. Also, Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29 – 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 132. See also Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 3.

⁴³ Schneiders, ‘Spirituality in the Academy’, 681.

relationship to God and the importance of an interior faith'.⁴⁴ This focus on the individual and their inner life shifted the understanding of spirituality from an external, structured concept to one that was more personal and inward-looking. Spirituality was no longer limited to traditional institutions and practices but was understood as an internal experience within the individual. This allowed people to explore their own spirituality without having to adhere to the rules and regulations of traditional institutions.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while spirituality's sense of 'interior life' remained a prominent way of using the term, its sense of the 'devout life' became old-fashioned, and the word 'spirituality' became affected by the growing fascination with Eastern philosophies among Europeans and Americans. According to Principe,

The religious or devotional sense of "spirituality" continued into the 19th century but seemed to have gradually become archaic and less frequently used. In the later 19th and early 20th centuries, however, a special interest by some in modern Hinduism ... [resulted in] the frequent use of "spirituality" to designate what was considered to be the superiority of Indian religion to the so-called Western "materialism".⁴⁵

At this point, spirituality as an element of Christian traditions seems to have receded and become overshadowed by the Eastern-influenced sense of the word. For this thesis, the terms 'Eastern spirituality' and 'Eastern traditions' refer to South and East Asian religions and philosophies, particularly Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism.⁴⁶ The shift in the understanding of spirituality is likely a consequence of the prevalence of Eastern spiritual philosophies in the Western world. This has led to a more holistic and nonreligious approach to spiritual development. The interest in Eastern traditions, according to Carrette and King, may be attributed to European colonialism:

⁴⁴ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 37.

⁴⁵ Principe, 'Toward defining Spirituality', 133.

⁴⁶ See Harold Coward, Ronald Neufeldt, and Eva K. Neumaier, *Readings in Eastern Religions* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), xi, 117. See also Robert Fuller, 'Unchurched Spirituality: An Introduction', in *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, (New York: Oxford Academic, 2001), 1-12.

European colonialism had precipitated an unprecedented (if unequal) encounter with various Asian civilisations. The result was a great deal of popular interest in the exoticism of the Orient ... European and American audiences became increasingly interested in “Eastern philosophies” and religions, particularly insofar as they seemed to offer an “exotic” alternative to mainstream Christianity.⁴⁷

Through colonialism, European countries substantially influenced Eastern societies, but Eastern societies also influenced the Western world. As Europeans colonised more of Asia and interacted with its cultures, they became fascinated by its different philosophies and religions. This fascination profoundly influenced the development of Western thought, with many of the works of famous philosophers and writers containing elements of Eastern philosophy. For instance, Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society, as described by Maryam ‘Intabī, sought to bridge the gap between East and West by bringing Eastern religious concepts to the West and incorporating Hindu and Buddhist concepts, such as Karma and reincarnation.⁴⁸ Similarly, Vivekananda’s mission was to spread the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualist interpretation of Hinduism, to the West.⁴⁹ Their efforts have had a lasting impact in the West and have helped to shape the way many people in the West view religion and spirituality today. The popularity of

⁴⁷ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 39.

⁴⁸ See Maryam ‘Intabī, *Theosophya: Qaḍīyyat al-‘Ulūhiyya fī al-Fikr al-Theosophy al-Ḥadīth (Theosophy: The Concept of Divinity in New Theosophical Thought)* (Jeddah: Markaz Ta’sīl Lildirāsāt), 71.

Helena Blavatsky was born in Russia and left her marriage to begin her travels around the world in search of wisdom and the secrets of life. She spent seven years in Tibet and India, where she claimed to have met the Masters and was indoctrinated with the secrets of magic and astrology in the homes of monks. She was then assigned the task of spreading wisdom and beliefs to mankind, as she explained. She claimed to communicate with spirits and worked as a medium until her tricks were revealed. She then returned to the United States, where she founded the Theosophical Society in New York. (See *Ibid.*, 59-60).

⁴⁹ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 39-40.

Swami Vivekananda was an Indian monk and the most prominent disciple of the Indian mystic Rama Krishnan. He advocated for the Vedas and played a key role in introducing Vedanta and Yoga to Western culture. He was the spokesman for Hinduism in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, after which he became a popular figure and introduced Hinduism to Americans. See Adīb Sa‘b, *Al-‘Adyān al-Ḥayya: Nushū‘uha wa Taṭawuruhā (Lived Religions: Their Emergence and Development)*, 3rd edition (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2005), 41.

Eastern philosophies in the 19th century contributed to the spread of what is called 'alternative beliefs' concerning Christianity. Pike characterises this belief set in the following manner:

Alternative tradition had no code of conduct, central doctrine, single sacred text, organised body or central leadership. Instead, it was a loose network of overlapping beliefs and practices that scholars have variously dubbed "metaphysical religion", "the alternative reality tradition", "harmonial religion" and "shadow culture".⁵⁰

These alternative beliefs were attractive to many as they provided a spiritual path which prioritised individual exploration and self-discovery, rather than relying on a set of rules and doctrines set by a central figure or organisation. This appealed to those who wanted to have a more personalised and meaningful spiritual journey. During the mid-20th century, the meaning of spirituality gradually expanded to include various traditions outside of the Christian context. As Principe notes, 'gradually ... it seems the word came to be applied more and more to all kinds of particular spiritualities'.⁵¹ He adds,

From the 1950s on the term "spirituality" began to be and increasingly became a more popular word ... the term was extended to studies of non-Christian groups: there exists, for example, a collection entitled '*Spiritualités vivantes*' [living spiritualities] with subsections on Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist "*Spiritualité*".⁵²

From the mid-20th century, the word 'spirituality' underwent a significant semantic shift detaching it from its Christian origins. By distancing the term from its Christian roots, it became more inclusive of non-Christian spiritualities, while also allowing for a more universal interpretation of the concept, making it applicable to a wider range of religious and philosophical beliefs. Furthermore, the shift towards a more inclusive definition of spirituality facilitated the exploration of mystical experiences that were not confined to the realm of Christianity. As evidenced by Schmidt's words,

⁵⁰ Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 39 – 40.

⁵¹ Principe, 'Toward defining Spirituality', 134.

⁵² *Ibid*, 128 - 129.

Only through some dissociation from those Protestant habits does the term spirituality come to be distinguished from religion; only at a step removed from evangelical Christianity does spirituality begin to refer to “direct mystical experience” and “an individual’s solitary search” for “the absolute or the divine”.⁵³

Spirituality has come to be viewed as an expansive and individualised form of religion, which facilitates the pursuit of spiritual truths through personal exploration rather than reliance on traditional religious teachings. The emphasis on individual experience, often outside of a religious context, has emerged as a defining feature of modern spirituality, enabling individuals to express their beliefs in a more personalised way. It is likely that the notion of individual or inner spirituality that emerged in the 17th century gained widespread popularity in the 1950s. During this period, the spiritual significance that was once attributed to the Holy Spirit was transformed into an expression of an individual’s inner self. It is possible that spirituality acquired these new connotations during this time as a result of changes in religion and culture.

Marwick framed the period from 1958 to 1974, as ‘the long sixties’, which, he argues, ushered in a ‘cultural revolution’ in Britain, France, Italy and the United States: ‘The period 1958-74 ... have been both unique and of special significance with regard to what came after’.⁵⁴ Marwick identifies a range of incidents and trends that have shaped the ‘cultural revolution’ or ‘long sixties’ from that period to the present day. These include the emergence of new subcultures and movements that often challenge or reject established societal values and modes, such as the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and the gay rights movement. The availability of the contraceptive pill, along with new standards of sexual behavior, such as sexual liberation and novel forms of self-presentation, also contributed to this cultural revolution. Furthermore, unprecedented international cultural exchange, including discos, pop music, fashion and film,

⁵³ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 4. See also Carette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 44.

⁵⁴ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2011), 14 -15. See also Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 18.

along with a participatory and uninhibited popular culture based on rock music, became a sort of universal language.⁵⁵ These developments helped to challenge the existing norm and create an environment where people could express themselves freely, regardless of race, gender or sexuality. This era witnessed significant social freedom, laying the groundwork for the ongoing cultural revolution. These changes appear to have influenced the meaning of spirituality as well, which took on a more inclusive, accessible, and self-exploratory significance. People were no longer confined to a particular religion but could explore a variety of spiritual paths. This opened up new possibilities, allowing individuals to find their own spiritual paths and express themselves in ways that were previously unavailable.

Mcleod employs Marwick's notion of 'the long sixties' and discusses the religious changes that occurred in Christianity and other religions in the democracies of Western and Northern Europe, North America and Australasia. According to Mcleod, 'In the "long 1960s" ... nearly every Western country saw a drop in church-going, and in some cases the drop was dramatic'.⁵⁶ Mcleod identifies four main themes concerning these changes. Firstly, a growing portion of the population had access to a vast range of beliefs and worldviews, including Hinduism, Buddhism, alternative spiritualities, atheism or secularism. Notably, people who rejected Christianity were more vocal about their stance. Secondly, the perception of people's religious identity changed; Western societies during the 1960s and 1970s were classified as 'pluralist', 'post-Christian' or 'secular' while earlier decades were labelled as 'Christian countries'. Thirdly, there was a decrease in socialising children as members of a Christian society; fewer parents discussed God and Jesus with their children or sent them to Sunday schools to learn about such beliefs, while atheist or agnostic parents were more likely to discuss their non-belief at home. Lastly, while Catholics and Protestants were moving closer together, divisions within each church were

⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Hugh Mcleod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

evident between their 'conservatives', 'moderates', 'liberals', and 'radicals', according to Mcleod.⁵⁷

In the latter half of the 20th century, the term 'spirituality' began to connote a flexible meaning that caters to individuals' requirements and encompasses all facets of human existence. As Carrette and King point out:

Tailoring of spiritual teachings to the demands of ... individual self-expression ... From the 1980s, spirituality infiltrates all domains of public life, including healthcare, education and ... the world of business. Indeed, spirituality can be mixed with anything since, as a positive but largely vacuous cultural trope, it manages to imbue any product with a wholesome and life-affirming quality⁵⁸

This semantic shift in the term 'spirituality' creates a kind of 'spirituality-on-demand', whereby individuals can adapt spiritual teachings to their own personal needs and desires. This phenomenon enables individuals to take control of their spiritual journeys and find comfort in whatever form or practice they find most meaningful. This shift not only emphasises the importance of an individual's inner self and freedom in selecting their life's path but also notably allows spirituality to link to all aspects of life. As a result, the term 'spirituality' has gained increasing popularity, while also becoming more ambiguous and challenging to define.

The term 'spirituality' has evolved over several centuries, with distinctive periods that have impacted its trajectory (see graph 1.1). The 19th century was a notable period during which the concept of 'interior life' was firmly established, and its influence by Eastern philosophical thought was on the rise. This period may have laid the foundation for the contemporary meaning of the term. As Vincett and Woodhead observe, spirituality developed as an 'alternative' concept to religion during the 19th century.⁵⁹ The popularity of the 'interior life' concept was further fueled

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, 1 – 4. See also Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4, 7 – 9.

⁵⁸ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 44 - 46.

⁵⁹ See Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead, 'Spirituality', in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Christopher Partridge, and Hiroko Kawanams (Milton Park: Routledge: Taylor and Francis groups, 2016), 324.

during ‘the long sixties’, with the spread of various terms such as ‘mystical experience’ and the ‘individual’s solitary search’ for the divine. However, a more significant period of change occurred from the late 20th century to the present, during which the significance of the individual’s ‘inner self’ has become an eclectic feature based on personal feelings and interests. As McLeod notes, ‘By the 1980s and 1990s, the fashion would be for eclecticism—a deliberate mixing of elements drawn from different belief-systems, or a casual assumption that the boundaries between them were irrelevant’.⁶⁰ The late 20th century appears to encompass most, if not all, of the contemporary use of the term ‘spirituality’, which has since become increasingly mainstream, infiltrating diverse disciplines and encompassing a broad spectrum of different forms.



Graph 1.1: The historical development of the concept of spirituality

See also Linda Woodhead, ‘New Forms of Public Religion: Spirituality in Global Civil Society’, in *Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society*, ed. Wim Hofstee, and der Kooij, A. van (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 30. Also, Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 2005, 6-7.

⁶⁰ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 3.

The Contemporary Meaning of Spirituality: Definition and Context

Numerous historical occurrences have influenced the meaning of spirituality, resulting in various developments and diversified applications. In modern scholarly discourse, spirituality is a comprehensive category encompassing various movements, rituals and disciplines. As outlined by Holmes,

What has happened is that spirituality as a domain has broken away from its traditional religious moorings ... [and] has begun to appear in numerous academic and professional disciplines, all outside traditional religion ... Attempts at a single definition are therefore increasingly problematic.⁶¹

According to Holmes' perspective, the broad nature of spirituality can be attributed to three factors. Firstly, its separation from traditional religious connotations created a broad, unstructured significance. Secondly, its dynamic capacity to cross disciplinary boundaries, including fields as diverse as nursing and business. Finally, its inclusion of and connections with various spiritual traditions, phenomena and movements, each characterised by a range of beliefs and practices. Woodhead elaborates on some of these movements:

It is possible to identify at least three different strands in contemporary Western spirituality, each of which has its own inner variety. First, there is "New Age" ... a second stream of spirituality, made up of various "Mind, Body, Spirit" practices, ... The third important strand of spirituality is Paganism.⁶²

Each of these strands of spirituality is characterised by distinct belief systems and practices. New Age spirituality, for instance, often focuses on the individual, emphasising personal transformation and growth. Mind, Body, Spirit practices, encompassing activities like Yoga, meditation and holistic healing, are also an integral part of this strand. Paganism represents itself

⁶¹ Peter Holmes, 'Spirituality: Some Disciplinary Perspective', in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 24. See also Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 34. Also, Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 3.

⁶² Woodhead, 'New Forms of Public Religion', 30-31.

as an ancient faith tradition, with its focus on venerating nature.⁶³ Notably, New Age spirituality is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘spirituality’, as evident in the work of Otterloo, Aupers and Houtman: ‘While the Christian tradition is steadily declining in North Western Europe since the 1950s, “New Age” or post-traditional “spirituality” is growing in the last decades’.⁶⁴ However, spirituality is often regarded as a vast and inclusive domain from which New Age has emerged as a subset, as exemplified by Woodhead’s earlier analysis.

In light of the broad scope of contemporary spirituality, formulating an adequate definition has become challenging. This challenge stems from the presence of contemporary spirituality across disciplines and movements and the many ways it can be understood within each area. Furthermore, a definition must consider various movements, disciplines, research approaches and practice domains. Therefore, the definition of spirituality can vary between individuals, cultures and disciplines. It is, therefore, essential to consider the context when examining the concept of spirituality.

The challenge in providing an accurate delineation of contemporary spirituality also arises from its spontaneous and decentralised nature. Hayfā’ al-Rashīd notes that ‘It is a loose network without any centralised leadership, formal doctrines or unified rituals’.⁶⁵ Consequently, spirituality does not conform to authoritative sources that can be relied upon to comprehend its

⁶³ New Age is a form of spirituality that anticipates the arrival of a new era of ‘heightened consciousness’. This era is believed to transform those who are capable of realising their destiny into enlightened, empowered, and spiritual beings.

Mind, Body, Spirit practices, which include Yoga and Reiki, are ‘based on the idea that *Chi* or energy is the vital force of all life’, and that holistic techniques can unblock *Chi* energy. These practices pay particular attention to a holistic well-being of an individual. See Woodhead, ‘New Forms of Public Religion’, 31.

Paganism is characterised by its emphasis on, and regard for, nature; interest in occultism and spiritual beings, including ancestral spirits; and involvement with pre-Christian cultures, their rituals, and gods. It has a growing affirmation for plurality. See Vincett and Woodhead, ‘Spirituality’, 330.

⁶⁴ Anneke van Otterloo, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman: ‘Trajectories to the New Age: The Spiritual Turn of the First Generation of Dutch New Age teacher’, *Social Compass* 59 (2010), 5. See also Houtman and Aupers, ‘The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition’, 305–320. Also, Michael York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements* (Lanham and Oxford: The Scarecrow press, 2004), 1.

⁶⁵ Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 23.

essence or define it precisely. Instead, it stresses self-authority and is essentially a subjective experience that is unique to everyone. It entails a personal journey of exploration and discovery with no single definition or prescribed path to follow. As such, the differences in how contemporary spirituality is defined should not be construed as a contradiction but rather as a reflection of its diversity or defining an entity through its constituent elements. Despite this considerable diversity, it is still possible to identify commonalities among the varied definitions, ideas and practices that comprise the contemporary use of spirituality.

Contemporary spirituality is commonly regarded as a modern expression of longstanding ideas rather than a recent development. Sutcliffe and Bowman describe contemporary spirituality as 'An emic repackaging of popular and vernacular religion to suit the peculiar condition of industrial and post-industrial societies'.⁶⁶ To put it simply, contemporary spirituality is a reinterpretation of traditions that are distinct from traditional form of organised religions and official doctrines, tailored to address the demands of modern society. The preceding definition highlights two fundamental aspects of the term 'spirituality': firstly, that it draws upon archaic elements of philosophy and ritual, and secondly, that these elements are adapted and reformulated to suit contemporary needs. These aspects are evident in Fuller's depiction of spirituality adherents, who are inclined to seek the meaning of life from non-traditional sources, including Eastern belief systems and practices such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, while simultaneously 'tend to filter these exotic philosophies through a familiar set of beliefs'.⁶⁷ Terms like 'filter' and 'repackage' suggest that Eastern philosophies are 'westernised' to conform to modern Western demands through spirituality. However, they also demonstrate the significance of Eastern ideas for contemporary spirituality.

⁶⁶ Sutcliffe and Bowman, *Beyond New Age*, 8, cf. 6. See also Marion Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion', 3-4. Also, Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, Xii.

⁶⁷ Fuller, 'Unchurched Spirituality', 75. See also Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 87. Also, Anneke H. van Otterloo, 'Self Spirituality and the Body: New Age Centres in the Netherlands Since the 1960s', *Social Compass*, 46 (1999): 199-200. Also, Woodhead, 'New Forms of Public Religion', 30.

The earlier characterisations of contemporary spirituality show certain parallels with the Arabic definition provided by Kurdī, who describes it as '*al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilhādiyya al-Rūhiyya* (spiritual atheistic philosophical orientations) is a category that underscores its reliance on Eastern religious concepts, Paganism and atheistic philosophy to explain life and metaphysics ... often promoted in modern templates'.⁶⁸ Consequently, spirituality is portrayed, on the one hand, as ancient due to its derivation from archaic traditions like Eastern philosophy and Paganism and, on the other hand, as contemporary due to its diverse applications that align with current needs. In this respect, Kurdī's definition is akin to that of Sutcliffe and Bowman. Nonetheless, Kurdī characterises spirituality as an 'atheistic' movement since, in her view, it encompasses 'the disbelief in the true God'.⁶⁹

A second common thread found among the definitions of contemporary spirituality is a contrast drawn between contemporary spirituality and traditional forms of organised religions. For example, Vincett and Woodhead characterise spirituality as:

A series of movements and currents that arose in the 19th century in reaction to existing forms of traditional religion and that have grown, developed, and diversified ever since. Although it was initially a reaction to forms of Christianity, spirituality quickly became a global movement, and openness to other religions – particularly their mystical aspects – is a pioneering feature of modern spirituality.⁷⁰

Two aspects of this definition should be highlighted. Firstly, contemporary spirituality has been framed as being opposed to traditional forms of organised 'religion', which has been portrayed as dogmatic, external and authoritarian, with 'spirituality', which has been portrayed as being concerned with inner experiences and self-authority. This contrast may explain why Vincett and

⁶⁸ Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilhādiyya al-Rūhiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu'āṣira*, 10. See also Bardīsī, *Al-Da'awāt al-Bāṭiniyya 'Ilā al-Salām fī al-'Aṣr al-Ḥadīth*, 28.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 324. See also Woodhead, 'New Forms of Public Religion', 30. Also, Schmidt, *Restless Souls*.

Woodhead describe spirituality as ‘a preferable alternative (hence the term ‘alternative spirituality’).’⁷¹ The work of Houtman and Aupers further reinforces this concept of spirituality:

Post-Christian spirituality can be understood as an alternative “third option” ... Those involved do not pursue meaning and identity from “pregiven” authoritative sources, located outside the self (e.g., the answers offered by the Christian churches), but want to rely on an “internal” source, located in the self’s deeper layers. It is this “dogma of self spirituality”.⁷²

This type of spirituality is based on the idea that one’s own inner voice is more reliable than an external source for finding meaning and identity. Thus, instead of relying on pre-existing answers, those engaged in spirituality seek to discover their own truth by exploring their inner depths. This idea, according to Houtman and Aupers, characterises contemporary spirituality as a ‘sacralisation of the self’ that includes the belief that ‘in the deepest layers of the self [is] the “divine spark”’.⁷³ Tacey also describes it as ‘the God within’.⁷⁴ This idea suggests that every individual has the potential to discover their own spiritual truth and to become liberated from external authorities. It is a form of spiritual autonomy which allows people to take ownership of their own spiritual journey. In a similar manner, the Arabic-speaking literature by Hayfā’ al-Rashīd defines *al-Rūḥaniyya al-Ḥadītha* (new spirituality):

It is a new orientation that has separated itself from its Christian roots. Not only does it crowd out religious discourse by offering non-religious alternatives, but it also represents a revolution against religious fundamentalism. It attempts to transform people from within rather than

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁷² Houtman and Aupers, ‘The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition’, 307.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 305, 307. See also Gerard Saucier and Katarzyna Skrzypinska, ‘Spiritual but not Religious? Evidence for two Independent Dispositions’, *Journal of Personality*, 74 (2006): 1259 – 1260.

⁷⁴ David Tacey, ‘Contemporary Spirituality’, in *Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare*, ed. Mark Cobb, Christiana Puchalski, and Bruce Rumbold (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 475. See also David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Milton Park: Routledge: Taylors and Francis groups, 2005), 5.

through prophetic mediation or revelation restrictions. It is, thus, a spiritual exploration outside of traditional religious frameworks.⁷⁵

Al-Rashīd's definition aligns with the English-language description of contemporary spirituality as an alternative to organised religions. Her emphasis on the individual's inner dimension as a source of knowledge, rather than external sources, further supports this characterisation. Words such as Tacey's seem to attribute the allure of contemporary spirituality in Western countries to this feature:

We need spiritual guidance, but for a variety of historical and social reasons we cannot return to organised religion or dogmatic theology in their old, premodern forms ... we are ... stuck between a secular system we have outgrown and a religious system we cannot fully embrace.⁷⁶

By allowing individuals to create their spiritual paths and find personal meaning in spiritual experiences, contemporary spirituality may be particularly attractive to those seeking spiritual guidance without the limitations of organised religion. The surge in the popularity of contemporary spirituality can be attributed to a growing desire for alternative forms of spirituality which seek to address the spiritual void resulting from declining religious affiliations. Houtman and Aupers further support this notion:

Detraditionalisation goes along with a spiritual turn and our theory assumes that this is because the decline of tradition conjures up problems of meaning and identity that haunt the late-modern self: "What is it that I really want?" "Is this really the sort of life I want to live?" "What sort of person am I, really?"⁷⁷

In other words, the declining influence of traditional values has left individuals with a sense of disorientation regarding their personal identity and the meaning of their existence. As a

⁷⁵ Al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta'wīlī fī al-Ta'āmul ma' al-Naṣ*, 11. See also al-Qaḥṭanī, *al-Wa'y*, 361. Also, Bardīsī, *Al-Da'awāt al-Bāṭiniyya 'Ilā al-Salām fī al-'Aṣr al-Ḥadīth*, 28.

⁷⁶ Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 1-2.

⁷⁷ Houtman and Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition', 316.

consequence, individuals have had to look elsewhere to find answers to questions of identity and purpose, and have turned to spiritual paths to gain insight into these existential questions.

Vincett and Woodhead's prior definition of contemporary spirituality highlights its emergence as a response to established forms of traditional religion. However, the authors assert that a hallmark of contemporary spirituality is its willingness to embrace the mystical aspects of other religions: 'spirituality quickly became a global movement, and openness to other religions – particularly their mystical aspects – is a pioneering feature of modern spirituality'.⁷⁸ They add that contemporary spirituality stresses the mystical strands within 'theistic religions':

Christianity, Judaism and Islam all have mystical elements ... [which] often downplay of the "hierarchy" of God and emphasise the unity between God and the believer. They may also present God as impersonal, ineffable (beyond name), and unknowable'.⁷⁹

Vincett and Woodhead's definition of the mystical refers to a 'tendency within all major religious traditions that places emphasis on the nearness of the divine to the human and the possibility of direct experience of the divine'.⁸⁰ This characterisation of mystical elements is also present in Arabic literature, where Hayfā' al-Rashīd posits that spirituality draws inspiration from mystical currents within various religions and traditions, such as 'Gnosticism, Kabbalah and philosophical Sufism'.⁸¹ Al-Rashīd underscores that the mystical thread emphasises the unity between the

⁷⁸ Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 324. See also Woodhead, 'New Forms of Public Religion', 30. Also, Schmidt, *Restless Souls*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁸¹ Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 56.

Gnosticism is an orientation that includes multiple sects that emphasise attaining salvation through mystical and esoteric knowledge, occasionally aided by magical rituals. ('Abdurrahman Badawī, *Madhāhib al-'Islāmīn (Islamic Orientations)* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm lilmalā'īn, 1997), 757-758).

Kabbalah is 'the esoteric mystic lore of Judaism based upon an occult interpretation of the Bible and handed down as secret doctrine to the Initiated'. *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 'Kabbalah', 412.

divine and the cosmos and ‘expands the circle of the sacred to include everything’.⁸² This perspective regards all existence as a reflection of the divine, representing some form of unity with it. The idea of a unified relationship between the divine and the physical world, as well as between humans and the divine, is a fundamental characteristic of spirituality’s explanation of life and the connection between the divine and the physical world.

Given the preceding discussion, this research defines contemporary spirituality as an incoherent umbrella that involves repackaging old philosophies that differ from traditional organised religion to align with present conditions. It is a concept that emphasises internal sources of authority in the quest for meaning and spiritual exploration and expanding the scope of the sacred to encompass all things.

Typically, scholars differentiate this form of spirituality from those that stem from Christianity or other organised religions by using specific terms to highlight its distinctive characteristics. For instance, designations such as ‘post-Christian spirituality’ or ‘alternative spirituality’ underscore the contrast between this variant of spirituality and its traditional religious counterparts. Other terms used to describe it include ‘new age spirituality’ or ‘new spirituality’ which emphasise the emergence of this type of spirituality in the 19th century and its separation from the domain of Christianity.⁸³ Consistent with the latter convention, the present research employs the term ‘contemporary spirituality’. This label underscores the modern methods and strategies, or the repackaging of old concepts, used by this phenomenon to adapt to the cultural and societal conditions in which it arises.

⁸² See al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 145-151. See also al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta’wīlī fī al-Ta’āmul ma’ al-Naṣ*, 11.

⁸³ See Tacey, ‘Contemporary Spirituality’, and see Michael York, ‘Alternative Spirituality in Europe: Amsterdam, Aups and Bath’, in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 118.

Is Contemporary Spirituality a Religion?

The analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of contemporary spirituality within the realm of modern academic discourse. While it is frequently labelled as a network, orientation, or movement, some scholars have expanded the definition of religion to encompass this form of spirituality. Primiano introduces the concept of 'vernacular religion', describing it as 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret and practice it'.⁸⁴ He perceives it as 'a process of contestation – of coming to a new understanding of religion'.⁸⁵ This perspective accentuates the central role of individual experience in influencing religious beliefs and practices. Primiano's emphasis on individual agency suggests a paradigm shift in religious studies, transitioning from overarching notions of 'religions' or 'beliefs' to a more individual-centric approach.⁸⁶ In this context, religion emerges as a fluid construct, a dynamic entity, constantly reshaped by individual interpretations of religious texts and their surroundings. Contrary to seeing religion as a set doctrine, Primiano suggests that even established religions undergo continuous reinterpretation and adaptation, challenging the perception of religion as immutable.⁸⁷

Bowman's insights echo this perspective. She advocates for 'a more rounded and realistic view of what religion entailed in order to fully apprehend it'.⁸⁸ Bowman recognises the relevance of vernacular religion, not just in the context of traditional religious expressions but also in understanding the fluidity of contemporary spirituality, particularly its manifestations in digital

⁸⁴ Leonard Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife', *Journal for Western Folklore* 54, 1 (1995): 37–56.

⁸⁵ Leonard Primiano, 'Afterword: Manifestations of the religious vernacular: Ambiguity, power, and creativity', in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, Marion Bowman and Ü Valk (Acumen Publishing, 2012), 390.

⁸⁶ See Primiano, 'Afterword: Manifestations of the religious vernacular: Ambiguity, power, and creativity', 384.

⁸⁷ See *Ibid*, 384.

⁸⁸ Marion Bowman, '25 Years of Vernacular Religion Scholarship', in *Vernacular Knowledge - Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs*, ed. Ü Valk and Marion Bowman. (Equinox eBooks Publishing, Sheffield, 2022), 412.

realms.⁸⁹ From this vantage point, spirituality can be perceived as equated or synonymous with religion.

However, this view isn't universally accepted. Another perspective delineates religion as a unique amalgamation of beliefs, rituals and governing structures that profoundly influence its adherents' lifestyles. Muḥammad Darrāz elucidates:

Religion is an intricate belief system anchored in the acknowledgment of a transcendent entity or entities possessing emotions and decision-making abilities. Such entities are perceived to exert influence over human affairs, evoking in individuals a profound sense of reverence, marked by awe, longing, submission, and veneration.⁹⁰

Darrāz's interpretation seeks to demarcate religion from other paradigms like superstition, philosophy and cultural or tribal traditions. He adopts a panoramic view of religion, transcending the confines of Abrahamic or mainstream faiths. Hayfā' al-Rashīd offers a nuanced perspective, contending that while contemporary spirituality might echo religious tenets, it doesn't possess the requisite structure to be deemed an independent religion.⁹¹ She elaborates as follow:

In its idiomatic understanding, religion is characterised by a structured belief system and rituals, providing a specific framework that directs its followers' lives. In contrast, contemporary spirituality, despite promoting a unified cosmological perspective and addressing existential concerns, does not prescribe a definitive path to salvation nor offers a codified guideline distinguishing between what's permissible and forbidden.⁹²

Al-Rashīd underscores that contemporary spirituality encourages 'esoteric currents within existing religious traditions' without attempting to shift anyone from their original religious

⁸⁹ See Marion Bowman, 'Vernacular Religion and Contemporary Spiritualities. Tribute to Leonard Norman Primiano (1957-2021)'. *Journal for Traditiones*, 50 (2022): 7–14.

⁹⁰ Darrāz, *Al-Dīn*, 52.

⁹¹ See Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 25.

⁹² *Ibid.*

beliefs.⁹³ This focus on the ‘unity or unification of religions’ and the harmonisation of religious ideologies distinguishes it from idiomatic religions, typically anchored in exclusive doctrines.⁹⁴ Furthermore, she observes that religions are enriched with rituals and forms of worship that aim to bridge the gap between the worshiper and the divine. This necessitates a clear demarcation between the worshiper and the worshiped, a distinction notably absent in the beliefs championed by contemporary spirituality.⁹⁵ Based on al-Rashīd’s insights, contemporary spirituality deviates from the idiomatic definition of ‘religion’. It lacks core elements such as sacred texts, centralised leadership and a defined doctrinal system. Its focus on personal spiritual exploration further sets it apart. While it might be loosely labelled as a religion, al-Rashīd emphasises its departure from conventional interpretations. Her perspective sheds light on the complexities of modern spiritual identities and their potential challenges to established religious beliefs, especially in the context of Islam.

In my perspective, when examining specific practices within contemporary spirituality, they might resonate as religious due to their origins in diverse religious traditions. However, when viewing contemporary spirituality as a holistic entity, it doesn’t entirely fit the traditional definition of religious structures. While there are parallels with established religious frameworks, contemporary spirituality lacks pivotal characteristics commonly linked to religion. The notable absence of a central figure, coupled with an emphasis on personal spiritual exploration, suggests that contemporary spirituality leans more towards an ‘individual religion’ than a traditional one. It emerges as a distinct category, both overlapping with and standing apart from conventional religious paradigms.

⁹³ See Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 25-26.

⁹⁴ Unity of religions suggests that all religious beliefs and practices are valid and lead to a common ultimate goal. Unification of religions refers to the merging of various religious traditions into a single, new faith, causing followers to leave their original religions and join this newly formed belief system. (Aḥmad al-Qāḍī, *Al-Taqrīb Bayn al-‘Adyān: Dirāsa Naqdiyya fī Ḍaw’ al-‘Aqīda al-‘Islāmiyya* (Advocacy for Convergence Among Religions: A Critical Examination in the Context of Islamic Beliefs) (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1422/2001), 1/339, 343.

⁹⁵ See Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 26.

Chapter II: Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Society

This chapter transitions from the historical development of the English term ‘contemporary spirituality’ to exploring its emergence in Saudi Arabia. While this phenomenon did not originate independently within Saudi Arabia, it was introduced to various Arab countries by Arab spiritual trainers. Furthermore, the Arabic-speaking literature frequently alludes to the rise of contemporary spirituality in Arab countries as a whole rather than confining its focus to a specific geographic region. For instance, the work of Hanā’ al-Nafjān posits that ‘the orientation of contemporary spirituality began to emerge in the Arab and Islamic world between 1995 and 2000’.⁹⁶ The Arabic language is a common bond among Arab countries, and the prevalent media platforms facilitate the exchange of ideas. Consequently, spiritual concepts are likely to have a broader impact on the Arab world, rather than being limited to a single country or region. The initial segment of this chapter defines the term ‘contemporary spirituality’ in Arabic language. The following section provides an overview of the religious landscape of Saudi Arabia, outlining the Islamic branch that is practised within the country, the doctrines that citizens adhere to and the bases of their perspectives regarding other beliefs. This is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, it elucidates the Islamic society within which contemporary spirituality has spread. Secondly, it provides insights into the degree of openness the community exhibits towards other doctrines and their attitudes and connections with other faiths. The third section delves into the emergence of concepts and practices of contemporary spirituality in Saudi culture. The chapter discusses the three phases that characterise Saudi Arabia’s contemporary spirituality.

⁹⁶ Hanā’ al-Nafjān, *‘Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha: ‘Arḍ wa Naqd (The Relationship Between Philosophical Sufism and New Spirituality: View and Critique)* (Master’s thesis at al-’Imam Muḥammad Ibn Saūd Islamic University, 1441/2020), 112.

Definition of The Term ‘Contemporary Spirituality’ in Arabic Language

In Arabic literature, contemporary spirituality is referred to as *al-Rūḥāniyya al-Mu‘āṣira* (contemporary spirituality) or *al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha* (new spirituality). As Kurdī indicates, ‘*al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha* is classified as a modern current due to the variety of practices and techniques it employs to meet the needs of modern society’.⁹⁷ The term *al-Rūḥāniyya al-Mu‘āṣira* was used by ‘Amānī Bardīsī, who states that ‘today, *al-Rūḥāniyya al-Mu‘āṣira* manifests itself in a variety of ways to meet the needs of modern individuals’.⁹⁸ Both words have the same meaning and refer to the same current.

The Arabic translation of ‘spirituality’ is ‘*al-Rūḥāniyya*’, and if we refer to the word in Arabic dictionaries, we find that it is associated with *al-Ghayb* (the unseen).⁹⁹ For example, in Arabic language dictionaries, the word *Rūḥānī* (spiritual) is derived from *Rūḥ* (soul).¹⁰⁰ As ‘Ismā‘īl al-Jawharī (d. 1003) states, the Arabs use the word *Rūḥānī* to refer to angels, the jinn or anything that has a soul.¹⁰¹ The term is also applied to souls that do not have bodies or to magical works. For example, according to Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), ‘those who worshipped the planets employed the term “*Rūḥāniyyat al-Kawākib*” (planetary spiritualities), which is used to refer to

⁹⁷ Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-‘Ilḥādīyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu‘āṣira*, 12.

⁹⁸ ‘Amānī Bardīsī, *Al-Niyya fī al-Fikr al-Bāṭinī wa Manhajuhā fī al-Wusūl ila al-Salām (Intention in Esoteric Thought and its Approach to Achieving Peace)* (Master’s thesis at Jeddah University), 28.

⁹⁹ Al-Ghayb is an important concept in Islamic belief. According to Guessoum, it is everything that cannot be known to humans except by Islamic revelation, encompassing what only God knows, such as the realm of God, angels, paradise, hell and future events. Kurdī adds, ‘al-Ghayb includes the beginning of life, the end and in between. We received our knowledge about al-Ghayb through Islamic revelation and we must believe in it. It includes the six pillars of Iman, which are the belief in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the belief in the final day and in al-Qadar’. See Nidhal Guessoum, ‘The Qur’an, Science, and the (related) Contemporary Muslim Discourse’, *Journal of Religion and Science*, 43 (2008): 411- 431, and see Fowz Kurdī, *‘Uṣūl al-‘Imān bi al-Ghayb wa Ātharuhu (The Origins of Belief in The Unseen and its Effects)* (Riyadh: Dār al-Qāsim, 1429/2008), 23).

¹⁰⁰ See Murtaḍā al-Zubaydī, *Tāj al-‘Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs (The Bride’s Crown from the Dictionary’s Pearls)* (Kuwait: Dār al-Hidāya), 6/412.

¹⁰¹ See ‘Ismā‘īl al-Jawharī, *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ Tāj al-Lughā wa Ṣiḥāḥ al-‘Arabiyya (The Crown of Language and the Correct Arabic)* Taḥqīq: ‘Aḥmad al-‘Attār, 4th edition (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm Lilmalā’īn, 1407/1987), 1/367.

the demons who led them astray'.¹⁰² Here, the term 'planetary spirituality' was used by ancient cultures to refer to the astrological influences they believed the planets had on their lives. They also believed the planets had the power to influence their fate. The Arabic word *Rūḥānī*, however, is not mentioned in Islamic scriptures. As Hayfā' al-Rashīd explains,

The word *Rūḥānī* and its forms are not mentioned in the Qur'an nor in the Prophet's *Maqbūl* (accepted) *Ḥadīth*. Thus, using the word to express Islamic meanings is borrowed from other cultures, and the usage of the word *Rūḥāniyya* in the Arabic language varies depending on the context.¹⁰³

The term *al-Rūḥāniyya*, in the Arabic context, carries various meanings. It is occasionally utilised to describe Islamic notions such as *'Īmān* (belief) and *Khushū'* (reverence), as indicated by several respondents in the present study.¹⁰⁴ However, since this application of the term does not appear in Islamic scriptures, al-Rashīd suggests that the use of *al-Rūḥāniyya* to describe religious concepts is a product of cultural influences. For instance, the term 'spirituality' has been employed by some Western societies to denote a connection to God or a higher power.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, upon examining the current state of affairs, it is apparent that some Saudi spiritual instructors refer to themselves as *Mu'allim Rūḥānī* (spiritual teacher).¹⁰⁶ This appellation appears to be influenced by Western spiritual pioneers who also refer to themselves as spiritual teachers and whose teachings are imparted by Saudi spiritual trainers.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Rad 'alā al-Mantiqīn (Refutation of Logicians)* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa), 286. See also Muḥammad al-Harawī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughā (Refinement of Language)* Taḥqīq: Muḥammad Mur'ib (Beirut: Dār 'Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 5/146.

¹⁰³ al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta'wīlī fī al-Ta'āmul ma' al-Naṣ*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter Four of the current study. See also al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta'wīlī fī al-Ta'āmul ma' al-Naṣ*, 10.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter One for example.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, Muḥammad al-Duḥaym, a spiritual instructor, referred to himself as *Mu'allem Rūḥānī*. See *Fī al-Ṣamīm Program*, Rotana Khalijiyya channel official account on YouTube (24 June 2015). Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56_W1CihK1o, (Accessed 2 April 2022).

¹⁰⁷ For example, Eckhart Tolle, a Western spiritual pioneer who calls himself as a spiritual teacher. See Eckhart Tolle's official website:

Setting The Religious Scene in Saudi Arabia

Since its early foundation, the Salafī form of Sunnī Islam has been the state religion of Saudi Arabia. The Islamic preacher Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the regional prince Muḥammad Ibn Su‘ūd signed a pact in 1744 that established the Salafī form of Sunnī Islam in the region and called for its protection, for the fight against what they considered heresy and for expansion throughout the Arabian Peninsula. As Ismail points out,

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was committed to ridding Islam of corrupt practices influenced by customs over time. He forged a political alliance with Muḥammad Ibn Su‘ūd, the founder of the first Saudi state ... to eradicate practices that they considered to have been added to Islam.¹⁰⁸

Initially formed in the 18th century, this alliance continued and contributed to the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Although several non-Saudis call the reformism of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Wahhabism’, he did not use this term nor did his adherents. Rather, they called themselves ‘Salafīs’, as they called for the Salafī doctrine and for purging the region of practices such as venerating the righteous and pilgrimaging to their shrines, which were widely spread throughout the region. As Muḥammad al-Shuway‘ir argues,

A commonly held misconception is that Wahhabism represents the *Da‘wa* (call) of Sheikh Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. However, in a nutshell, his *Da‘wa* advocates Salafism to disseminate the doctrine of *Tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) and emancipate individuals from ignorance, pagan rituals and *Shirk* (association with God). These practices include obtaining blessings from inanimate objects, such as graves, trees and stones.¹⁰⁹

<https://eckharttolle.com/about/#:~:text=Eckhart%20Tolle%20is%20widely%20recognized,life%20in%20the%20present%20moment>. (Accessed 29 Nov 2022). See Chapter Four for more details.

¹⁰⁸ Raihan Ismail, *Rethinking Salafism: The Transnational Networks of Salafī ‘Ulama’ in Egypt, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2021), 16. See also John Habib, *Ibn Sa‘ud’s Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and their Role in the Creation of the Sa‘udi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 3.

¹⁰⁹ Muḥammad al-Shuway‘ir, *Taṣḥīḥ Khaṭa’ Tārīkhī Ḥawl al-Wahhābiyya (Correcting a Historical Error Regarding Wahhabism)* (Riyadh: Dār al- Ḥabīb, 2000), 76.

Al-Shuway'ir explains that using the term '*Wahhābī*' to refer to Sheikh Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhāb's movement is linguistically incorrect.¹¹⁰ This is because the term 'Wahhabism' is an attribution to the reformist father's name, not his own, and the movement was not led by his father. As such, al-Shuway'ir stresses that the *Da'wa* of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb is an interpretation of Salafism that attempts to return to the principles of the early Muslims, who focused on the oneness of God and rejected all forms of idolatry and superstition. The term Salafī, according to Ismail, is derived from

Al-Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ, meaning pious ancestors and referring to the first three generations of Muslims. Salafism holds that the pious ancestors are to be emulated, as they were the closest to the Prophet and belong to the Golden Age of Islam ... and [they are thus] preservers of the authentic tradition.¹¹¹

To elucidate, following the death of the initial companions of the Prophet Muhammad, who directly witnessed and acknowledged him, the second generation of Muslims received and assumed their religious knowledge. This group was identified as the *Tābi'ūn* (followers) of the initial generation. Subsequently, upon their passing, the third generation, called *'Atbā' al-Tābi'ūn* (followers of followers), developed into a reliable source of information. As a result, Salafism is not a modern construct but instead, aspires to uphold a tradition deeply embedded within Islam. It is the beliefs and approaches of the Prophet, his companions and those who followed them. According to al-Salūmī,

Salafī doctrine is the driving force that simultaneously invigorates and pacifies Saudi society. This ideology is disseminated through standardised educational curricula, public advocacy initiatives led by 'Ulamā' (religious scholars) and both traditional and contemporary preaching mediums. As a result, Saudi society is often perceived as Muḥāfiẓ (conservative) and Mumāni' (reluctant).

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Ismail, *Rethinking Salafism*, 12. See also Richard Gauvain, *Salafī Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (London: Routledge, 2012), 5.

Furthermore, it is challenging to influence or alter this societal direction, except through religion, 'Ulamā' and their fatwas, which are widely regarded as trustworthy and reassuring.¹¹²

In his description, al-Salūmī emphasises two characteristics of Saudi society: first, he stresses the individuals' strong affiliation to Islamic Salafī doctrine, which they grew up on and learned in Saudi schools for 12 years, and their resistance to religious ideas different from their own; second, he underscores the significant role of the 'Ulamā' in influencing and directing society. As Nawāf 'Obayd notes, 'Since the 18th century, the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula have shared power with their religious contemporaries, and this remains the case in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia today ... They are judges, lawyers and prayer leaders (*Imāms*)'.¹¹³ In 1971, *Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulamā'* (The Council of Senior Scholars) was established. It is the highest religious body of the Kingdom and serves as an advisory body to the king concerning religious matters.¹¹⁴ As a result, Islamic practices remain a central part of Saudi society, and the influence of the 'Ulamā' is widespread throughout the country. Against this background, it is unclear how and why contemporary spirituality ideas and practices spread throughout a society that is unusually conservative in its attitudes toward religion.

After the foundation of Saudi Arabia, Sufī practices were proscribed for many decades, as they were considered as *Shirk* (association with God) and *Bid'a* (heresy or innovation). As discussed in the introduction, Sufism refers to a mystical religious practice advocating asceticism and devotion, which evolved into various paths aimed at gaining divine knowledge through *Kashf* (unveiling). In turn, Sufī methodologies intertwined with Indian, Persian, and Greek philosophical traditions.¹¹⁵ According to Ismail, in the first Saudi state in 1744, 'Āl Su'ūd's army sought to eradicate practices that they considered to have been added to Islam, targeting, in particular, the Sufīs and the Shī'a, [who were charged] for engaging in deviant practices which amount to

¹¹² Al-Salūmī, 'Ideology al-Mujtama' al-Su'ūdī wa al-Taghīr'.

¹¹³ Nawāf 'Obayd, 'The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Leaders', *Middle East Quarterly*, 6 (1999): 51-58.

¹¹⁴ See 'Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulama': 40 'Āman fī Khidmat al-Qaḍāyā al-Kubrā wa al-Fatwā' (The Council of Senior Scholars: 40 Years of Serving Major Issues and Fatwas), *al-Madīna Newspaper* (15 Jan 2013).

¹¹⁵ See *Al-Mawsū'a al-Muyassara fī al-'Adyān wa al-Madhāhib wa al-'Ahzāb al-Mu'āṣira*, 1/249.

infidelity'.¹¹⁶ In other words, Saudi Arabia, throughout its history and beginning with the establishment of the first state, has strongly opposed practices considered to be incompatible with its particular view of Islam. These practices are described by Lacey as follows: 'people gave superstitious reverence to domes and tombs, even to rocks, caves and trees that were associated with holy men'.¹¹⁷ These practices were 'popular cults of saints' and 'cults of trees and stones worship', as expressed by Habib.¹¹⁸ Similarly, this was the case when Saudi Arabia was established, as pointed out by al-Ṣabbāgh:

A major action taken by the Saudi state following its occupation of Hejaz in 1925 was the demolition of shrines, the closing of Sufī *Zawāyā* (corners) and the abolishment of the heresies that were prevalent at that time.¹¹⁹

Al-Ṣabbāgh provides several examples of situations involving Sufīs in the region, wherein their practices were viewed as 'promoting misguidance, heresy, pagan rituals and *Shirk* (association with God)'.¹²⁰ Sufī *Zawāyā* or *Zāwiya* (meaning corner) is a multifunctional institution that may serve as a place of worship, a school, and/or a tomb.¹²¹ Restrictions were imposed on the public gatherings and rituals of Sufī groups, including reciting '*Adhkār* out loud in unison and *Mawlid*, as they were perceived to be a threat to Islamic doctrine. Consequently, Sufī beliefs and rituals were regarded as a cultural taboo by society, and Sufī gatherings were often conducted in secret. As described in a report by The Washington Post, these gatherings were 'held in orchards outside

¹¹⁶ Ismail, *Rethinking Salafism*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 11.

¹¹⁸ See Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam*, 3. See also John Esposito, 'Wahhabis' in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Available

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580-e-2467#> (Accessed 31 Oct 2022).

¹¹⁹ Al-Ṣabbāgh, 'Al-Ṣūfiyya wa al-Majālis al-'Ilmiyya fī al-Hijāz', 179.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 179-185.

¹²¹ See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, 2nd edition (Brill), *Zāwiya*. Available

https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/zawiya-COM_1384?s.num=116&s.start=100, Accessed (1 Nov 2022).

the city, or in basements and without microphones, for fear of drawing attention'.¹²² The clandestine nature of these gatherings reinforced the idea that they were socially unacceptable, and the Sufī faith remained largely underground for many years. Consequently, information about the faith was not widely disseminated and was confined to small groups.

Over a period of several years, I participated in weekly Sufī gatherings for women held in the cities of Riyadh, al-Khobar and Jeddah, during which, a number of incidents were observed. These gatherings were conducted in secrecy in private residences, and were arranged through coded phone calls to avoid detection. The women sheikhs who organised these gatherings were predominantly from Syria, and provided teachings, curricula and books, while also receiving information about their *Da'wa* (preaching) in Saudi Arabia. In some instances, sheikhs even made periodic visits to Saudi Arabia to deliver lectures. Attendees of these sessions, which comprised individuals of diverse ages, were encouraged to memorise the Qur'an, attend *Mawlid*, recite *'Adhkār* in unison and study Sufī curricula. However, it is pertinent to note that not all attendees were aware of the Sufī nature of these gatherings. This is because the teachers often refrained from explicating Sufī concepts to new participants, instead focusing on providing fundamental Islamic knowledge. This tactic may have been adopted to ensure inclusivity among a wider audience, while also preventing any potential conflict with Saudi society and rejection of the teachings.¹²³ During a gathering, a Sufī Sheikh reported an incident in which a Saudi woman persistently questioned her about her affiliation with Sufism, since she was unwilling to attend Sufī gatherings. The Sheikh responded by asking if she had ever seen her discuss Sufism, demonstrating that 'Sufism' was not commonly discussed during their gatherings. The Sufi teachers demonstrated a keen interest in attracting new attendees to these gatherings and frequently encouraged current attendees to bring their colleagues and neighbours along. These incidents raise the question of how and why spiritual ideas spread and contributed to the

¹²² Faizah Ambeh, 'In Saudi Arabia, a Resurgence of Sufism', *The Washington Post* (2006), Available <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/01/AR2006050101380.html>, (Accessed 1 Nov 2022).

¹²³ This analysis is also supported by some participants in the current study, who indicated that many of those involved in contemporary spirituality do not understand its philosophical concepts, and she provided a similar explanation. See Chapters Three and Four.

emergence of Sufī beliefs in a society that once rejected their practices and gatherings as heretical and include *Shirk* (association with God)?

Until early 2000s, this relatively strict attitude towards Sufism in Saudi society was prevalent. Then, it began to shift due to several factors. Some writers discuss that the view on Sufism in the Kingdom has begun to change due to several attacks that took place by Saudi citizens in the early 2000s. According to a report by *The Washington Post*,

The tide finally turned in 2003, with the new atmosphere that took hold following the Sept. 11 attacks, when the future King ‘Abdullah, then the crown prince, held a series of meetings to acknowledge the country’s diverse sects and schools of thought. One of the guests was Sufī leader Mālki.¹²⁴

The report stresses that the Kingdom underwent several changes due to the September 11th attacks. The involvement of Saudi citizens in the attacks led to accusations against Salafism, which is embraced by the Kingdom. As a result, the Sufīs, whose gatherings were kept secret for a long time, reaped benefits from these changes, as they found a place on the sectarian map of the Kingdom. However, were the attackers the fruit of Salafī schools in Saudi Arabia? How could that be the case when Salafism condemns such attacks? In this regard, the Saudi Salafī scholar al-‘Aqil said,

I find it surprising that some people believe Salafism contributed to the September 11th attacks. It is a delusional myth spread by those who do not understand the true religion of the Kingdom. Salafī scholars, students, thinkers and intellectuals have strongly condemned this heinous act.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, See also al-Ṣabbāgh, ‘Al-Ṣūfiyya wa al-Majālis al-‘Ilmiyya fī al-Ḥijāz’, 251, 265. Also, David Commins, *The Wahhābī Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 5 - 6.

¹²⁵ Nāṣir al-‘Aqil, ‘*Islāmiyya lā Wahhābiyya: Kitāb Yubayyin Ḥaqīqat Da‘wat Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (Islamic, not Wahhabi: A Book That Demonstrates the Truth of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Call)*’ (Saudi Arabia: Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Da‘wa and Guidance, 2010), 1/435. See also David Commins, *The Wahhābī Mission and Saudi Arabia*, 6.

Following the events, *Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulamā'* issued a fatwa that 'criminalised the events of September 11th as a form of terrorism and criminalised the support of terrorism in all its forms'.¹²⁶ In other words, Saudi scholars made it clear that Salafism does not allow an act that targets the lives of non-combatants, Muslims and non-Muslims, and it was clearly stated that the Saudis who participated in such attacks did not represent Islam, the Salafī position or the religious curriculum that the country and society follow. Rather, they represent the individuals. As clarified by Wiktorowicz, 'The Salafī movement ... represents a diverse community, [and those attributed to Salafism represent] the entire spectrum of Salafī activism, ranging from pacifists to the extremes'.¹²⁷ The Salafī community is characterised by a religious approach that emphasises the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad and eschews religious innovation. Despite this common foundation, the community exhibits a diversity of applications, which may include those who espouse violent or non-violent ideologies that do not fit within this approach. Therefore, it is imperative to note that not all those affiliated with Salafism necessarily represent the beliefs of the broader community.

Despite the positive shift for Sufīs in the Kingdom, many Sufī beliefs were still not expressed in public. Additionally, shrines, Sufī salons and their literature were still prohibited.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, Saudi society underwent a second shift, but this time the change was gradual and took numerous years (see graph 2.1). Hayfā' al-Rashīd argues that the spread of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia has rather contributed to changing society's religious landscape:

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's *Da'wa* in the Arabian Peninsula has become a model for pure monotheism devoid of *Shirk* impurities. However, the fortresses that were built through the Salafī *Da'wa* have

¹²⁶ *Hay'at Kibār al-'Ulamā' bi al-Su'ūdiyya Tu'arrif a-'Irhāb wa Tujarrimuhu fī Fatwā Tārīkhiyya (The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia Defines Terrorism and Criminalises it in a Historic Fatwa)* (2010), Available: <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010%2F04%2F13%2F105747>, (Accessed 4 Nov 2022).

¹²⁷ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Anatomy of the Salafi Movement* (Washington: Routledge, 2006), 207.

¹²⁸ See Ambeh, 'In Saudi Arabia, a Resurgence of Sufism', and see Yāsir Bā'āmir, 'Al-Ṣūfiyya al-Su'ūdiyya wa 'l-'ādat Tashkīlātuhā fī al-Dākhil' (Saudi Sufism and its Re-formation within Saudi Arabia), in *Al-Taṣawwūf fī al-Su'ūdiyya wa al-Khalīj* (Dubai: al-Misbār, 2013), 268, 269.

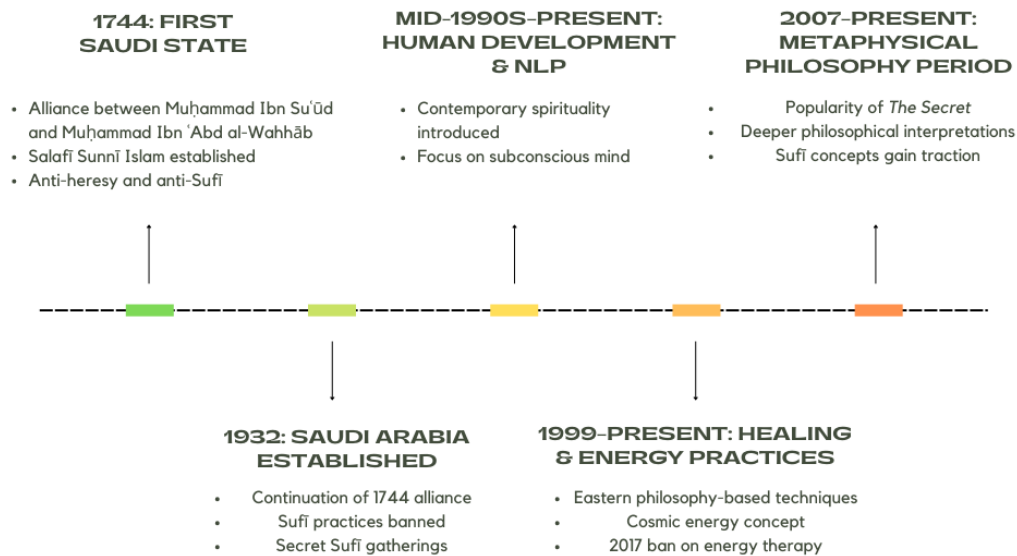
been threatened in recent years by advances in technology, communication and Western media, which promote contemporary spirituality. This movement has revived esoteric, Sufi and Eastern beliefs in the region.¹²⁹

For al-Rashīd, the diffusion of spiritual principles has threatened the ‘fortresses’ erected during the establishment of Saudi Arabia, thereby posing a threat to society’s beliefs. She contends that the proliferation of Eastern beliefs and esoteric principles engendered by contemporary spirituality has impacted individuals’ beliefs.¹³⁰ Additionally, it is probable that Saudi society has become less resistant to novel ideas and Sufi beliefs than in the past. Notably, the discourse on Sufi beliefs has become a popular subject, discussed not only by clerics and Sufis but also by laypersons on social media and other platforms, and has been embraced not just by Sufis but also by Sunnīs, as will be further discussed.¹³¹ However, contemporary spirituality is not the only driver of change in the religious landscape of the Kingdom. Instead, the transformation has been engendered by overlapping factors, such as politics, social media and an increased degree of openness in recent years. Nonetheless, the impact of contemporary spirituality has been felt far earlier than other factors. This is because the events linked to contemporary spirituality have occurred during the last two decades of the 21st century, as elucidated in the subsequent section.

¹²⁹ Hayfā’ al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu’āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā’ al-Sharqiyya*, 11.

¹³⁰ Esoteric orientations are ‘metaphysical, contemplative, oriented to knowledge, wisdom and unification with divinity, and toward the spirit and not the letter of religious teachings’. (Saucier and Skrzypin’ska, ‘Spiritual but Not Religious?’).

¹³¹ In the current study, in the case of one participant, although she was sceptical of delving into Sufism, she practised Sufi principles through spiritual practices without realising that they were Sufi elements, as she described. See Chapter Four.



Graph 2.1 A gradual change in the religious landscape of Saudi Arabia

The Gradual Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Arabia

Contemporary spirituality encompasses a wide variety of ideas and practices that may seem unrelated at first glance. However, this mixture of different elements is part of the nature of contemporary spirituality. Drane's study explains contemporary spirituality's blend via analogy with a vacuum cleaner:

It picks up whatever is there, and messes it all up. So, when you open the bag, you recognise all the bits and pieces that are in there – but the mixture is completely different from anything you've ever seen before. You probably wonder how it can all possibly belong together. The fact is, it doesn't. Those things are in there just because the vacuum cleaner happened to pick them up.¹³²

The aforementioned statement implies that had the vacuum cleaner moved in a different direction, it would have collected a disparate range of materials that would also be classified under the umbrella term contemporary spirituality. This term encompasses diverse practices and

¹³² A definition offered in John Drane, *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?* (London: Marshall Pickering, Hammersmith, 1991), 15-16.

ideas, reflecting an eclectic approach in which individuals draw from various cultures. Consequently, some studies have described it as a 'pick-and-mix' or 'spiritual supermarket' approach.¹³³ Despite this apparent diversity, these practices share a common mystical thread, as highlighted in the preceding chapter. What, then, distinguishes spiritual practices? Based on the definition of contemporary spirituality mentioned earlier, two principal features characterise spiritual practices. Firstly, they often consist of modified elements and philosophies beyond traditional forms of organised religion. Secondly, practices emphasise the sacralisation of not only the self, but also the world around us.

As outlined in Chapter Three, the participants living in Saudi Arabia engage in a broad spectrum of spiritual practices. This makes it impractical to explore every aspect of this divergent phenomenon that has been present in the country for over two decades. As a result, this section aims to provide a general overview of the types of spiritual practices prevalent in Saudi society. As previously discussed, the rise of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia was part of its emergence in several Arab countries. Some spiritual practices, according to Hayfā' al-Rashīd, circulated in certain Arab countries towards the end of the 20th century; however, their impact was not far-reaching.¹³⁴ For instance, in 1973, the transcendental meditation movement was established in Lebanon to disseminate Maharishi's Vedic knowledge in Lebanon and the Middle East.¹³⁵ The founder of this movement, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, was a Hindu monk who aimed to popularise this kind of meditation worldwide.¹³⁶ Similarly, the Egyptian Minister of Health hosted a delegation of Chinese experts in acupuncture in 1974, who shared their knowledge with Egyptian doctors and treated patients in Syria. Despite these visits, according to al-Rashīd, their

¹³³ See Malcom Hamilton, 'An Analysis of the Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit, London', in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 193; cf. 7, 18.

¹³⁴ See al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 324.

¹³⁵ See the official website for Maharishi Health Education Centre in Lebanon. Available: <http://maharishitm.org/ar/ourtmvar.htm>, (Accessed: 28 Oct 2019).

¹³⁶ The transcendental meditation movement was founded in India in the 1950s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a Hindu monk. He 'set off on a series of world tours with his expressed purpose to win over one-tenth of the population of the globe to meditation'. He gave lectures at universities and established centres throughout India, Europe, and the United States. See Lucille Poland, *A Study of the Transcendental Meditation Movement* (Michigan: UMI, 2009), 6.

impact was limited to a specific buildings and groups.¹³⁷ Therefore, these practices can be viewed as the nascent stages of contemporary spirituality in the Arab world; however, their influence was restricted to specific locations and certain groups of people.

The advent of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia during the early 21st century was stimulated by its emergence in the Arab Gulf countries, particularly Kuwait. Within Saudi society, the development of contemporary spirituality unfolded gradually, beginning with training courses in human development. This eventually led to healing techniques grounded in cosmic energy and culminated in a newfound dimension of metaphysical philosophy. Notably, the distinct phases of this progression do not present themselves in isolation but are rather integrated, with each phase serving as a basis for the subsequent one.

- **First: Human Development and Neuro-Linguistic Programing (Mid-1990s–Present)**

Arabic-speaking literature demonstrates that contemporary spirituality was introduced in Saudi society through human-development training courses, particularly neuro-linguistic programing (NLP) courses in the early 21st century. According to Kurdī,

New spirituality thought was introduced to Saudi Arabia around 1423 AH [2002 AD] through courses in NLP, following its introduction in Kuwait around 1420 AH [1999 AD] under the guidance of three trainers: Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid, Najīb al-Rifāʿī and Muḥammad al-Tikrītī. This type of training became increasingly popular under the name of human development, with thousands having graduated as certified trainers or experts.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ See al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Muʿāṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfāʾ al-Sharqiyya*, 324.

¹³⁸ Fowz Kurdī, *Istiʿrāḍ Mūjaz li Ḥaqīqat al-Fikr al-Bāṭinī al-Ḥadīth wa Wāqīʾ al-Intishār wa Juhūd al-Muwājaha* (A Brief Review of the Reality of Modern Esoteric Thought, its Proliferation and Confrontation Efforts), a private course presented in 2014. See also Aḥmad Samāḥa, 'Dr Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid: al-Barmaja al-Lughawiyya al-ʿAṣabiyya, Ayn al-Ḥaqīqa?' (Dr Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid: Neuro Linguistic Programing, where is the Truth?), *Al-Yawm Newspaper* (11 June 2004). Also, Hayfāʾ al-Rashīd, 'Taṭbīqāt Muʿāṣira li al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya' (Contemporary Applications of Eastern Philosophy), *Al-Bayān Magazine*, 329 (2014). Also, Rāmī ʿAfīfī, *Min Taghrīdāt Sabeily* (From Sabeily's Tweets) (17 June 2020). Available: <https://sabeily.com/من-تغريدات-سبيلي/> (Accessed 16 Dec 2019).

Human development, according to Thurayyā al-Sayf, ‘entails a variety of methods related to personal growth. It refers to the development of a person’s physical, mental, social, skillful and spiritual abilities’.¹³⁹ This means that human development involves not only physical growth, but also psychological and spiritual development. It is a process of learning and improving skills, relationships with others and a sense of purpose and direction in life. One example of human-development technique is NLP which, according to Hayfā’ al-Rashīd,

Deals with the subconscious mind to bring about changes in thought and behaviour. Through NLP techniques, a person can supposedly rid themselves of negative thoughts, beliefs, habits and

Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid, a Kuwaiti activist, is considered one of the leading proponents of contemporary spirituality in the Arab world. Through establishing numerous centres dedicated to disseminating spiritual teachings, al-Rāshid has facilitated the publication of spiritual books, the organisation of training programs and the arrangement of tourist trips. Among the most prominent centres is the ‘al-Rāshid centre’, established in 1996 and operated in more than 20 Arab cities. The centre often hosts distinguished Western spiritual speakers, such as Jean Houston, Elizabeth Brown and Lynne McTaggart. In 2006, al-Rāshid founded the Smartsway company, which aspires to become a prominent global educational institute. The International Academy of Personal Development (IAPD) was established in 2012, followed by Smartsway Training Groups (STG), an interactive live and e-learning platform dedicated to human development. The company’s ultimate goal is to expand to 100 cities worldwide to provide live broadcast training courses and forums. It has appointed 16 representatives throughout various Arab countries, including three in Saudi Arabia. See al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 51. See also the official website of al-Rāshid centre. Available: <http://www.alrashed.net/About.aspx>, <http://www.alrashed.net/News.aspx>. Also, the official website of The International Academy of Personal Development. Available: <https://www.iacademypd.com>, <https://www.iacademypd.com/about>, <https://www.iacademypd.com/iacademy-stars>. Also, the official website of STG. Available: <http://stg.center/Centers.aspx>, <http://stg.center/Courses.aspx>. (Accessed 12 Jun 2019).

Najīb al-Rifā’ī is a Kuwaiti university lecturer in educational administration. He was amongst the first Arab pioneers who introduced NLP to Arab countries. See *Al-Sīra al-Dhatiyya li Najīb al-Rifā’ī (Najīb al-Rifā’ī’s CV)*. Available: <http://www.muharat.com/السيرة-الذاتية-للدكتور-نجيب> (Accessed 15 Oct 2019).

Muḥammad al-Tikrītī holds a PhD in Control System Engineering. He was amongst the first Arab pioneers who introduced NLP to Arab countries. See *Al-Sīra al-Dhatiyya li Muḥammad al-Tikrītī (Muḥammad al-Tikrītī’s CV)*. Available: <https://www.mtikrity.com/ar/السيرة-الذاتية-مفصلة> (Accessed 30 Nov 2022).

¹³⁹ Thurayyā al-Sayf, *Al-‘Uṣūl al-Falsafiyya li Taṭwīr al-Dhāt fī al-Tanmiya al-Bashariyya: Dirāsa ‘Aqadiyya Naqdiyya (Philosophical Origins of Self-Development in Human Development: a Critical Doctrinal Examination)* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1440/2018), 1/28.

some types of fear. In NLP techniques, a combination of psychological, administrative and philosophical knowledge is applied selectively.¹⁴⁰

The underlying premise of NLP techniques is based on the notion that the human subconscious is an exceedingly potent force in governing behaviour, and by understanding how the subconscious mind works, individuals can use language, body language and other psychological tools to change their thoughts and behaviours to achieve the desired outcome. The courses in question attracted a wide audience within the region and were extended to numerous cities. Such instruction has significantly influenced both the individual and societal levels. The success of early NLP courses prompted a surge in the number of coaches offering these services in the country, leading to their recognition alongside other celebrated figures.

In the various Arab Gulf societies, the advent of contemporary spirituality initially emerged within the borders of Kuwait. This was due to the efforts of three prominent trainers who provided NLP training. Aḥmad Samāḥa had traced the origins of contemporary spirituality within Arab societies to the year 1995, 'when Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid, a Kuwaiti activist, initiated the first mass training seminar in Kuwait. This effort ultimately led to the establishment of the Arab Union of NLP in the United Kingdom by al-Rāshid, al-Rifā'ī and Tikrītī in 2000'.¹⁴¹ Presently, Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid continues to spearhead the propagation of spiritual concepts in Arab societies, including Saudi Arabia, through various channels and institutions he founded. The International Academy of Personal Development (IAPD), an online platform, is a prime example. Graduates of the academy serve as ambassadors in their respective locales, with a significant number of them hailing from Saudi Arabia.¹⁴² The emergence of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia has been intrinsically

¹⁴⁰ See al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 419, cf. 430.

¹⁴¹ Samāḥa, 'Dr Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid'. See also the official website of Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid's Company: Smartsway. Available: <https://www.smartsway.com/About.aspx> (Accessed 15 Oct 2019).

¹⁴² See al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 51. See also the official website of al-Rāshid centre. Available: <http://www.alrashed.net/About.aspx>, <http://www.alrashed.net/News.aspx>. Also, the official website of The International Academy of Personal Development. Available: <https://www.iacademypd.com>, <https://www.iacademypd.com/about>, <https://www.iacademypd.com/iacademy-stars>. Also, the official website of STG. Available: <http://stg.center/Centers.aspx>, <http://stg.center/Courses.aspx>. (Accessed 12 Jun 2019).

linked to the progression of similar trends within the wider Arab community. Shared media outlets further reinforce the integration between Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Consequently, what is broadcast on one Arab channel can impact other Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia. Hence, the emergence of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia may be regarded as a parallel development with comparable events occurring in other Arab countries.

The widespread popularity of NLP courses may be attributed to their marketing efforts to cater to diverse social segments and levels. As noted by Samāḥa: NLP courses target individuals from various age groups, such as the youth and the elderly, as well as individuals seeking to attain hope, health and success.¹⁴³ The audience for NLP courses extends beyond the unwell and the healthy, as it includes students, teachers, volunteers, businessmen and other interested parties. As Kurdī elucidates, 'even Muslim preachers are enrolled in NLP and human-development courses'.¹⁴⁴ A human-development course advertisement further exemplifies the all-encompassing nature of NLP courses, as it promises to cater to a wide range of social segments:

Our self-development course invites students seeking success, supervisors seeking to motivate their students, managers seeking to discover their employees' strengths, business owners seeking deeper insight into production, parents seeking to inspire their children and individuals seeking to achieve their goals.¹⁴⁵

Such an advertisement suggests that NLP courses offer comprehensive solutions to diverse needs and desires. The perceived ability to acquire the necessary skills in a relatively short timeframe might appeal to individuals who face time and resource constraints. This may help explain the popularity and rapid spread of NLP courses in Saudi Arabia. The advertisement presents a seemingly effortless solution to complex problems, creating the illusion of quick and easy mastery of the required skills.

¹⁴³ See Samāḥa, 'Dr Ṣalāḥ Al-Rāshid'. See also al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 432.

¹⁴⁴ Kurdī, *Istī'rāḍ Mūjaz li Ḥaqīqat al-Fikr al-Bāṭinī al-Ḥadīth wa Wāqī' al-Intishār wa Juhūd al-Muwājaha*.

¹⁴⁵ See Ḥasan al-Jābir, *Dawrāt Sihriyya Tujarriḍuk min Thiyābik li Tuṭliq al-'Imlāq alladhi Bidākhilik* (Magical Courses That Strip You Off so You Can Unleash Your Inner Giant). Available: <https://www.alarabiya.net/saudi-today/2017/01/12/-دورات-غريبة-تجردك-من-ثيابك-لتطلق-العملاق-الذي-بداخلك>. (Accessed 5 Nov 2022).

In Arab-speaking literature, it is noted that NLP has played a significant role in fostering the growth of spiritual practices in Saudi society. For instance, Rāmī ‘Afīfī asserts that ‘the principles of NLP serve as the basis for subsequent spiritual practices’.¹⁴⁶ This viewpoint is echoed by Hayfā’ al-Rashīd, who suggests that many individuals who have embraced cosmic energy techniques and other forms of spirituality have initiated their journey through NLP.¹⁴⁷ These observations highlight the crucial role played by NLP in serving as a gateway to contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, enabling individuals to explore a diverse range of spiritual practices. NLP provides a solid foundation for individuals to delve into healing practices involving cosmic energy, macrobiotics and other spiritual techniques.

- **Second: Healing and Energy Practices (1999–Present)**

Following the spread of human development and NLP courses, the general trend in the country shifted in favour of healing and cosmic energy practices. As ‘Afīfī points out, ‘Several healing practices, including cosmic energy and macrobiotics, were developed based on NLP principles. In those days, macrobiotics pioneer Mariam Nour dominated our channels, presenting macrobiotics as a new vision and a return to health’.¹⁴⁸ Healing practices, according to Hayfā’ al-Rashīd, are ‘techniques rooted in Eastern philosophy that aim to restore health by addressing the body, mind and spirit’.¹⁴⁹ The principle of energy, as highlighted by ‘Ā’isha al-Shamsān, ‘is a philosophical concept that expresses Eastern belief in oneness. It is considered an absolute force and the source of all life, with the universe considered a collection of different manifestations of that

¹⁴⁶ Rāmī ‘Afīfī, *Baḥṭh Mawqī’ Sabīlī hawl al-‘Ilāj Bi al-Ṭāqa* (Sabilī’s Website Research on Energy Therapy) (2009). Available: <https://sabeily.com/مقدمة-البحث/> (Accessed 15 Nov 2022). See also ‘Afīfī, *Min Taghrīdāt Sabeily*. Also, al-Rashīd, ‘Taṭbīqāt Mu’āṣira li al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya’. Also, Kurdī, ‘Athar al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya fī Barāmij al-Tiqānī wa al-‘Istishfā’ al-Mu’āṣira’ ((The Impact of Eastern Philosophy on Contemporary Training and Healing Programs), *Majallat al-‘Ulūm al-Shar’iyya*, 27 (al-‘Imām Muḥammad Ibn Su’ūd University, 1434/2013), 27.

13. Also Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-Ilhādīyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu’āṣira*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ See al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 455.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Afīfī, *Baḥṭh Mawqī’ Sabīlī hawl al-‘Ilāj Bi al-Ṭāqa*. See also ‘Afīfī, *Min Taghrīdāt Sabeily*. Also, al-Rashīd, ‘Taṭbīqāt Mu’āṣira li al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya’. Also, Kurdī, ‘Athar al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya fī Barāmij al-Tadrīb wa al-‘Istishfā’ al-Mu’āṣira’, 13. Also, Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-Ilhādīyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu’āṣira*, 42.

¹⁴⁹ al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu’āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā’ al-Sharqiyya*, 37, cf. 41.

force'.¹⁵⁰ It is believed that this energy is present in all living beings and is the basis for healing. It is thought to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds and to establish a connection between all living things. By harnessing this energy, individuals believe in facilitating healing and balance within themselves and their surroundings.

The inception of healing and cosmic energy-based practices in Saudi Arabia could be traced back to the late 1990s with the introduction of macrobiotics by Lebanese activist Mariam Nour. According to Kurdī, 'Mariam Nour is recognised as one of the pioneers of healing training in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Her rapid rise to fame can be attributed to her appearance on the Al-Jazeera channel's popular program, *Bilā Ḥudūd* (Without Frontiers), in the late 1990s'.¹⁵¹ Through her appearances on this program, Mariam Nour sparked an interest in macrobiotics, a healing practice that aims to harmonise the body with the environment and the universe.¹⁵² As a result of her widespread visibility, her teachings reached a broad audience in Saudi society, and many have since adopted her approach to holistic healing practices.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ 'Ā'isha al-Shamsān, 'Reiki wa al-'Ilāj al-Prānī: Dirāsa fī Ḍaw' al-'aAqida al-'Islamiyya' (Reiki and Pranic Healing: A Study in Light of Islamic Doctrine), *Majallat al-'Ulūm al-Shar'īyya wa al-Lughā al-'Arabiyya*, (al-Kharj: al-Amīr Saṭṭām Ibn 'Abdulazīz University, 1438/2016), 11-12.

¹⁵¹ Kurdī, "Athar al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya fī Barāmij al-Tadrib wa al-'Istishfā' al-Mu'āṣira", 13. See also al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 201.

¹⁵² Macrobiotics is a fad diet and a way of life drawn from Zen Buddhism. According to specific spiritual and philosophical principles, macrobiotics balances Yin and Yang in food. (Marjolijn Bijlefeld and Sharon Zoumbaris, *Encyclopedia of Diet Fads: Understanding Science and Society*, 2nd Edition (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2015), 'macrobiotics', 127).

Mariam Nour is a prominent advocate of contemporary spirituality in the Arab world, having been among the first to introduce these ideas to the region. Born in Lebanon in the late 1930s, she has lived in various countries, including the United States and India. Nour has established multiple centres, notably the Bayt al-Salām (House of Peace) in Lebanon. She has appeared on numerous radio and satellite programs, advocating Sufi and mystical beliefs, as well as a blend of various religions, although she identifies with Islam. Nour has published several books that exhibit a clear influence of Eastern philosophies and the belief in the unity of existence. See the official website for the Salām centre. Available: www.mariamnour.com/Arabic (Accessed 10 Nov 2019).

¹⁵³ Chapter Four provides examples of Mariam Nour's influence on the current research sample.

Nour's popularity can be attributed to several factors, as observed upon viewing her episodes.¹⁵⁴ First and foremost, Nour's appearance on a prominent Arab television program, *Bilā Hudūd*, at the height of its popularity, provided her with a platform to reach a larger audience and increase her visibility. Her message of 'a return to health' resonated with individuals of all ages and social classes, as health is a fundamental aspect everyone strives to attain. Her promise of a natural and holistic approach to health, rather than traditional medical advice, further enhanced her popularity and reinforced her image as a health expert. Furthermore, Nour's compelling presentation style and her use of scientific evidence to support her statements lent her credibility, establishing her as a trusted source of health advice. Finally, Nour's inclusion of Islamic texts to elucidate principles such as Yin Yang and cosmic energy broadened her appeal to a wider audience, including conservative religious adherents. By integrating Islamic texts, Nour could tap into a preexisting belief system and instil her advice with a sense of recognition and trust that it might not have otherwise garnered.

In the early 2000s, Reiki, another healing practice based on cosmic energy, gained popularity in Saudi Arabia. According to Hayfā' al-Rashīd,

Energy healing and Reiki were among the most prevalent Eastern philosophy practices in Saudi Arabia and among the most organised ... In 1422 AH [2001 AD], Saudi Reiki Society was founded in Jeddah city, and its purpose was to place Reiki in an Islamic framework.¹⁵⁵

Reiki, as defined by York, means 'universal life energy'; it is 'a Japanese form of healing that involves the transference of energy from the practitioner to the patient to stimulate the body's natural propensity to heal itself'.¹⁵⁶ The proliferation of Reiki practice in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the efforts of its advocates to license it as an acceptable therapeutic method. In an interview with a Reiki instructor and founder of the Saudi Reiki Society, he stressed the safety

¹⁵⁴ See an interview with Mariam Nour on Al-Jazeera channel. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvxygsk6cQ> (Accessed 1 Oct 2019).

¹⁵⁵ Al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 319.

¹⁵⁶ Michael York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 154.

and effectiveness of Reiki therapy, encouraging more individuals to embrace it.¹⁵⁷ Despite resistance from Islamic scholars and academics, Reiki enthusiasts were convinced of its compatibility with Islamic teachings and the possibility of using it alongside conventional medicine. During the interview, the instructor emphasised that ‘Reiki could be used to help individuals heal from physical, mental and emotional ailments’.¹⁵⁸ Similar to NLP and macrobiotics, Reiki has been advertised as a remedy for all medical conditions. As stated by the Reiki instructor, ‘Reiki cures all diseases’.¹⁵⁹ This notion of Reiki as a cure-all has likely played a significant role in its acceptance and popularity, as many people have grown disillusioned with the inability of allopathic medicine to address all their health concerns.

The Saudi Reiki Society had been providing a diverse range of Reiki training courses in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Gulf countries until 2017.¹⁶⁰ This was when the Saudi Arabian authorities banned all forms of energy therapy and training, impeding the progress of energy healing. The ban encompassed all printed, audio and video publications and activities associated with energy therapy.¹⁶¹ As reported in the newspaper *Okaz*, the authorities cautioned against Reiki therapy and training, characterising it as ‘unfounded allegations made by therapists and lacking scientific validation’. They also accused Reiki therapists of ‘duping patients’ and ‘promoting sham training courses’ under various guises.¹⁶² The newspaper explained that these measures were implemented to forestall the deception of patients by Reiki therapists and to prevent the exploitation of individuals unfamiliar with the practice. Consequently, the Saudi Reiki

¹⁵⁷ See *Dr Ṭalāl Khayyāt: al-‘Ilāj bi al-Ṭāqa ‘Reiki’* (*Dr Ṭalāl Khayyāt: Energy Therapy ‘Reiki’*) (23 June 2010). Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaUV71JBYxM> (Accessed 17 Nov 2022).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ See Ḥabīb ‘Abdulla, *Ṭalāl Khayyāt: Al-Reiki Yuḥaqqiq Insijām al-‘Aqil wa al-Nafs wa al-Jasad* (Talal Khayyat: Reiki creates harmony between the mind, soul and body) (5 Nov 2005). Available: <https://habibabdullah.wordpress.com/2005/11/05/طالال-خياط-الريكي-يحقق-انسجام-العقل-والجسد> (Accessed 17 Nov 2022). See also ‘Al-Tadrīb al-Tiqānī Yamna’ Iqāmat Dawrāt al-‘Ilāj bi al-Ṭāqa fī al-Ma‘āhid wa al-Marākiz al-Ahliyya’ (Technical Training Bans the Conduction of Energy Therapy Courses in Private Institutes and Centres), *Saudi Press Agency* (30 Jan 2017).

¹⁶¹ See ‘Al-Tadrīb al-Tiqānī Yamna’ Iqāmat Dawrāt al-‘Ilāj bi al-Ṭāqa fī al-Ma‘āhid wa al-Marākiz al-Ahliyya’.

¹⁶² See Muḥammad al-Subay‘ī, ‘Tawjīhāt bi Man’ ‘Ilāj al-Reiki wa Ḥazr ‘istirād mawāddaha’ (Directives Prohibiting Reiki Treatment and Banning the Presentation of its Materials), *Okāz Newspaper* (20 Jan 2017).

Society ceased operations, and Reiki practitioners were compelled to modify their practices to conform to the updated legislation.¹⁶³ They had to explore alternative ways to promote their services. This included utilising social media platforms, providing Reiki courses outside of Saudi Arabia and offering courses on other spiritual practices like the law of attraction.

- **Third: Metaphysical Philosophy Period (2007–Present)**

Arabic-speaking literature suggests that contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia was inclined towards metaphysical philosophy in the mid-2000s. This period provided more explicit philosophical interpretations regarding God, the universe and existence than previous epochs. As per the views of 'Afifi,

Most of the practices endorsed in recent decades lacked a well-defined philosophical foundation, as they were either Islamised or presented as scientific theories. However, a new development took place with the translation of *The Secret*, which underwent a process of Islamisation that did not entirely conceal all indications of unbelief. Moreover, Eastern philosophies were openly expressed during this phase.¹⁶⁴

In this context, philosophy refers to an effort to comprehend the essence of existence, the objective of life and its correlation with beings. This is without relying on conventional forms of organised religion. The aforementioned statement indicates a transformation in how philosophical concepts of contemporary spirituality are introduced. 'Afifi explains that the philosophy of contemporary spirituality was often presented through Islamisation or scientific validation processes in the preceding eras.¹⁶⁵ These approaches were perceived as strategies for repackaging and legitimising spiritual philosophies. Currently, these approaches are unnecessary since the philosophies are being communicated more explicitly. Additionally, until recently, most contemporary spirituality discourse centred around practical precepts without explicitly outlining

¹⁶³ For instance, in the same year, a Saudi Reiki master posted an advert for Reiki master training course in Egypt. Available: https://www.instagram.com/p/BYra82ug86J/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link (Accessed 5 Nov 2019).

¹⁶⁴ 'Afifi, *Min Taghrīdāt Sabeily*.

¹⁶⁵ See Chapter Four for more details about Islamisation and scientific framework approaches.

their philosophical underpinnings. However, in the ultimate phase, contemporary spirituality is not only concerned with techniques to achieve specific objectives. Instead, it has evolved into a metaphysical, philosophical approach to comprehending the essence of the divine and the universe. As a result, the present epoch marks the beginning of a shift in the presentation of contemporary spirituality and the advent of transparency in articulating the philosophical tenets that form the basis of spiritual practices.

The period in question, as cited in the previous quote by 'Afīfī, is associated with the rise of *The Secret*. This book's popularity in Saudi Arabia can be traced back to 2007 when its author was introduced on Oprah Winfrey's show.¹⁶⁶ This appearance significantly contributed to the spread of the book and its central concept, the law of attraction, in Saudi Arabia, where Oprah's show wielded substantial influence. As Sakr notes, many Saudi women watched the show on MBC4, a Saudi television station that broadcasts throughout the Arab world.¹⁶⁷ Likely, *The Secret's* dissemination in Saudi Arabia may be attributed to its translation into Arabic and publication by Jarir, one of the country's most prominent bookstores. According to al-Ḥamza, 'Jarir bookstore publishes a large number of books every year. More recently, a collection of contemporary spirituality books has been added to the psychology and development section of the library'.¹⁶⁸ For example, *The Secret* is located in the 'self-development' section of the bookstore. This suggests that the trend of reading self-improvement, spiritual and philosophical books, including those addressed in *The Secret*, is on the rise in Saudi Arabia, which could explain the book's popularity in the country. Finally, as al-Ḥamza's quote explains, the placement of contemporary spirituality books in the psychology or self-development section of the bookstore may have also played a role in their further publication. This way, such books reach individuals who are not actively seeking them, as well as those who have never encountered them before. In this

¹⁶⁶ See Rhonda Byrne: *Biography of the Author*. Available: <https://www.theseecret.tv/about/rhonda-byrnes-biography/> (Accessed 3 Dec 2019).

¹⁶⁷ See Naomi Sakr, *Arab Television Today* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 171-172. See also 'Abdulla al-'Ajīrī, *Khurāfat al-Sir: Qirā'a Taḥlīliyya li Kitāb al-Sir wa Qānūn al-Jadhb (The Superstition of the Secret: An Analytical Reading of the Secret and the Law of Attraction)* (Riyadh: King Fahad National Library, (1430/2009), 12.

¹⁶⁸ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 354.

instance, there is no indication that this was done intentionally to mislead customers; rather, the titles of certain spiritual books may have given that impression. For instance, a title such as *Asrār al-Ḥayāt (Secrets of Life)* by Osho, available at Jarir, may imply that the book is a guide to success in life. However, upon a review of its pages, one finds explanations of philosophical concepts relating to the existence, 'the oneness of the universe' and 'being one with omnipresence'.¹⁶⁹

During the aforementioned period, the discourse on Sufī concepts gained popularity in Saudi Arabia. Hayfā' al-Rashīd posits that 'spiritual Sufī discourse and Eastern philosophy became popular in the Islamic world during the last years'.¹⁷⁰ Some authors suggest that the rise of Sufī discourse is attributed to its similarities with contemporary spirituality. 'Afīfī, for instance, notes the convergence between contemporary spirituality and Sufism concerning their beliefs, stating that 'contemporary spirituality has taken on a new dimension over the past few years; it has merged with Sufism through the doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (the unity of existence)'.¹⁷¹ Similarly, al-Nafjān observes that,

A major common characteristic of Sufism and new spirituality is the belief of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Both currents hold the belief that the divine does not have a separate existence from the world, but is rather the fundamental reality that underlies it.¹⁷²

The doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* has been extensively discussed among various Sufī teachers, with Ibn 'Arabī being the most prominent one to delve into the concept in a detailed manner.¹⁷³ The current study, however, adopts the general meaning of the doctrine, as described by Ṣlaybā.

¹⁶⁹ See Osho, *'Asrār al-Ḥayāt (Secrets of Life)* (Beirut: Dār al-Khayāl, 2012), 10, 194.

¹⁷⁰ al-Rashīd, 'Taṭbīqāt Mu'āṣira li al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya'.

¹⁷¹ 'Afīfī, *Min Taghrīdāt 'Sabeily*.

¹⁷² Al-Nafjān, *'Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Hadītha*, 564.

¹⁷³ See Muḥammad al-'Abdu and Ṭāriq 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, *Al-Ṣufiyya: Nash'atuha wa Taṭawwuruhā (Sufism: Its Emergence and Development)*, 2nd edition (Kuwait: Dār al-'Arqam, 1417/1996), 15 – 19, 40.

Ibn 'Arabī was an Andalusian Sufī philosopher and the developer of the theory of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (the person who has reached perfection) in Sufī thought. (See al-Nafjān, *'Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Hadītha*, 67, and see Yadu Allah Yazdān, *Al-'Irfān al-Nazarī: Mabādī'uhu wa 'Uṣūluhu (Theoretical Gnosis: Principles and Origins)*, tr. 'Ali 'Abbās al-Musawī (Beirut: Markaz al-Hadhāra Litanmiyat al-Fikr al-'Islāmī, 2014), 34.

According to this understanding, *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* posits that ‘every being is divine and that the divine is the only reality, with everything else serving as an expression or manifestation of this reality. This ancient doctrine has been embraced by different religious orientations and groups, including Hinduism and Sufism’.¹⁷⁴ This doctrine emphasises connection, unity and oneness based on the idea that all existence is unified and shares the same divine essence. It recognises that each being possesses a divine spark or essence intimately connected to the divine.

The doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* has been employed in various forms by Saudi spiritual instructors. In 2010, for instance, Muḥammad al-Duḥaym, a Saudi spiritual instructor, posited that ‘we are spirits of God and we express God’.¹⁷⁵ Likewise, in the same year, a Saudi spiritual trainer and an ambassador for Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid Academy claimed that ‘Allah is nothing because he is everything; in nothing lies eternity’.¹⁷⁶ This situation continues until today: in 2022, a Saudi spiritual trainer stated that,

The most damaging programing we were subjected to was that of separation from Allah; that He is outside and above in the sky watching us. You will have a different life when you believe in Allah’s presence within you and feel connected to Him inseparably.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Jamīl Ṣlaybā, *Al-Mu’jam al-Falsafī (The Philosophical Dictionary)* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Libnānī, 1982), 2/569.

¹⁷⁵ See private courses by Muḥammad al-Duḥaym. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wQyXHbjvLY&app=desktop> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzhUrKM0DcM>, (Accessed 15 Feb 2020).

Muḥammad al-Duḥaym is a Saudi instructor and consultant whose teachings combine both spiritual and Sufī teachings. His training courses and articles show how Sufī thought influences him. (See al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 54. Also see al-Duḥaym’s official Twitter account and personal blog. Available: blogger.com/profile/17906441660372781752 (Accessed 11 Jan 2023).

¹⁷⁶ This quote was stated by Sultān al-Mulayḥī on his Snapchat account: Sultanzm.

Al-Mulayḥī is a student of Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid and an ambassador for his Academy. See SmartswayFM official account on Twitter. Available: <https://twitter.com/smartswayfm/status/1218424270293958656?s=20> also an advert for al-Mulayḥī courses hosted by the Academy (18 Jan 2020). Available: <https://twitter.com/mabdelattar19/status/951346507000745984> (Accessed 14 Feb 2020).

¹⁷⁷ See the official Twitter account of Maha ‘Ajaj (10 June 2022). Available: <https://twitter.com/mahaajaj/status/1535185620393394176?s=24&t=PtTs882GsATGfzy7nd3hNw> (Accessed 21 Sep 2022).

Such expressions indicate that Sufi concepts have begun to transform overtly and directly within the discourse of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. They also demonstrate how spiritual trainers' discourse has shifted from focusing on practical techniques, such as healing and self-development, in earlier times to discussing metaphysical concepts about existence and the nature of God in the current period. In this sense, the discourse of spiritual proponents could be seen as one of many factors contributing to the revival of Sufi heritage in Saudi society. In other words, the proliferation of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia has facilitated the spread of Sufi beliefs. As stated by al-Nafjān, who contends that, 'new spirituality serves as a bridge for old orientations, including Sufism that had lost all hopes of spreading its beliefs throughout the Arabian Peninsula'.¹⁷⁸ Despite past obstacles, the diffusion of contemporary spirituality has opened doors for disseminating Sufi teachings in the present day. This has allowed Sufism to be accepted more widely in the region and to reach new audiences.

It is believed that the dissemination of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* in Saudi Arabia occurred gradually through various means, including its incorporation into the notion of cosmic energy that emerged in the preceding period. For instance, Hayfā' al-Rashīd argues that 'the principle of energy is an expression of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, yet it was widely adopted as a scientific principle'.¹⁷⁹ The connection between these two concepts is based on the belief that all matter is composed of energy, an expression of the underlying unity of all things. This is in line with the concept of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, positing that all of existence is one. Consequently, even though *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* may have been a part of the Saudi Arabian spiritual discourse in earlier periods, its philosophical implications were not apparent. Instead, as argued by al-Rashīd, it was initially presented as a scientific framework through the principle of cosmic energy. This aligns with Kurdī's argument that 'the first step toward gaining acceptance of the doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* was presenting the concept of energy as a scientific principle'.¹⁸⁰ Kurdī's assertion

¹⁷⁸ Al-Nafjān, *Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha*, 2. See also al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-ʿAṣr al-Jadīd*, 4.

¹⁷⁹ al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Muʿāṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfāʾ al-Sharʿiyya*, 224.

¹⁸⁰ Kurdī, *Ḥarakat al-ʿAṣr al-Jadīd: Dirāsa li Judhūr al-Ḥaraka wa Fikruhā al-ʿAqadī wa Makhāṭiruhā ʿalā al-ʿUmma al-ʿIslāmiyya* (The New Age Movement: A Study of the Movement's Roots, Doctrinal Thought and its Threats to the Islamic Ummah), *Majallat Jāmiʿat ʿUm al-Qurā li al-ʿUlūm al-Sharʿiyya wa al-Dirāsāt al-ʿIslāmiyya* (1430/2009), 31.

suggests that the scientific approach to explaining the belief of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* appealed to the Saudis, who were accustomed to more traditional, Salafī forms of Islamic belief and were more likely to accept scientific explanations. By presenting the concept of energy as a science-based principle, the underlying philosophical implications of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* could be more easily comprehended and accepted by the individuals later. Thus, the philosophical implications of this belief were gradually made more explicit, contributing to its eventual acceptance in the country. To conclude, Sufī ideas and practices, which had been prohibited since the inception of Saudi Arabia and practised clandestinely as they were deemed heretical, have been revitalised gradually with the dissemination of contemporary spirituality. Sufī teachings are no longer confined to secret meetings among a select few, as contemporary spirituality has paved the way for spreading them throughout the country. Its beliefs are now openly presented in various public forums, including television programs, books and social media accounts.

When comparing the development of contemporary spirituality in Western societies and in Saudi society, it is observed that there are two main differences. Firstly, it emerged and evolved at a faster pace in Saudi society than in Western societies. According to al-Nafjān, 'this movement in the Arab and Islamic world emerged between 1995 and 2000, only about 25 years ago, yet it has demonstrated rapid dissemination of its beliefs'.¹⁸¹ In contrast, the contemporary meaning of spirituality in the West occurred gradually over centuries. This difference is attributed to the fact that this phenomenon emerged in Saudi Arabia following its development in the West, facilitated by the rapid dissemination of Western thought through the media. Additionally, Arab trainers often embrace and teach spiritual practices introduced in the West, further contributing to their rapid development in Saudi society. Secondly, there are differences in the reasons for the rise of contemporary spirituality between the Western world and Saudi Arabia. As seen in the previous chapter, studies suggest that the development of the contemporary meaning of spirituality in Western countries may be attributed to the decline of traditional forms of organised religions, which has created a spiritual gap that people seek to bridge. However, studies conducted in Saudi society suggest that wearing Islamic clothing is one of the reasons for the spread of spiritual

¹⁸¹ Al-Nafjān, *ʿAlāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha*, 112.

teachings. Thus, spiritual practices are often embraced by individuals who remain affiliated with the Islamic faith.¹⁸² Consequently, contemporary spirituality is likely to address similar questions to those addressed by religion. In the West, it initially appeared as an alternative to traditional forms of organised religion, while in Saudi Arabia, it is seen as an attempt to integrate itself into Islamic teachings.

- **An Overview of the Religious Resistance to Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Arabia**

Contemporary spirituality has faced opposition from various sectors of Saudi society since its inception. Religious opposition, in particular, has been a vocal opponent of spiritual teachings since their early emergence, starting in 2003.¹⁸³ The religious critique has primarily targeted the philosophical and spiritual aspects of spiritual teachings and their association with esoteric elements. Kurdī notes that,

Once their connection to *al-Bāṭiniyya* (esoteric) doctrines became clear, lectures and courses warning against spirituality and human-development courses began in 2003 [in Saudi Arabia]. There were several debates between Muslim scholars and spiritual proponents in 2004, with the ‘*Ulamā*’ (scholars) warning those interested. There were further efforts in 2005 to oppose this thought in several Arab countries.¹⁸⁴

This opposition stems from the belief that these doctrines pose a threat to traditional Islamic teachings and may lead to a loss of faith in the Muslim community. Furthermore, with the emergence of these ideologies, there has been a concern that they may promote a form of *al-*

¹⁸² For example, all participants who engaged in spiritual practices in the current study indicated that they practiced Islam and belonged to the Sunnī branch of the religion.

¹⁸³ In addition to the religious opposition, there is also a scientific opposition, whose voice gained popularity following the religious resistance. See, for example, several interviews with Saudi scientist ‘Abdulghani Melaibārī: *al-Ṭāqa al-Kawniyya: Ḥaqā’iq wa Tawjīhāt* (Cosmic Energy: Facts and Guidelines). Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpiWYpHfwR0>. (Accessed 1 Dec 2022). See also scientific articles written by the Kuwaiti scientist Ṭalāl al-‘Utaybī. Available: <http://4talal.blogspot.com/> (Accessed 1 Dec 2022).

¹⁸⁴ Kurdī, *Isti’rāḍ Mūjaz li Ḥaqāiqat al-Fikr al-Bāṭinī al-Ḥadīth wa Wāqī’ al-Intishār wa Juhūd al-Muwājaha*.

Bāṭiniyya (esoteric teachings) that is not aligned with the religious values of Salafī Islam. According to Munā Abū Zayd,

Al-Bāṭiniyya refers to an orientation that distinguishes between an outer, exoteric “*Ẓāhir*” and an inner, esoteric “*Bāṭin*”, which pertains to everything perceptible, including life, humans, and scriptures. Adherents of this philosophy believe that the sensible realm is divided into the outer, the body, and the inner, the spirit and that *Bāṭin* is the true knowledge.¹⁸⁵

This concept holds that the inner knowledge of the universe is the only source of ‘true’ wisdom. In contrast, external knowledge, including traditional religious teachings, is temporary, illusory and distracts from the internal journey. This belief is grounded in the notion that one must transcend the physical senses to understand the authentic nature of reality. It also emphasises the inner workings of the universe. Consequently, Kurdī cautions against spiritual techniques, arguing that despite their apparent utility, they espouse tenets inconsistent with traditional Islam and could potentially threaten Muslim beliefs. In Kurdī’s view,

Spiritual programs, including NLP, which offer to teach communication skills, pose a threat to Muslims’ *Aqīda* (creed) and identity since they incorporate hidden principles originating in *al-Bāṭiniyya* (esoteric) philosophy that rejects external sources of *al-Ghayb* (the unseen) as authentic sources of knowledge. Furthermore, these programs promote Eastern and pagan philosophies that include *Shirk* (association with God).¹⁸⁶

Kurdī explains that *al-Bāṭiniyya* philosophies, which influence spiritual beliefs, do not acknowledge Islamic revelation as a genuine source of knowledge. Rather, these philosophies assert that metaphysical concepts can be directly comprehended through inner sources such as personal experience. Moreover, Kurdī clarifies that spiritual teachings advocate Eastern beliefs that she deems incompatible with the traditional form of Islam. Al-Shamsān provides a similar

¹⁸⁵ Munā Abū Zayd, ‘*Al-Bāṭiniyya*’ (Esotericism), in *Mawsū‘at al-Firaq wa al-Madhāhib fī al-‘Ālam al-‘Islāmī*, ed. Maḥmoūd Zaqqūq (Cairo: Wazārat al-Awqāf, 2007), 163-164.

¹⁸⁶ Kurdī, “*Aṭhar al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya fī Barāmij al-Tadrib wa al-‘Istishfā’ al-Mu‘āshira*”, 39, cf. 44. Also see Fowz Kurdī, *Waqfa ma’ al-Dawrāt al-Tadribiyya* (A Pause to Reflect on Training Courses). Available: <https://alfowz.com/وقفه-مع-الدورات-التدريبية/> (Accessed 30 Nov 2022).

critique, positing that the concept of energy parallels Eastern philosophy's interpretation of the 'absolute principle':

The concept of cosmic energy represents a philosophical view that diverges from the Islamic notion of a transcendent God. This perspective draws on Eastern atheistic philosophies that posit the existence of an absolute being from which the universe emanates, derives its energy, strives to unite and realises its oneness. Similarly, the principle of energy is believed to constitute the foundation of the universe, which individuals aim to unite with through energy practices. In Hinduism, this energy is referred to as "*Prana*", while in Taoism, it is known as "*Chi*".¹⁸⁷

In other words, the principle of cosmic energy is a philosophical concept that posits an explanation for the universe's existence. According to Eastern traditions, this principle serves as the primary source of existence, connecting the universe with the fundamental element of life. This principle underpins their understanding of existence, serving as the bridge between the physical and metaphysical domains. However, al-Shamsān posits that this concept contradicts traditional Islamic views on existence, the universe and the nature of God. Moreover, she considers the belief in an absolute being underpinning this concept as atheistic because it denies God's will, attributes and actions. Hayfā' al-Rashīd adds that contemporary spirituality presents interpretations that differ from traditional Islamic perspectives:

In contemporary spirituality, there is an emphasis on self-interpretation, eclecticism and inspiration, leading to an interpretation of Islamic holy texts from a non-Islamic perspective and undermining the reliable Salaf approach. Accordingly, the holy texts are interpreted in an uncontrolled manner, resulting in a lack of reference and endless chaos.¹⁸⁸

Al-Rashīd believes that self-interpretation of religious texts is too subjective, leading to an endless array of meanings because it is open to personal bias. She argues that this results in confusion and uncontrolled interpretations. This approach, according to al-Rashīd, is contrary to

¹⁸⁷ Al-Shamsān, Reiki wa al-'Ilāj al-Prānī, 18. See also Kurdī, 'Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd, 31, 48. Also see Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilhādiyya al-Rūhiyya wa Taṭbīqātuhā al-Mu'āṣira*, 55. Also, al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 219-221, 453, 454.

¹⁸⁸ Hayfā' al-Rashīd, *Al-Manhaj al-Ta'wīlī fī al-Ta'āmul ma' al-Naṣ*, 33, cf. 30-32.

the Salaf perspective and undermines the role of the Salaf in interpreting the texts. She asserts that the Salafī approach is more controlled because it relies on a well-defined set of rules and principles that are accepted and followed by all Salafis. This allows for a more consistent interpretation of the texts and a unified understanding of their meaning.

Religious resistance towards contemporary spirituality has manifested in various forms, including lectures, debates, fatwas, online websites and social media. In addition, books, articles and academic research have been published to argue and caution against the concepts and techniques of contemporary spirituality.¹⁸⁹ However, in its initial stages, only a few voices were heard, and Kurdī's voice was the earliest and most prominent. As al-Sayf observes,

Fowz Kurdī, a professor of Islamic theology and contemporary religions, was the first to raise awareness of the hazards of new spirituality. Through her website, she imparts knowledge to Muslims regarding esoteric philosophies and beliefs disguised in alluring forms, such as health, happiness and positivity.¹⁹⁰

Kurdī has emerged as an expert in this field, discussing the potential perils of such spiritual practices and how they can be exploited to deceive people. Her work has become a valuable resource for Saudis and non-Saudis interested in comprehending the nuances of contemporary spirituality and its implications for their faith. The resistance against contemporary spirituality has progressed from individual efforts to organised and institutionalised opposition. As al-Sayf notes,

In 2014, Hayfā' al-Rashīd established the *al-Bayda'* centre in Riyadh City to address the emerging phenomenon of contemporary spirituality, including its esoteric thought and applications. Its

¹⁸⁹ The first article was written by Kurdī on NLP on 2003 was titled *Waqfa Mawḍu'īyya ma' al-Barmaja al-Lughawiyya al-Aṣabiyya* (An Objective Pause to Reflect on Neuro-linguistic Programing). Available: <https://alfowz.com/وقفة-موضوعية-مع-البرمجة-اللغوية-العصب> (Accessed: 14 Nov 2022).

¹⁹⁰ Al-Sayf, *Al-'Uṣūl al-Falsafīyya li Taṭwīr al-Dhāt fī al-Tanmiya al-Bashariyya*, 3/1182. See also Fowz Kurdī's website: www.alfowz.com.

establishment was prompted by growing concern about the negative influences of spirituality on the Muslim community.¹⁹¹

The *al-Bayḍa'* centre seeks to promote a deeper understanding of Islamic beliefs and provide a reliable platform for Muslims to discuss spiritual topics while protecting them from potentially harmful practices. It accomplishes this through research papers and training specialists in Islamic faith teaching. It also communicates with scholars and official bodies to discuss the latest beliefs that may threaten Muslim beliefs. Other centres were also established to teach Islamic beliefs, such as the *Rasīl* centre, which according to al-Sayf, 'managed by 'Ilhām al-Mulla and supervised by female academics in al-Khobar city. The *Rasīl* centre aims to instil strong Islamic faith in people and prevent suspicion by introducing contemporary doctrinal topics'.¹⁹² It has partnered with several institutions to provide a platform for readers to access and read contemporary doctrinal and intellectual books.

The intended audience for these centres is diverse and not limited to a specific group. In addition to raising awareness of the perceived threat posed by contemporary spirituality, these centres share their dedication to educating individuals about Islamic Salafī beliefs. They aim to strengthen the faith of individuals and, by extension, believe to safeguard society against incompatible spiritual ideologies. This aligns with al-Sayf's statement, 'a sound doctrinal foundation is essential in addressing spiritual programs that conflict with Islamic teachings ... ultimately, it shields the Muslim community from any potential doctrinal transgressions'.¹⁹³ Al-Sayf underscores the significance of understanding Islamic doctrine as a safeguard against non-Islamic tenets, including spiritual beliefs. This posits that inadequate knowledge of Islam may render individuals susceptible to non-Islamic practices and ideologies.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3/1185.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 3/1193.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3/1005.

¹⁹⁴ In this study, several participants suggested that ignorance of Islamic teachings contributes to the use of contemporary spirituality, with those less familiar with the teachings of Islam being most affected. See Chapter Four.

Chapter III: An Empirical Study of Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Arabia

As demonstrated, contemporary spirituality is often used as an umbrella term for various movements and practices. It is a spontaneous movement that repackages old philosophies outside traditional organised religion and emphasises inner authoritative source over external ones to find meaning and promote spiritual exploration. The rise of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Salafi society raises questions about how it has grown and why people are drawn to its ideas. The purpose of this study is a) to identify and analyse the kind of contemporary spirituality that has risen in Saudi society and b) to understand the reasons behind the movement's rapid growth. This chapter will address the first point based on interview responses and will analyse the themes that emerged from this data. The study will address the second point in the following chapter.

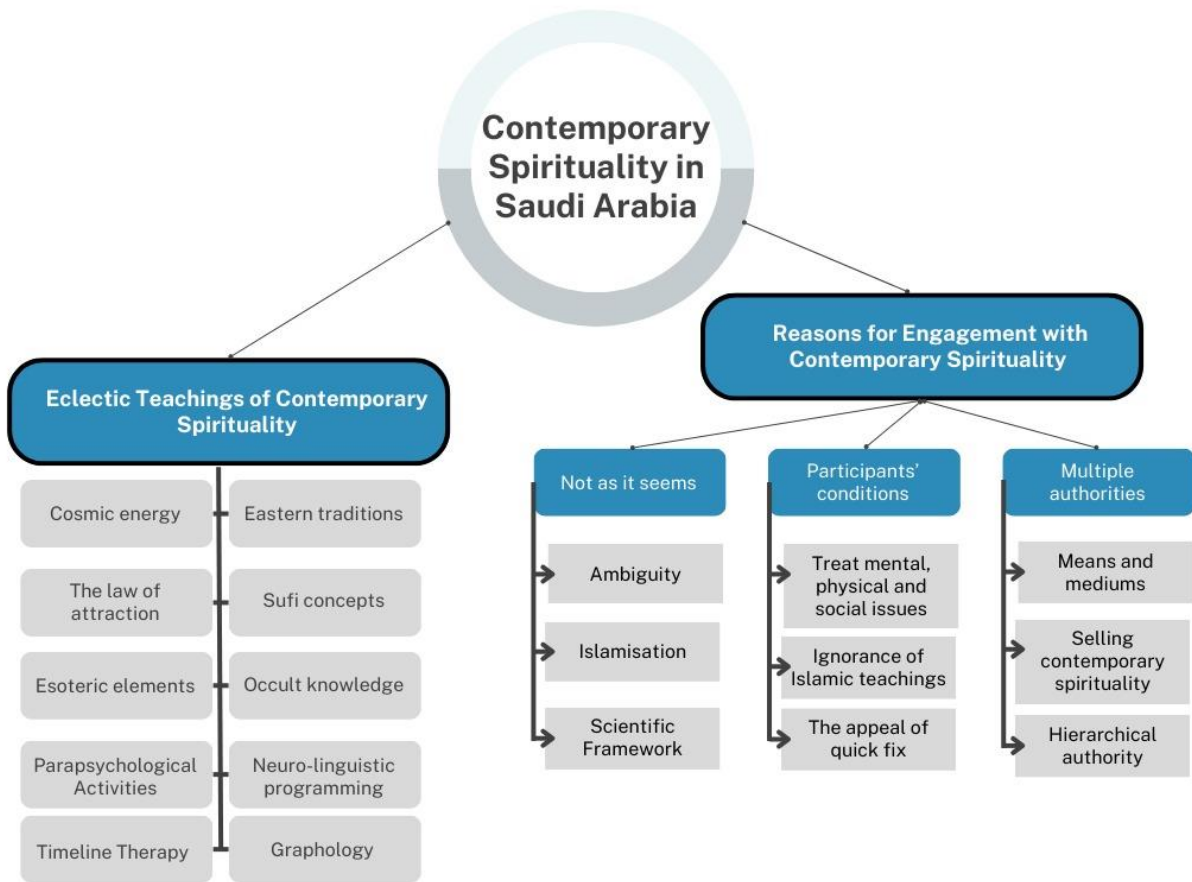
This study's methodological framework was outlined in the introduction. As discussed above, I conducted qualitative research and thematically analysed the data. This chapter will present the results and analysis of the research according to high-level themes. As Guest proposes, 'probably the most common method of presenting thematic results is by high-level themes—that is, a high-level theme constitutes a subheader'.¹⁹⁵ In this study, the themes direct the presentation of the data and include subheadings (see graph 3.1). The first theme addressed in this chapter, *Eclectic Teachings of Contemporary Spirituality*, explains the nature of the spiritual teachings that have arisen in Saudi society and were discussed by interviewees. The other themes, including *Repackaged Spirituality*, *Participants' Conditions* and *Multiple Authorities*, are addressed in the following chapter and illustrate the reasons for participants' engagement with contemporary spirituality. The themes are explained, associated with the interview questions that prompted the responses and supported with extracts. They are then summarised and analysed. The theme

¹⁹⁵ Guest *et al.*, 'Writing Up Thematic Analysis', 20; cf. 5. See also Mathew Miles and Michael Huberman, *An Expanded Source of Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd edition (London: Sage, 1994), 299, 301.

titles were chosen based on participants' expressions or descriptions of similar features in the literature. According to Guest, there is no rule on how to present quotes: 'the goal is to convey your story in a credible, transparent, and engaging manner'.¹⁹⁶ This study will list quotes related to a theme with interview questions below subheadings. This form is suitable for conveying all the quotations and clarifying their content before they are analysed. As this study is the first qualitative study of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, sharing all the extracts related to a particular question may facilitate a better understanding of the type of contemporary spirituality that participants practice.

As I translated the excerpts, I ensured that the quotes were as verbatim as possible and I removed some irrelevant data with the use of ellipses (...). Furthermore, I clarified some unclear words in square brackets [-]. Lastly, I kept some of the words in Arabic and included an English translation in parentheses (-). Despite the efforts to use participants' extracts equally, some participants' quotes are longer or more frequently used than others. This may be due to differences in the length of time participants have engaged in spiritual teachings or differences in the depth of their experiences. While some respondents had only engaged in a few practices for a short period, others were involved in a wide range of daily techniques.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.



Graph 3.1: Themes of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia.

Eclectic Teachings of Contemporary Spirituality

This theme delves into the eclectic nature of contemporary spirituality as experienced by participants in Saudi Arabia. The term 'eclectic' encapsulates the diverse range of traditions, practices, and beliefs that participants can choose from, aligning with Possamai's description of this as an 'eclectic—if not kleptomaniac—process of selecting culture(s) and religions'.¹⁹⁷ This multifaceted approach to spirituality is also echoed by Schmidt, who cites Carol Lee Flinders' inclusive spiritual practice that draws from various religious traditions: 'I cannot describe my

¹⁹⁷ Adam Possamai, 'Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Culture and Religion', *Culture and Religion*, 4 (2003): 40.

spiritual practice as Buddhist, ... or as Hindu or Catholic or Sufī, though I feel that in a sense it is all of these'.¹⁹⁸

The data reveals a collection of spiritual teachings and practices that participants have embraced, ranging from elements of physical practices and self-help techniques to more esoteric and mystical traditions like Sufism and Eastern philosophies. Specific topics that were frequently mentioned by interviewees include cosmic energy, Eastern traditions, the law of attraction, Sufi concepts, esoteric elements, occult knowledge, parapsychological activities, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), timeline therapy and graphology.

Most of the insights into this theme were gleaned from responses to the question: 'What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?' The variety of answers underscores the highly individualised and eclectic nature of contemporary spirituality, as participants draw from a broad spectrum of traditions.

- **Cosmic Energy**

The concept of 'energy' or 'cosmic energy' appears to be a central tenet in the spiritual practices embraced by the participants in this study. This aligns with a broader understanding of spirituality, as conveyed by Woodhead, that sees spiritual practices as 'unified by the idea that *Chi* or energy is the vital force of all life, and that *Chi* can be unblocked by way of a range of holistic techniques'.¹⁹⁹ In the context of the interviews, it's noteworthy that all 11 participants mentioned 'energy' in some form, indicating its significance in their spiritual practices.

The terminology used by participants varied, with some referring to it simply as 'energy', while others used more specific terms like 'cosmic energy' (*al-Ṭāqa al-Kawniyya*) and 'spiritual energy' (*al-Ṭāqa al-Rūhāniyya*). This suggests that while the core concept remains consistent, its

¹⁹⁸ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Woodhead, 'New Forms of Public Religion', 31.

interpretation and application are individualised, echoing the eclectic nature of contemporary spirituality highlighted earlier.

Participants seem to view this 'energy' as a resource that can be acquired, released, or even transferred to achieve specific outcomes or desires. The data for this particular concept mainly emerged from the question asking participants about the spiritual ideas and practices that interest them, further emphasising its centrality in their spiritual lives.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I believe there may be a collective energy that unites the entire universe and the whole human entity – (Karima).

I came across the topic of energy through a trainer on social media who was lecturing on concepts of Yin Yang and feminine and masculine energy as components of the whole universe, indicating that everything in the universe was made of energy – (Samar).

My sister became an energy healer, and she sometimes practices it remotely – (Lama).

I was taken by the concept of alpha energy and applied it after my friend convinced me – (Arwa).

I was told about energy therapy as a new medical speciality, so I signed up for a Reiki course where the trainer sold energy bracelets with stones claiming they would benefit the wearer. However, I could not afford them – (Zeena).

I believe that negative energy can be transmitted to others; that the moon affects our life. According to the trainer, we receive energy from the moon on certain days. However, on some days, this energy can be toxic. Therefore, she told us not to speak to anyone ...

Believing in and applying such a lie affected me negatively. I became isolated and stopped speaking to others – (Maram).

I attended a course on the principle of cosmic energy, which explained that energy was feelings and vibrations that we could release. The trainer explained that life was made of energy, and she emphasised that the universe responds to and directs us to send and receive messages to and from it. She also described this type of energy as a physical phenomenon generated by individuals' strength, power of thinking and focus on feelings. The trainer said that our energy could reach people everywhere, even in different parts of the world. Accordingly, I bought crystals believing they would benefit me and provide me and my house with positive energy ... However, I now realise that this concept was *Shirk* (association with God) and had nothing to do with science. I no longer practice it – (Malak).

My sister used to meet an energy healer on the beach during specific times to acquire spiritual energy from the moon. They meditated while facing a specific direction – (Elham).

I had tapping therapy on my body's energy points when I was deeply grieving my father's death. Then, I joined courses where coaches covered ideas about the balance and harmony of the universe. We also practised living in harmony with the universe. You see, ideas of unity of everything, that we are all one and the universe is united through energy, existed in trainers' words; however, their meanings were often unclear – (Wisam).

I practised Reiki for a while, but I often felt exhausted afterwards. The practice included listening to meditative music and performing Reiki to cleanse our energy, release negative energy within us and receive positive energy ... The trainers directed us to unite with the collective or universal consciousness or energy ... Eventually, I observed that among

spiritual groups, there was a tendency to use phrases other than “God gave me”, such as “the universe gave me” and “I attracted things from the universe” – (Dalal).

This participant described a Reiki course as follows:

During a Reiki course in Kuwait, the instructor spoke like a diviner: with her bare hands, she measured the aura of an attendee who argued against her analysis because he felt his aura was more significant than her measurement. The way this argument played out left me with doubts and questions. Whose assessment was correct, the trainer or the attendee? Which criteria did the trainer use to evaluate the aura? If Reiki is a science, it should have a scientific basis – (Dalal).

The Reiki course I attended in Jeddah was so strange and crazy that I laugh at myself whenever I think about it. It involved closing our eyes and saying “*Sunnn*”. While doing this, I recall imagining circles within circles, through which I could reach union with the universe. In this exercise, we were trying to unite with the whole universe. Our mantra would be: the universe and I are united, but the union never occurred (Laughter) – (Muna).

Summary and Analysis:

The data shows a uniform understanding among interviewees about the concept of cosmic energy, with nine having direct experiences and two relaying experiences of their sisters. This consensus suggests that the concept has gained a certain level of acceptance or at least curiosity among the participants. They commonly employ terms like ‘energy’, ‘cosmic energy’ and ‘spiritual energy’, indicating a shared language and understanding of this concept as a tool for personal transformation. Techniques involving stones, crystals and lunar cycles are believed to manipulate this energy for various ends, such as healing, emotional well-being and even interpersonal relationships. However, this utilitarian approach to cosmic energy raises critical questions, especially in a context like Saudi Arabia where Islamic teachings hold significant sway.

The idea that energy can be ‘acquired, released, or transferred’ to achieve specific goals suggests a transactional view of spirituality, which could be at odds with traditional Islamic values that prioritise ethical and moral considerations over personal desires.

Additionally, some participants reported negative experiences, such as social isolation and physical exhaustion, and even went as far as labeling the practice as ‘*Shirk*’ (associating partners with God), a grave sin in Islamic theology. This points to an underlying tension between these spiritual practices and established religious norms. The shift in language from ‘God gave me’ to ‘the universe gave me’ indicates a change in the conceptual framework through which participants understand the source of blessings or positive events, even without realising it. This shift from a theistic focus to a more ambiguous cosmic force could be interpreted as a move away from traditional Islamic tenets. It raises questions about the potential for such language to dilute or even supplant established religious beliefs, especially in a context like Saudi Arabia where religious norms are stringently upheld. This linguistic shift could be indicative of broader changes in spiritual orientation and warrants further investigation to understand its implications fully. This tension is further highlighted by Kurdī’s observation that such spiritual practices could ‘crowd out the correct Islamic belief, posing a potential threat to the religious fabric of the community’.²⁰⁰ Therefore, as illuminated by both participant experiences and Kurdī’s insights, the concept of cosmic energy exhibits complex intersections with traditional Islamic beliefs, raising questions that merit deeper examination.

- **Eastern Traditions**

Eastern traditions encompass teachings, philosophies or practices rooted in South and East Asian religious and cultural frameworks, notably Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism.²⁰¹ The prevalence of Eastern traditions in the responses of all 11 interviewees points to their significant influence on contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. Concepts such as Yin Yang, Chakras, Karma,

²⁰⁰ Kurdī, ‘*Ḥarakat al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd*’, 47, cf. 51.

²⁰¹ See Coward, Neufeldt and Neumaier, *Readings in Eastern Religions*, xi, 117. See also Fuller, ‘Unchurched Spirituality’, 1-12.

reincarnation, Yoga, meditation, Tai Chi, Feng Shui and macrobiotics were frequently mentioned, indicating a broad range of Eastern philosophies that have been incorporated into the spiritual practices of the participants.²⁰²

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I heard about Yoga and the fact that it is rooted in Buddhist beliefs – (Arwa).

The energy expert said that everything in the world consists of Yin Yang, feminine and masculine energies and that it was associated with Eastern traditions ... I came across the concept of Karma and heard that it was linked to Hinduism. It means your actions will have repercussions; you are the reason for everything that happens to you. It is you who

²⁰² Yoga is one of six schools of Hindu philosophy. It is a group of spiritual and physical practices aimed to reach unity.

Karma, according to Hindu belief, is the result of a person's actions and volitions that determine their reincarnation, their present and future lives.

Reincarnation refers to the return of soul, after death, to another body because it did not perform all its duties in previous lives. (See Maria Kniazeva, 'Eastern Spirituality in The Western Marketplace', *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 18 (2015): 467, 468, 470, and see Swami Ramdas, *Al-Hikma al-Hindūsiyya: Falsafāt wa Nuṣūṣ* (Hindu Wisdom: Philosophies and Texts) (Beirut: Mu'assasat Nawfa, 1998), 142, and see 'Alī Zi'ūr, *Al-Falsafa fī al-Hind: Qiṭā'āṭuhā al-Hindūkiyya wa al-'Islāmiyya wa al-Mu'āṣira ma' Muqaddimāt 'an al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya wa fī al-Ṣīn* (Philosophy in India: Its Contemporary Hindu and Islamic issues, with introductions to Eastern philosophy in China) (Beirut: Mu'assasat 'iz Addīn liṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, 1413/1992), 132-134.

Chakras are various focal points on the spine that are described in Hindu and Buddhist literature and are used in meditation to accomplish enlightenment. (See York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements*, 42).

Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art based on the Taoist philosophy of Yin Yang, and is intended to unify the mind, body, spirit and energy. (See Wong Kiew Kit, *The Complete Book of Tai Chi Chuan: A Comprehensive Guide to the Principles and Practice* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002) 13 - 17).

Feng Shui is an ancient Chinese art that specifies how to arrange spaces in a way that allows cosmic energy to flow in a particular location.

(See April Simmons, *Feng Shui* (Glasgow: Geddes and Grosset, 2001), 13).

Yin Yang are ancient Chinese philosophical principles that are believed to make up the universe. There is a complementary and balancing effect between both principles. (See York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements*, 203).

Meditation is a spiritual practice rooted in Hinduism, and an intellectual exercise aimed at achieving mental clarity. (See Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism* (Roma: Universita Gregoriana Editrice, 1982), 243).

causes the incidents in your life ... I also heard that Yoga was rooted in Hinduism, but I practised it as a stretching exercise ... In Yoga classes, the instructor incorporated both spiritual and physical aspects like breathing and mindfulness – (Samar).

For 21 days, I meditated, imagining energy moving through my Chakras, and then I wished for things I wanted. I included some Yoga poses in my meditation practice. Although my father warned me that Yoga was a religious practice from Hinduism and Buddhism, I did not pay much attention to him because I did not like the way he spoke to me ... I was also so influenced by a book about Karma that I tried to contact the writer. I applied techniques linked to Karma and the law of attraction provided by the teacher I followed on social media. This was even though my brother warned me that it was black magic – (Zeena).

My sister and I practice Tai Chi and believe there is a third eye affected by colours, but my sister went beyond that and believed that the third eye affects fertility, happiness and sadness ... After I met a Korean student in the United States whose mother was a Feng Shui architect, I started to apply Feng Shui and believe in its effect. So, I removed mirrors from entrances, ensured that my bed faced the sun, removed metal from the room and covered the room with parquet because they say rooms full of greens and wood absorb negative energy and anger and increase intimacy. If we want to succeed or increase our focus, Feng Shui directs us to stay away from the corners and put our desks in the middle of rooms instead of in corners since energy is circular. When I redesigned my office, I applied all these instructions – (Ekram).

When asked whether Feng Shui was associated with a certain culture or religion, the participant replied:

Yes, I guess it is a Buddhist concept – (Ekram).

I attended Tai Chi classes and took my mother with me. During the classes, the instructor spoke about philosophical concepts of balance, the energy ball which is made up of black and white swirls [Yin Yang] ... I practised meditation with a trainer who sent us symbols to imagine within our Chakras ... for my teacher, meditation was a way to reach Prophet Muhammed's time, and for me, it was a way to understand the truth within me. However, honestly, I never understood the meaning of (the truth within me) as my teacher never explained it until I found out later that it meant Allah resides within me – (Wisam).

In addition, the participant discussed her experience with Karma:

I embraced the concept of Karma, which means that we are responsible for our lives and for everything happening to us—even poverty. However, diving into this idea made me blame myself when I didn't receive positive results. I am not wealthy, and people in these groups consider poverty a choice people make. So, they avoided engaging with the poor out of fear of receiving low energy. Why would I be a bad omen for others if I was not prosperous? Even though I have given everything I could, I'm still poor. I believe this concept is far away from humanity and compassion – (Wisam).

Lastly, the participant shared her experience with macrobiotics and Feng Shui:

I read a book on macrobiotics by Mariam Nour, and I was excited to learn new stuff. I also watched her on Future TV and, stupidly, imitated everything she did ... An energy expert transformed one of her apartments into a space to hold spirituality courses, the first of which was in Feng Shui by a French trainer. After explaining Feng Shui, the trainer predicted the attendees' future resolutions, problems or confusions. Based on the predictions, he suggested decorations that harmonise with participants' homes. Additionally, he directed them to follow energy directions: "wait, have patience and start working". I felt that I was heading down the wrong path and asked God to lead me to the right way – (Wisam).

First, I studied Feng Shui. Then, my family and I fully followed Mariam Nour's macrobiotic program. However, as my sister was pregnant, her baby was born with rickets. He is 18 years old and still suffers from bowlegs because he did not have sufficient nutrition in his mother's womb – (Muna).

When asked why she believed that macrobiotics was the reason for the baby's issue, the participant replied:

Of course it was, because my sister stopped consuming all dairy products: she did not have milk or calcium except natural sources, and she did not eat meat or chicken as suggested by Mariam Nour – (Muna).

This participant discussed another experience:

All programs I joined covered philosophical concepts, such as Yin Yang and its association with life, food and lifestyle. Furthermore, the idea of Karma states that a person controls their life and is responsible for everything in it. Our Karma even causes illness. I learnt not to think or speak negative words as they attract negative events. Negativity will come back for you if you say negative phrases like "pay attention not to drop things". The conscious mind will not comprehend the negative word and will do the opposite and drop everything. All this concentration makes us confused and afraid of making mistakes. This way of thinking made my mind focused and stressed all the time; I even blamed myself for thinking about certain things because I believed that my thoughts were the reason for my suffering – (Muna).

Afterwards, the respondent described her experience in a private course in Lebanon as follows:

In a private course in Lebanon, I meditated with a group. We sat on the floor next to each other, the incense stick burner was on, the practitioner read and mumbled to a certain attendee whose eyes were closed and everyone else was quiet. In Mariam Nour's course, she spoke about reincarnation, explaining that souls could live in various physical forms, including a cockroach and that one should not kill a cockroach as it might have someone's soul in it – (Muna).

I practice Yoga, but I don't care about its Hindu philosophy. I only do it to stretch and benefit my body. During the class, the trainer incorporates 10 minutes to live in the moment, focus and clear our minds of everything ... I used to believe in the law of attraction and Karma. Whatever you do will get back to you, and to prevent bad Karma, you should be cautious. As a result of this idea, I felt responsible for everything that happened in my life, which caused me to suffer from stress and anxiety because I directed all my attention towards thinking positively, being happy and giving out positive energy to receive positive energy. Despite being sad, I did not allow myself to feel it – (Maram).

Some individuals claimed to practice Hindu and Taoist rituals exclusively as a practice rather than a philosophy. However, the issue arises when the next generation learns about the religions that their families practised "physically". They will believe they are true religions and will be more willing to accept ideas that conflict with their Islamic beliefs – (Lama).

For a while, I practised Feng Shui. I focused on decoration, specific colours and crystals as the coach explained that crystals have a high energy level. I also believed that positive energy was associated with precious stones and particular plants, which is why I used them extensively – (Malak).

An additional experience with Eastern concepts was then discussed by this participant:

It has become clear to me that Yoga originated from the pagan Hindu faith. It is a spiritual and physical exercise intended for *Fanā'* (annihilation of the self or passing away), as well as communication with the divine. Alongside meditation for cleansing and healing, I attended energy cleansing sessions in which the practitioner explained the third eye as a Chakra located on the forehead. The practitioner instructed me to visualise light entering the Chakras and then moving to the heart Chakra. She also suggested that we might benefit from Eastern religions, although we would use the word 'ports' rather than 'Chakras'. The practitioner then said that we can Islamise the term by associating it with Islamic concepts – (Malak).

Even though I know Yoga is associated with Hinduism, I practise it as a physical practice and a stretching exercise. I'm not interested in its spiritual or philosophical aspects. The Yoga instructor often speaks about the third eye and directs us to open it before class. The idea of soul contracts influences me a lot; the teacher said that everyone I encounter, even those who harm me, carries a message for me that contributes to my development. People's lives are governed by previous agreements or contracts made between their souls before birth ... I also believe in Karma. When you see life from a particular perspective, everything around you becomes viewed through this lens. So, if you have a negative attitude, everything becomes negative and vice versa. The messages you send will come back to you. When you act, you get a reaction – (Karima).

When asked whether an individual is responsible for their illness, failure and success, the participant replied:

Not necessarily. Things might be out of your control. You are not always in control, and you are not always responsible. So, you are unintentionally responsible for your failure; perhaps you did not do enough to succeed. This does not make you responsible, but you have not done enough to succeed. So, people do not always deserve what is happening to them. I don't know. You are not entirely in control of your life. Sometimes, things get

out of hand. Karma is always correct, but we do not always have enough awareness to control the situation. That is why most things in our lives reflect who we are – (Karima).

I bought Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid's audio album of hymns (Subliminal) to calm me down. Still, whenever I heard it, I fell asleep during meditation and woke up exhausted. Meditation is based on emptying negative energy and allowing oneself to receive inspiration or guidance that makes us reach perfection. Then, I practised Feng Shui for a while as I believed that it was scientific. However, one of the most significant blows to Feng Shui is that four schools have conflicting information. For example, if I arrange my house according to the first school, it will oppose the second school's principles and attract negative energy according to the third school. What is the basis for this knowledge? Which school offers the best curriculum? If these curricula were scientific, as they claim, why do they conflict? Contradictions do not exist in science. I also believe a trainer used sorcery to marry her ex-husband through Feng Shui; she asked his mother to follow specific Feng Shui techniques in his bedroom to make him marry her – (Dalal).

Following this, the respondent discussed the beliefs of a spiritual teacher regarding life after death:

In the teacher's view of life, feminine and masculine energies are separated, with one guiding the other from above and sending instructions. The esoteric teacher did not follow Islamic beliefs about the afterlife. He rejected the afterlife and also interpreted it differently; he believed that the afterlife was a merging of the individual with the divine. He viewed hellfire as a symbol of reincarnation, with those who don't develop their consciousness becoming inanimate objects or plants. Once liberated from Karma and rebirth, those who have reached perfection will dissolve into the divine, representing heaven. Those who are not cleansed of multiple Karmas are tormented and their purification becomes mandatory as if they are in a land of purification. As a result of Karma and reincarnation, we choose our parents and way of life before birth – (Dalal).

The respondent then explained her views on Karma:

According to this belief, everyone deserves what they are currently experiencing: the poor deserve poverty, the oppressed deserve injustice, and each is Karma resulting from their previous lives. Therefore, we should not grieve for anyone since they will receive the results of their past mistakes—your pain happened because you hurt someone in a past life. However, perhaps the oppressed person is the first victim. Indeed, there must have been a first victim, oppressed for the first time, whose Karma followed. Is it possible to blame a victim if this is true? ... It was funny when the esoteric teacher said the mother of his lover refused their marriage because she [the mother] was his lover in a previous life. In her current life, she takes revenge on him – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

In examining the spiritual leanings of the 11 participants, it's clear that Eastern traditions have permeated Saudi society to some extent. However, the prevalence of terms like 'Karma' and 'Yoga' provokes questions about whether these concepts are deeply understood, or have they merely become buzzwords? The utilisation of these Eastern terms may be shaped by their Western popularisation, which often decontextualises them of their original cultural and philosophical subtleties. This reflects the broader social and cultural contexts within which these practices are being interpreted and adapted. Despite this, participants' varying degrees of acquaintance with Eastern terminology like 'Yoga' and 'Karma' suggest more than just a cursory engagement. Some participants even utilised descriptive language, indicating a nuanced adaptation of these Eastern concepts to comply with their own religious beliefs.

Participants' involvement with Eastern traditions revealed a complex interplay between physical exercises and the underlying philosophical tenets. For example, Tai Chi was engaged in not merely as a physical activity but also as an embodiment of philosophical concepts such as Yin and

Yang. Likewise, Yoga was approached as more than a physical regimen but as a pathway to spiritual enlightenment. This complex fusion of physical and philosophical elements underscores the intricate nature of Eastern traditions, particularly when modifications are attempted to align these practices with Islamic principles, despite inherent contradictions.

All participants acknowledged the connection between the Eastern traditions and the spiritual practices they were involved in, but their responses to this realisation varied significantly. Some opted to engage solely with the physical aspects, eschewing the philosophical foundations, while others sought to contextualise these practices within an Islamic framework. Intriguingly, a number of participants disengaged entirely upon learning of the Eastern origins of these practices. This variation in responses illuminates the participants' nuanced approach to the philosophical foundations of these practices, revealing an underlying caution to ensure these practices do not clash with their Islamic convictions. This careful approach aligns with the observations of Hayfā al-Rashīd, who notes that 'many individuals engaging in spiritual practices do not fully comprehend the philosophical dimensions that conflict with Islamic teachings'.²⁰³ Despite attempts to focus solely on the physical aspects, participants often found themselves unintentionally incorporating elements with spiritual or philosophical ramifications, such as the concept of the 'third eye' or 'mindfulness'. This may be due to an absence of clear delineation between the physical and philosophical aspects within these practices. One participant even cautioned against the adoption of such practices, fearing they could inadvertently lead future generations to adopt ideas conflicting with Islamic teachings. This sentiment highlights the tension between the adoption of global spiritual practices and the preservation of local religious integrity, particularly in a context like Saudi Arabia, where alternative spiritual viewpoints are often met with scepticism.

The participants were exposed to a diverse array of spiritual teachings that often amalgamated elements from various traditions. Concepts like Chakras and Karma were often intermingled with ideas like the law of attraction, and even Sufī concepts like Fanā' were invoked to elucidate

²⁰³ Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 346.

practices like Yoga.²⁰⁴ This syncretic approach indicates a form of spiritual eclecticism, where participants are blending and adapting elements from different traditions to suit their own spiritual frameworks. However, this blending was not without its challenges. Some participants expressed reservations and discomfort with specific practices and their instructors. For instance, one participant questioned the ethical standing of a Feng Shui instructor who ventured into predicting attendees' futures and prescribing personal choices. Another participant cast doubt on the scientific credibility of Feng Shui, even associating it with sorcery. Additionally, concerns were raised about the health implications of a macrobiotic diet during pregnancy. These reservations not only underscore the participants' critical engagement with these practices but also reveal a degree of scepticism about their scientific validity and ethical standing.

While many participants expressed an initial affinity for the concept of Karma, their experiences with it were anything but straightforward. The idea that one is responsible for the events in one's life, both good and bad, resulted in feelings of anxiety and exhaustion for some. This emotional toll was especially evident when participants grappled with issues beyond their control, such as poverty and illness. The concept of Karma also had ethical ramifications; it engendered a lack of empathy and compassion among some participants. Specifically, two participants interpreted Karma as a rationale for viewing poverty and oppression as choices, thereby implying that those who suffer are deserving of their plight. This perspective risks perpetuating a form of victim-blaming, where individuals are held accountable for circumstances often beyond their control. Such a viewpoint not only exacerbates individual suffering but also has the potential to erode social cohesion.

One participant's views on Karma revealed a level of ambiguity. While she acknowledged that individuals might not be entirely responsible for their circumstances, such as illness or failure, she also asserted that 'things in our lives are reflections of who we are'. This inconsistency could

²⁰⁴ *Fanā'* refers to 'the vanishing of the self in the absolute unity' or the divine presence. (See Shams Addīn Ibn Qaiyyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij al-Sālikīn bayn Manāzil Iyyāka Na'budu wa Iyyāka Nasta'in* (*Ranks of the Divine Seekers*), Taḥqīq Muhammad al-Baghdādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1416/1995), 1/173.

stem from her attempt to reconcile her belief in Karma with Islamic concepts of destiny, or perhaps from a fragmented understanding of Karma itself, especially since she did not incorporate the idea of reincarnation into her explanation. In contrast, another participant who did integrate the concepts of Karma and reincarnation expressed a more coherent stance. She was adamant that individuals are responsible for all aspects of their lives, even going so far as to suggest that one's choice of parents is a decision made in a previous life. She also highlighted the incongruity between these beliefs and traditional Islamic views on the afterlife, heaven and hell. This divergence between both views underscores the complexities involved in attempting to integrate these different belief systems. It also suggests that a more nuanced understanding emerges when Karma and reincarnation are considered together, reinforcing the idea that actions have repercussions not just in the present, but also in future lifetimes.

- **The Law of Attraction**

The law of attraction, which posits that one's thoughts, feelings and words have the power to shape reality, was a prevalent concept among the participants.²⁰⁵ Out of 11 respondents, 10 referred to this principle in some form. While the majority explicitly used the term 'law of attraction', others simply used the verb 'attract' or described the concept without naming it. This suggests a varying degree of familiarity with the term itself, but a general acceptance of the underlying idea.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I believe when you see life from a certain perspective, people around you will have the same perspective, so if you have a negative perspective, everything becomes negative and vice versa ... I released several intentions to the universe to receive what I wanted—I said that I wanted a job and to lose weight. I believe when I release intentions to the universe, it begins to help me by putting the right people in my way – (Karima).

²⁰⁵ Byrne, *The Secret*, 7.

Belief is so powerful that it heals: your whole mind and body respond to the belief you hold ... during a session in *Bayt al-Salām* centre, we all sat together and prayed to the universe – (Muna).

I believed that people in our lives reflect us, so when we change our thoughts and intentions, people around us change ... After some time, however, I noticed that I became distant from God and no longer had *Tawakkul* (reliance on God) nor made *Du'ā'* (invocation and supplication) as frequently as I used to. I also began to blame myself for everything that happened to me because I attracted it. Consequently, I suffered deep remorse – (Samar).

I believed in the law of attraction: my thought and words attract my life's events. If I wanted a car, I would go to the car showroom and look at it, I would stare at pictures of it for a long time until it entered my subconscious mind and then attraction would occur. On the other hand, I read that the universe might be against us. However, when I faced reality and realised that I had not achieved anything, I got a terrible shock since I felt that I was responsible for not achieving my goals and that my application of the law of attraction was inadequate. Consequently, this way of thinking fuelled my anxiety – (Wisam).

I embraced the idea of the law of attraction, in which, according to my trainer, everything is made of frequencies that are spread out in the universe, and we attract the frequency we desire ... When I applied for a master's degree, I wrote down a statement to attract my master's admission and repeated this exercise 21 times for 14 days. Unfortunately, it became a habit, and I became accustomed to relying on myself instead of on God Almighty – (Malak).

I believe that thoughts shape life in the first place. Humans are responsible for their lives—they decide their *Qadar* (destiny) and choose to be wretched or happy through their thoughts and intentions. I practised the law of attraction for the universe to achieve my desires ... However, as a result of this idea, I felt responsible for everything that happened in my life, which caused me to suffer from stress and anxiety because I directed all my attention towards thinking positively, being happy and giving out positive energy to receive positive energy. Despite being sad, I did not allow myself to feel it – (Maram).

I embraced the law of attraction concept at the beginning of my experience. While I was trying to get pregnant, I was advised to surround myself with people with children to attract the energy of alpha and pregnancy. I was also told not to be too attached as it would fail to attract pregnancy energy. However, when I read the Arabic translation of *The Secret*, I felt it would ruin my faith. I realised that I began to ascribe everything to myself instead of to God and His power as a result of believing that I could attract anything. Rather than relying on my ability to attract, I should make *Du'ā'* to God Almighty and rely on Him – (Arwa).

According to a friend, the law of attraction allows her to receive more blessings because of her gratitude for coffee. I was surprised and asked, who gave you coffee in the first place? Your gratitude should be directed towards God who has blessed you with many blessings, including your daily cup of coffee – (Lama).

To attract travel to New York, I hung pictures of the city in my room and recited positive affirmations every day ... When I lost my family in a crowd, the first thing that came to my mind was to repeat affirmations to find them ... To manifest my dreams, I frequently sent energy before bed by imagining energy emanating from me, filling my room and the entire city. Then, I would send my wishes to the universe to attract them. This was nonsense – (Zeena).

When asked to elaborate more on how these meanings made her feel, this participant replied:

I was immersed in this idea and tried to convince those around me that we were in control of our lives and that our thoughts and words affect reality. However, after a while, the idea of being fully responsible for everything in my life began to tire me very, very, very much because I became like a machine trying to focus on everything around me, like an octopus with more than two hands moving in different directions simultaneously. This idea is very wrong because, in the end, humans have a limited capacity for energy and endurance. God gave us the ability to bear certain things, and not to take responsibility for every detail of our lives. The law of attraction leads individuals to attempt to perform divine tasks that are neither within their capacity nor their control, resulting in a sense of responsibility for their lives, actions and even their thoughts to the fullest extent possible – (Zeena).

I practised the law of attraction by repeating the following mantra: I attract, and I name what I wish to manifest. My initial belief was that one cannot attract what they desire unless they believe they deserve it. Eventually, I observed that among spiritual groups, there was a tendency to use phrases other than “God gave me”, such as “the universe gave me” and “I attracted things from the universe”. As a trainer, I spoke extensively about the universe and the effect it can have on us until one attendee asked: what is the universe? To be honest, I did not expect such a question and did not have an answer. Consequently, I searched in depth to find that the hidden meaning of the word “universe” in this context referred to the divine, which conflicts with my religious beliefs – (Dalal).

As a follow-up, the participant shared her thoughts on the law of attraction:

The law of attraction states that we attract everything we think of, that we have an absolute control over all the matters of our lives and that everything happening is simply a manifestation of our feelings towards what we think. Therefore, it is we who attract the

incidents, good and bad, into our lives. Consequently, the law of attraction reflects the belief of *Mu'tazila* and *Qadariyya* in *Qadar* (destiny); however, the law of attraction even transcends their beliefs because it considers death to be a human choice – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

The law of attraction emerged as a significant theme among the participants, with 10 out of 11 discussing its influence on their lives. This principle, which posits that individuals have the power to shape their own reality through focused thought and visualisation, was often conflated with other spiritual cosmic laws like the law of intention, the law of gratitude and the law of deserving.²⁰⁶ The appeal of the law of attraction lies in its promise of success without the need for hard work, aligning with al-'Ajirī's critique of the presumption that mere thought and feeling can suffice to fulfill one's desire:

The popularity of *The Secret* can be attributed to its new approach to life. Through thinking and feeling, one is able to fulfill their desires without having to exert any effort. This book claims that readers will be able to accomplish all of their aspirations by using visualisation techniques while lying in bed or sitting on a couch.²⁰⁷

While this concept promises quick and easy solution to life's challenges, it also risks trivialising the importance of dedication, discipline and hard work. These are not only important life skills but also virtues that are highly regarded in many ethical and religious frameworks, including

²⁰⁶ The law of intention is 'centred on focusing on an idea to change reality. In the spiritual belief, the intention releases a force that generates results'. (al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 271). The law of gratitude 'is part of the philosophy of attraction and is considered the key to abundance that unlocks the universe. It is the process of sending thanks at specific times, directing one's gratitude to the blessings around them so that they may receive abundance in return'. (*Ibid.*, 299). The law of deserving states that, in accordance with the law of attraction, feeling deserving is crucial to achieving one's goals. A person who feels unworthy of achieving their goals will not allow them to be accomplished. (*Ibid.*, 251).

²⁰⁷ Al-'Ajirī, *Khurāfat al-Sir*, 12.

Islamic teachings. By suggesting that one can achieve their goals through mere thought, the law of attraction could potentially discourage people from putting in the necessary effort and taking practical steps to achieve their aspirations. This could lead to a skewed understanding of success and how it is achieved, which is not only psychologically misleading but also ethically problematic.

While the law of attraction offers a sense of control and empowerment, it also raises theological questions that intersect with traditional Islamic teachings. Participants in this study viewed the law of attraction as more than just a tool for achieving desired outcomes; they saw it as a spiritual practice that empowers them to take control of their destiny, reflecting the principle of 'sacralisation of the self'. This aligns with Byrne's words in her book *The Secret*, where she states that 'the law of attraction is the law of creation', 'you are God in a physical body' and humans are essentially 'creators of Universal destiny'.²⁰⁸ However, this view contrasts sharply with traditional Islamic beliefs, particularly the Salafī doctrine, which places God as the ultimate authority and the sole source of healing and predetermination. As Khālīd al-Sabt writes, 'Allah alone has the power to heal all diseases. The only healer is Him; the only cure is His healing'.²⁰⁹ Even the language used in medical treatment within this framework avoids the word 'heal' in favour of 'treat', emphasising God's role as the ultimate healer. The Salafī doctrine of *Qadar* also underscores that while individuals have a choice and a will, these are ultimately confined within God's absolute will and predestination, as explained by Ḥasan al-Zuhayrī.²¹⁰ This theological stance led one participant to compare the law of attraction to early philosophical schools associated with Islam like *Qadariyya* and *Mu'tazila*, which argue for 'human free will and the ability to shape one's own destiny'.²¹¹ These schools, often viewed as controversial within

²⁰⁸ Byrne, *The Secret*, 15, 164, 160.

²⁰⁹ Khālīd al-Sabt, *Al-Shāfi' (The Healer)* (1430/2009). Available: <https://khaledalsabt.com/series/1050/22-الشافي> (Accessed 22 Jan 2022).

²¹⁰ See Ḥasan Zuhayrī, 'Uṣūl Ahl Assuna wa al-Jamā'a (*Origins of Ahl Assuna wa al-Jamā'a*), 6/1. Available: <https://shamela.ws/book/37603/68#p2> (Accessed 23 Feb 2023).

²¹¹ *Qadariyya* refers to a group of individuals who reject the concept of *Qadar* (destiny) and maintain that humans' actions are not created by God; rather humans possess absolute free will and are solely responsible for their actions. Eventually, the doctrines of the *Qadariyya* were incorporated into the *Mu'tazilī*s theological framework. (See 'Abdulqāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq*

mainstream Sunnī thought, align more closely with the law of attraction's emphasis on human agency and control. Therefore, while the law of attraction may offer a sense of control, it also poses theological challenges that not only conflicts with traditional Islamic doctrines but also raises questions about accountability and the role of divine will in shaping human lives.

When practising the law of attraction, some participants reported a reliance on the universe and the self, rather than on God. This perspective was viewed by some as tantamount to '*Shirk*', the act of associating partners with God, a serious theological issue in Islam. One participant even withdrew from these practices upon realising that the term 'universe' could be equated with the divine in certain spiritual contexts, thereby conflicting with her Islamic beliefs.

The law of attraction also had psychological implications. Some participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility its placed on them for events outside their control, such as illness, grief and failure. This led to feelings of regret, worry and pressure, echoing criticisms related to the concept of Karma. This mindset can be problematic, as it may lead to guilt and inadequacy when life events don't align with one's desires, and it can make people feel overwhelmed and helpless as they attempt to control the uncontrollable.

Bayn al-Firaq wa Bayān al-Firqa al-Nājya (The Difference Between Sects and the Clarification of the Surviving Sect), 2nd edition (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1977), 93.

Mu'tazila is a theological sect in early Islamic history that adheres to five principles. The first principle is monotheism, which asserts the negation of divine attributes and the belief that the Qur'an is a creation. The second principle is divine justice, which maintains that it is impermissible for God to create human actions and hold individuals accountable. This stance leads to the *Mu'tazila* being referred to as the '*Qadariyya*', as they hold that human will is independent of God's will. The third principle concerns promise and threat, which holds that those who commit grave sins and do not repent will be punished in Hell. The fourth principle entails an intermediate position, in which a Muslim who commits a major sin is not considered a believer but is not deemed a *Kāfir* (disbeliever). The fifth and final principle pertains to enjoining the right and prohibiting the wrong, which, according to Awājī, *Mu'tazila* considers constitutes rebellion against the ruler. (See al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq*, 112-115, and See Ghālib 'Awājī, *Firaq Mu'āshira Tantasib Ilā al-Islām wa Bayān Mawqif al-Islām Minhā (Contemporary Sects Affiliated with Islam and Islam's View of them)* (Jeddah: al-Maktaba al-'Aşriyya al-Dhahabiyya, 2005), 3/1178-1201).

By promising a sense of empowerment, the law of attraction raises complex ethical and theological questions that are not efficiently reconciled with traditional Islamic teachings. This underscores the importance of a nuanced and critical examination of the intersection between this spiritual practice and established religious frameworks.

- **Sufi Concepts**

As previously outlined, Sufism in the context of this study is characterised by its mystical and religious practices that emphasise asceticism and devotion. These practices have evolved into diverse paths that aim to attain divine wisdom through *Kashf*, or unveiling. Over time, Sufi methodologies have been influenced by and integrated with philosophical traditions from India, Persia and Greece.²¹² Within this multifaceted framework, the experiences of six participants revealed various intersections between Sufi concepts and broader spiritual teachings.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

There is a relationship between the spiritual techniques that I was practising and Sufi concepts. When I read *Talbīs Iblīs*, I realised that Sufi and esoteric concepts are repackaged through spiritual ideas. For example, spiritual teachers like Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid and Wayne Dyer used to tell us to unite with collective consciousness, cosmic consciousness or the universe. According to them, our consciousness should be prepared to accept the cosmic consciousness, or open for the cosmic consciousness to dwell in it – (Dalal).

In response to a question regarding her understanding of uniting with the universe or cosmic consciousness dwelling in our consciousness, the participant responded:

²¹² See *Al-Mawsū'a al-Muyassara fī al-'Adyān wa al-Madhāhib wa al-'Ahzāb al-Mu'āṣira*, 1/249.

No. As a trainer, I spoke extensively about the universe and the effect it can have on us until one attendee asked: what is the universe? To be honest, I did not expect such a question and did not have an answer. Consequently, I searched in depth to find that the hidden meaning of the word ‘universe’ in this context referred to the divine, which conflicts with my religious beliefs ... For this reason, spiritual teachers do not explicitly suggest uniting with the divine. Instead, they talk about unity with cosmic consciousness or collective consciousness – (Dalal).

I once believed that the entire universe was one and that we are all connected by energy. I believed that meditation would lead to me realising the truth: that Allah resides within me. Despite this, I did not fully understand the meanings of these concepts until much later because they were not clearly explained. [Spiritual] trainers would discuss topics such as the balance of the universe, as we did with the *Salām* group [a spiritual group] when we practised living in harmony with the universe. A spiritual teacher gave me the Sufī book of *Mathnawī* and directed me to read it to raise my awareness. I was also instructed to read books by Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Ḥallāj, which were unavailable in Saudi Arabia and were to be sent to me by specific online accounts. In all three [spiritual] groups I joined, we read and discussed *The Forty Rules of Love*. The members admired and adhered to its ideas – (Wisam).

In response to the question of whether she sees a connection between spiritual teachings and Sufī concepts, the participant replied as follows:

Yes, these people [spiritual adherents] value Sufī teachings and they often become Sufīs themselves. With Sufīs, they share the idea of sacralising the self, uniting with God and practising meditation and solitude. They also tend to rely on experience more than *Naql* (scriptures) – (Wisam).

My sister, who is an energy healer, attended a course on telepathy in which the coach recited and blew on the attendees’ perfumes and rings to bless them with his energy,

which was believed to bring happiness and fulfil desires. According to the trainer, the energy in the perfumes would only last three months. After this incident, which my sister referred to as “witchcraft”, she stopped attending similar courses because she felt silly attending them. What the coach did reflects the claims of Sufi *Shuyūkh* (Sufi guides) who claim to provide *Barakah* (blessings) to their disciplines ... In my opinion, some Sunnīs who used to reject Sufism and mock their superstitions are now practising Sufism without knowing it, under different names, such as the practices of energy – (Lama).

There may be a collective energy that unites the entire universe and all entities. Despite my belief in this idea, I am unsure how to express it. As you connect with yourself, your true self becomes clear and neutral ... You reach the peak of your energy when you feel connected to the universe and reach your truth. Ideally, people should be connected to everything around them – (Karima).

The Reiki course I attended in Jeddah was so strange and crazy that I laugh at myself whenever I think about it. It involved closing our eyes and saying “*Sunn*”. While doing this, I recall imagining circles within circles, through which I could reach union with the universe. In this exercise, we were trying to unite with the whole universe. Our mantra would be: the universe and I are united, but the union never occurred (Laughter) ... [spiritual] teachers are too wise to use phrases such as “unite with Allah”; they have never done so because society would not accept them. Instead, they taught us to become one with energy or with the universe, and I later found out that they were talking about God – (Muna).

In another course in Lebanon, the participant described the following experience:

My greatest concern in the *Dār al-Salām* centre was Nour’s comments about a religion she calls *Dīn al-Wiḥda* (religion of unity). According to her, this religion not only unites other religions but also unites us all with the universe. She compared *Dīn al-Wiḥda* to a

tree that unites all religions and said that the other religions were leaves of the tree. Regardless of our religion, we all sat together and prayed to the universe during the course. At that time, I followed the instructions and agreed with everything they said. I was united with everything – (Muna).

Though I was sceptical of the Sufī beliefs of *Ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *Ittiḥād* (union) in the past, I eventually embraced the idea that Allah’s energy is infused into human beings. However, it never occurred to me that it represented the Sufī doctrine of *Ḥulūl*. It appeared to me as the light of Allah. I am not sure how I came to believe I could charge myself with Allah’s energy. I made no connection to *Ḥulūl* or *Ittiḥād* at all ... The teachers spoke about the idea that ‘Allah’s energy is everywhere’, but society’s and my own ignorance of its dimensions made the statement acceptable. We did not know it represented the belief of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Even though teachers and doctors were among the course attendees, no one criticised such expressions. It was introduced as if it were a reference to Allah’s mercy. I don’t know how they explained it in a way that made it acceptable. It was only later that I realised these concepts were philosophical or doctrinal – (Malak).

Summary and Analysis:

In this study, six participants identified a nuanced relationship between spiritual and Sufī teachings, highlighting the fluid boundaries between contemporary spirituality and religious mysticism. This is particularly noteworthy in a context deeply rooted in Sunnī tradition, which emphasises the absolute transcendence and uniqueness of God (*Tawḥīd*).

The concept of ‘sacralisation of the self’, as articulated through phrases like ‘Allah resides within me’, suggests a belief in human transcendence towards divinity. This notion stands in tension with traditional Sunnī teachings that caution against any beliefs or practices that might compromise the fundamental tenet of *Tawḥīd*. The notion that humans could possess divine

qualities or be 'sacralised' is potentially problematic, if not heretical, from a Sunnī perspective. Sunnī tradition often maintains a clear distinction between the Creator and the created, viewing any ideas that blur this line with suspicion. Al-Nafjān's observation that spiritualists and Sufīs share the doctrine of '*al-Insān al-Kāmil*' (the perfect human) adds another layer of complexity: 'spiritualists, Sufīs and many *Bāṭinī* sects share the doctrine of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (the person who has reached perfection) and believe that humans have a form of divinity that brings them closer to perfection'.²¹³ This doctrine suggests that humans can aspire to a form of perfection through self-awareness and divine connection.

Moreover, the popularity of Sufī literature among spiritual circles suggests a form of cultural negotiation. Works like *Mathnawī* and those of Ibn 'Arabī and al-Ḥallāj are recommended not just as religious texts but as guides to spiritual enlightenment.²¹⁴ The novel 'The Forty Rules of Love', which explores Sufī themes, enjoys particular popularity among spiritual circles. This indicates a strategic adaptation of Sufī teachings to resonate with a broader audience. There seems to be a tendency for some individuals who initially identify as spiritual seekers to later explore Sufism. This pattern could be indicative of the porous boundaries between spirituality and Sufism, allowing for a fluid transition that may be facilitated by the shared themes and teachings. It also raises questions about the role of Sufī literature and concepts in shaping individual perspectives, potentially serving as a gateway to deeper religious or mystical explorations.

Interestingly, the language employed by spiritual teachers appears designed to avoid societal backlash. Phrases like 'become one with energy' and 'live in harmony with the universe' serve as euphemisms for more theologically loaded Sufī concepts like *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (unity of

²¹³ Al-Nafjān, '*Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha*', 434 - 435.

²¹⁴ Al-Ḥallāj, a Persian Sufi teacher, actively sought out those who could teach him the Ṣūfī way in Baghdad. During his travels, he ventured to India, Turkistan and China, where he expanded his knowledge to include magic. However, his thoughts and actions were met with deep suspicion by both civil and religious authorities. Specifically, his declaration of '*Anā al-Ḥaqq*' (I am the Truth, i.e., God) led to allegations that he had claimed divinity and was consequently executed. (See J.W. Fiegenbaum, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2022), 'Ḥallāj'. Available: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Hallaj> (Accessed 22 Jan 2023), and see al-Nafjān, '*Alāqat al-Taṣawwuf al-Falsafī bi al-Rūḥāniyya al-Ḥadītha*', 59-61.

existence), *Hulūl* (incarnation), and *Ittiḥād* (unification). This linguistic strategy reveals an acute awareness of societal and religious sensitivities, which could act as barriers to the acceptance of these spiritual concepts.

Furthermore, the use of Islamic terminology in spiritual concepts, such as ‘Allah resides within me’ or ‘Allah’s energy is everywhere’, makes the Sufi elements more explicit. This ‘Islamisation’ of spiritual language likely clarifies the Sufi aspects for both scholars and the general populace in Saudi Arabia, while also highlighting the evolving nature of religious and spiritual discourse in the region.

In summary, the participants’ experiences reveal a complex interplay between spiritual and Sufi teachings. This not only enriches our understanding of contemporary spiritual practices but also prompts critical inquiry into how these teachings attempt to manage the tension between Sunni theological principles and individual spiritual empowerment.

- **Esoteric Elements**

Esoteric orientations, as defined by Saucier and Skrzypińska, encompass a range of beliefs and practices that are ‘metaphysical, contemplative, oriented to knowledge, wisdom, and unification with divinity, and toward the spirit and not the letter of religious teachings’.²¹⁵ In this study, three participants explicitly referred to esoteric elements, using both the English term ‘esoteric’ and its Arabic counterpart ‘*Bāṭiniyya*’, when discussing spiritual concepts and practices they have embraced. While some participants labelled certain principles as esoteric, others revealed that they had acquired specific concepts from esoteric groups they had joined.²¹⁶

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

Following my passionate interest in human development courses for five years, particularly the principles of energy and the law of attraction, I discovered that these

²¹⁵ Saucier and Skrzypińska, ‘Spiritual But Not Religious?’.

²¹⁶ These groups, as participants described them, are private groups that offer both spiritual and esoteric teachings.

concepts go back to *Bāṭiniyya* (esoteric) philosophies and religions. Most of these practices are taken from ancient traditions that are revived, renewed and then presented to the Western world in the form of alternative contemporary spirituality – (Malak).

A member of *Salām* group [a spiritual group] invited me to join a group called “esoteric”. I joined with a passion to learn, but I found myself entering mud; it was not an official group on the ground and its members met on WhatsApp with the group leaders in Lebanon, who often sent books from Lebanon and advised us to read them. The main concept they emphasised was to live the experience and to try everything. As they believed that heaven was on the ground, they encouraged a life without restrictions for anything, even in sexual relationships. I started to question this group when their coach encouraged me to engage in sexual experiences. I also read a book that was sent from Lebanon that I could not finish because it represented sex in a bad way. I felt everything was wrong about this group and that I was heading down the wrong path – (Wisam).

I was introduced to a Syrian man living in Saudi Arabia, who called himself “the father of esoteric”. This man, whom I believe was not a Muslim, offered an esoteric course on Karma that included teachings conflicting with Islamic beliefs. He described Allah as a consciousness that does not have a *Dhāt* (essence) and emphasised that the Qur’an we have before us is distorted and that the true Qur’an, which he called “*Dhikr*”, was transmitted secretly and orally. The teacher did not believe in the afterlife in its Islamic sense. Instead, he provided a completely different meaning that states that an afterlife of each person was their merging with the divine. This was based on Karma and reincarnation philosophies. The true meaning of worship, according to him, was mental and spiritual states. He introduced numerology but refused to give me a book on the topic, stating that my consciousness was not ready to receive such deep knowledge. However, he introduced the spiritual meanings of some numbers. He also claimed that sorcery was scientific like physics and chemistry. When I argued against his teachings and clarified their conflict with my belief, he said I didn’t need to leave Islam, particularly at

that stage ... The esoteric courses were held in a computer centre in the evenings. When the computer centre was closed, it becomes a centre that offers secret and unauthorised esoteric courses – (Dalal).

This participant then introduced her views on esoteric books and principles:

While reading the esoteric books, I felt that I had put myself in danger and that what was written in the books was extremely wrong, so I began to fear for myself and started to write prayers for God to save me on the pages I was reading ... When I read *Talbīs Iblīs*, I realised that Sufī and esoteric concepts are repackaged through spiritual ideas – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

In this study, three out of 11 participants acknowledged their engagement with esoteric elements, referring to them as '*Bāṭiniyya*' in Arabic and 'esoteric' in English. These participants indicated that several spiritual concepts, including energy and the law of attraction, have their origins in *Bāṭiniyya* philosophies. This observation aligns with Hayfā' al-Rashīd's assertion that 'contemporary spirituality is a movement that has taken up and modernised *Bāṭiniyya* (esoteric), Sufī and Eastern beliefs'.²¹⁷ This not only suggests a shared lineage among these various spiritual and philosophical traditions but also highlights the enduring influence of *Bāṭiniyya* philosophies on contemporary spirituality.

During the course of the research, two participants who were members of esoteric groups revealed striking similarities in their experiences. Both groups operated unofficially and without authorisation, conducting online or clandestine meetings at a computer education centre in Saudi Arabia. The teachings of these groups diverged significantly from mainstream Islamic beliefs. For instance, they posited that God is not an entity with essence but a form of

²¹⁷ al-Rashīd, *al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 11.

consciousness, and that the afterlife involves merging with this divine consciousness rather than facing reward or punishment. These teachings also advocated for a life free from restrictions.

From a Sunnī perspective, these teachings could be viewed as highly controversial, if not heretical, as they challenge fundamental Islamic tenets. Such ideological conflict led the participants to disassociate from the groups. This tension raises intriguing questions about the efforts to relate or align esoteric beliefs with mainstream Sunnī traditional teachings, particularly given the often skeptical or even critical stance that Sunnī teachings may have towards esoteric elements. This also sheds light on why such teachings are kept under wraps; their public dissemination would likely be met with strong resistance given the prevailing Salafī Islamic ideology in Saudi Arabia.

- **Occult Knowledge**

According to Vincett and Woodhead, the term ‘occult’ pertains to matters that are concealed or shrouded in secrecy. It often encompasses supernatural beliefs and practices and is commonly associated with societies that offer esoteric or magical knowledge to their members.²¹⁸ In this study, four participants broached the subject of the occult when discussing their engagement with various spiritual concepts and practices. Their accounts ranged from personal experiences and beliefs to anecdotal stories they had heard.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

While I was doing an energy session, I saw a white light coming out of me and I imagined things that later came true ... I have always said that I have an overactive imagination – (Malak).

²¹⁸ See Vincett and Woodhead, ‘Spirituality’, 341.

I believed that my nephews were illusions; that they didn't exist unless they appeared before me—only then did they become real. After a while, I felt that this idea conflicted with reason and logic. I mean, why did I consider my nephews to be non-existent? What if they considered me unreal? Whose mind or consciousness would overcome the other? ... I believe that either Jinn is involved with certain practices, or that these practices separate one's mind from reality and people begin to believe in and see things that are not real – (Dalal).

My sister's behaviour changed after she joined energy healing groups: she expressed everything strangely and acted very detached from reality. She linked colours to sounds and future events and said my cat's eye colour referred to a hidden meaning. Later, she claimed that her son was not her son, but rather someone possessed by a spirit. She believed spirits move around and that certain places have the power and energy to separate us spiritually. She believed that her energy healers would harm her because she had a contract with them. When her healer accessed her subconscious mind, she became detached from her physical body in energy sessions. She believed that there is a third eye that is affected by colours. In desperation, my family and I investigated whether she was taking drugs and took her to therapy, where a therapist explained that her brain had been affected by a shock or traumatic experience. It was evident that she was detached from reality, and her symptoms were like those of psychosis: she hated her husband, she was afraid of her son and she viewed her family as her enemies – (Ekram).

The participant then described how she dealt with the energy healers who she claimed had harmed her sister:

I complained about those swindlers to the police and *Hay'at al-'Amr bi al-Ma'rūf wa al-Nahī 'an al-Munkar* (the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice). Then, I contacted the general investigation number and informed them that my sister was communicating with swindlers both within and outside the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia. In the end, I consulted a lawyer who suggested that I should sue the energy healers who had caused significant harm to my sister, but I only contacted and threatened them with legal action if they tried to contact her. All I wanted was to make sure that no one would call her again – (Ekram).

I met a person who said that whenever she wanted to make a decision, she heard voices talking to her. There is something weird about these practices ... whether in meditation, aura cleansing or salt baths. In a course on Feng Shui, a trainer said that if we focus on specific matters, we will call out the Jinn. Several things made me feel there was something wrong with this thought [spiritual teachings], such as when a Russian person said that he saw dwarfs in the forest and that when we focus on the Chakras between the eyes, we will see dwarfs. Who are the dwarfs? Does he mean the Jinn? (laughter) – (Wisam)

In response to further questions concerning spiritual mediation or communication with other worlds, the participant stated:

My idol, the trainer who treated me when my father passed away spoke about such topics. When I told him about a vision that I had where I saw myself as a wife of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, he said to me that he could reach the time of the Prophet by meditating or time travelling. Then, he said that it is possible that I was the Prophet's wife in a different world, and that men may be forbidden to me. At first, I believed in every single word he said, but I later discovered that this was a very dangerous interpretation of my dream – (Wisam).

Summary and Analysis:

Four participants delved into various aspects of the occult, covering a wide array of topics such as the illusory nature of human existence, spirit possessions, phenomena like white light

emanating from the body and even experiences like hearing voices or encountering supernatural beings like dwarfs. These discussions also touched on more speculative ideas like parallel universes and time travel.

While some participants may have initially been intrigued by these experiences, all expressed reservations and concerns as they delved deeper into the subject matter. One participant, for instance, began to question her belief in the idea that human existence is merely an illusion. Another expressed concerns about the existence of supernatural entities like dwarfs. A particularly alarming account came from a participant who described her sister's deteriorating mental health due to her involvement in practices like energy healing, which led the family to seek help from authorities. This suggests that the sister's fears were likely rooted in concerns about occult or spiritual harm, given the intensity of her paranoia and its impact on her mental well-being. Overall, the participants' discussions revealed a palpable sense of unease, likely stemming from the mysterious and often unpredictable nature of the occult. This discomfort may also be attributed to a general lack of understanding of the supernatural and its potential consequences.

Given the prevailing Sunnī norms in Saudi Arabia, these occult practices may not only be at odds with traditional Islamic teachings but could also be considered taboo or even forbidden. This divergence underscores the complexities and potential risks involved in engaging with the occult within a predominantly Sunnī context.

- **Parapsychological Activities**

Parapsychology is defined by Samī Mūṣlī as the 'the study of strange phenomena that transcend conventional scientific understanding, encompassing the paranormal, the unfamiliar and the ostensibly unreasonable, while striving for logical and scientific explanations'.²¹⁹ Within the

²¹⁹ Samī al-Muṣlī, *Parapsychology: Ḍawāḥir wa Tafṣīrāt* (Parapsychology: Phenomena and Interpretations) (Amman: Dār Dijla, 2014), 32.

context of this study, six participants touched upon parapsychological elements such as telepathy, out-of-body experiences and psychokinesis while discussing their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I believe telepathy could work – (Karima).

I studied telepathy and practised it – (Malak).

My sister practised out-of-body experiences with her coach – (Ekram).

I studied telepathy and psychokinesis [mind over matter]. During the class, the coach practised telepathy with an attendee by sending and receiving mental messages while in different rooms – (Wisam).

I believe in telepathy, which is the ability to send thoughts and messages or share feelings between people. If you think about someone a lot, they will think of you in return or see you in their dreams. Similarly, if you hate someone, you don't just hate them randomly. Rather, it means that they did something bad to you – (Maram).

My sister, who is an energy healer, attended a course on telepathy in which the coach recited and blew on the attendees' perfumes and rings to bless them with his energy, which was believed to bring happiness and fulfil desires. According to the trainer, the energy in the perfumes would only last three months. After this incident, which my sister referred to as "witchcraft", she stopped attending similar courses because she felt silly attending them – (Lama).

Summary and Analysis:

In this study, six participants discussed their involvement with parapsychological activities, which spanned a variety of practices, beliefs and readings. Although they were open about their experiences, they did not divulge too much detail about their personal journeys in this area. One participant's story serves as a telling example: her sister joined a telepathy course and was introduced to the idea of 'cosmic energy' as a force that could be transferred between people. However, when she discovered that this energy could also be stored in physical objects like perfumes and rings, she abruptly withdrew from the course, labeling it as 'witchcraft'. The participant's decision to distance herself from this form of knowledge can be seen as a protective measure, influenced by mainstream societal and religious norms. The inclusion of these phenomena in the participants' spiritual narratives not only broadens the scope of what is considered 'spiritual' but also introduces complex considerations relating to how we evaluate and interpret the validity or legitimacy of such experiences, especially within the context of prevailing religious and cultural norms.

- **Neuro-linguistic Programing (NLP)**

As previously discussed, Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) is described by Hayfā' al-Rashīd as a technique aimed at human development, facilitating changes in thought and behaviour by engaging the unconscious mind.²²⁰ In the context of this study, four participants discussed their experiences with NLP when prompted to share insights into their spiritual journeys.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I read books on NLP by 'Ibrāhīm al-Faqī – (Wisam).

I watched 'Ibrāhīm al-Faqī NLP episodes on TV channels – (Dalal).

²²⁰ See al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 419 cf. 430.

I took the first level of the NLP diploma, which was basically communication skills, but the advert that promoted the course was exaggerated. Overstated promises were made, such as “the key to controlling the world”, and how to know what others are thinking. Later, I heard that advanced levels of NLP include topics related to *Shirk* (association with God) – (Arwa).

I took all the levels of NLP courses. They were based on an emphasis on the unconscious mind and its control over humans, especially at the advanced levels of the course, not the early ones. One of the exercises that we learned in the advanced course was how to separate pain from the human body. If you had pain in your stomach or leg, there was a technique to separate the pain and keep it away. I applied this technique to a friend whose ear was hurting her. I removed the pain by removing her ear through the unconscious mind. The girl came back the other day saying she could not hear. It was a scary moment: playing with these matters is dangerous. Even though I may have benefited from the administrative aspect of NLP in my work, my issue with NLP is the significance it gives to the unconscious mind over the conscious mind. I mean, how would I appreciate the unconscious mind over the conscious when God has distinguished humans by their conscious minds? What is the difference between humans, animals or other creatures other than being conscious? So why would I try to raise the value of the unconscious mind? – (Muna).

Summary and Analysis:

In this study, four participants shared their varied experiences with Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), from watching TV shows and reading books to attending in-person courses. A notable observation was the difference in content between introductory and advanced NLP courses. One participant, who attended only the introductory course, described it as primarily focused on ‘communication skills’. In contrast, another participant who advanced to higher-level courses

found them to be more concerned with ‘the unconscious mind and its influence over human behaviour’. This shift in focus from communication to more spiritual or esoteric elements at advanced levels suggests a nuanced approach to introducing spiritual elements in NLP, particularly in a Saudi context where traditional Sunnī teachings may not easily accommodate such practices. Kurdī elaborates on this approach by stating that ‘NLP courses starts with seemingly neutral techniques but gradually introduces more complex and potentially controversial topics like transcendental meditation and energy concepts, eventually delving into Buddhist and Taoist beliefs’.²²¹ According to Kurdī, this incremental approach serves to mitigate societal backlash by easing attendees into the more esoteric aspects of the programme.²²² This suggests that the gradual unveiling of the course’s more esoteric or spiritual elements is a way to mitigate potential societal backlash, especially from those who might be skeptical due to religious or cultural reasons. This strategy allows participants to explore deeper aspects of the course without immediate external opposition, a point that will be further discussed.

- **Timeline Therapy**

Timeline therapy is a therapeutic approach that focuses on how individuals encode and store memories, offering techniques to interact with and modify these memory ‘timelines’.²²³ In this study, four participants brought up the concept of Timeline Therapy in various contexts when discussing their spiritual experiences.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

²²¹ Fowz Kurdī, *Ḥaqīqat al-Barmaja al-Lughawiyya al-‘Aṣabiyya: al-‘Usūl, al-Madhāmin, al-Mukhrajāt* (*The Reality of Neuro Linguistic Programing: Origins, Contents and Outputs*) (2004), 30. Available:

https://archive.org/details/20200222_20200222_1407/page/n29/mode/2up?view=theater (Accessed 23 March 2021).

²²² See *Ibid.*, 32.

²²³ See Tad James and Wyatt Woodsmall, *Timeline Therapy and the Basis of Personality*, (Wales: Crown House Publishing, 1988), 10.

I attended a course on timeline therapy, but I was not very convinced as I didn't quite understand the technique – (Arwa).

I studied timeline therapy and used it to treat a colleague who had a phobia of heights because her child fell from the third floor and died in front of her. The method aimed to recreate the script of the original traumatic event, which included the child falling in front of his mother, blood, screaming and fear. All these points must be removed from the patient's memory, or crowded out by something else. I made a new scenario as if I was making a new acting scene to replace the previous one that was embedded in her mind. The new scene should be sweet, happy and comedic. While her eyes were closed, I asked her to imagine her child looking down at her wearing safety pillows and jumping from above while laughing as if he was playing on a trampoline. When she opened her eyes, she felt comfortable and was cured. Then I realised that timeline therapy was pseudoscience and that I should not be dealing with it. My interpretation of the impressive results is that they may have been caused by a demonic possession that has ceased ... Since I was interested in the story of Tom Cruise, an American Actor who converted to Scientology, an offshoot of Judaism that aims to attract followers, I identified a resemblance between timeline therapy and Scientology. Then I started to think, which one influenced the other? – (Lama).

The timeline technique aims to change an idea in one's mind by turning them into a humorous situation . The problem with this method is that it does not cure the problem but denies it and continues to do this until it explodes. This is, of course, not the best way to cope with difficulties. How would a psychological trauma be treated by scribbling out the mental picture I have in my mind and turning it into a funny one? Does imagining a person with a rabbit's ear cure my phobia? In psychology, problems that are denied will reappear one way or another and may harm a person because they have not been treated. For example, repeating phrases like 'I'm happy' is not the

right way to deal with sadness. Instead, I should admit my suffering and then treat it—then I'll become happy – (Dalal).

In an NLP course, the trainer made a timeline exercise that I found terrifying. The exercise began with everyone defining their timeline, standing on it and then stepping away from their timeline to the right or left. I swear that the moment I moved away from my timeline I felt as if I had fallen. To this day I always remember that moment. It was very heavy. During the whole exercise, we were controlled by our unconscious minds. Some attendees fell and fainted during this exercise. Therefore, I believe that allocating control to the unconscious mind is dangerous – (Muna).

Summary and Analysis:

In this study, four participants discussed their engagement with Timeline Therapy, revealing a spectrum of experiences that ranged from superficial engagement to more in-depth understanding. The level of comprehension appeared to be correlated with the extent of the courses or training they had undergone. While one participant, who attended only a single session, found the content difficult to grasp, the other three who had more extensive exposure provided nuanced insights. Their experiences ranged from studying the technique to practicing it in groups and using it to treat phobias.

Interestingly, despite their deeper understanding, all three of these participants evaluated Timeline Therapy negatively. One labelled it as pseudoscientific, although she acknowledged some perceived benefits, which she speculated might be due to the therapeutic effects of discussing problems openly. Another participant criticised the technique for encouraging denial rather than confrontation of issues, emphasising the importance of facing one's challenges. The third participant raised safety concerns, cautioning that the technique's heavy reliance on the unconscious mind could lead to decisions made without conscious thought or consideration. This

collective skepticism among participants who had firsthand experience with Timeline Therapy raises questions about its efficacy and safety, particularly given its focus on the unconscious mind. It also suggests that while the technique may offer some immediate relief or insight, it may not provide a sustainable or safe solution for addressing deeper psychological issues.

- **Graphology**

Graphology is the practice of analysing handwriting to assess various aspects of an individual's personality, attitude, skills and potential.²²⁴ Within the context of this study, two participants discussed their encounters with graphology as a component of their broader spiritual experiences.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

I attended a course on graphology thinking it was related to psychology, my major, to later find out that it was not – (Wisam).

I attended an introductory course on graphology. As impressive as the course was, I objected to the ethics of graphology. I mean, by what right is people's handwriting interpreted without their permission? Then, their characteristics are analysed ridiculously. Another problem was that individuals accept the analytics as certain rather than seeing them as subject to right and wrong. All this did not fit my values, so I stopped studying graphology. After a while, graphology gained popularity in the country, and when a relative attended a course on it, I decided to take the course to understand it better even though I had some reservations about it. It was fascinating, I kept the booklet and began analysing my relatives' handwriting. However, after a

²²⁴ See Carla Dazzi and Luigi Pedrabissi, 'Graphology and Personality: An Empirical Study on Validity of Handwriting Analysis', *Psychological Reports*, 105 (2009): 1255 - 1268.

while, I started to notice that the results of people's handwriting analyses were similar, so I started to doubt my ability to analyse and lost interest in the technique – (Lama).

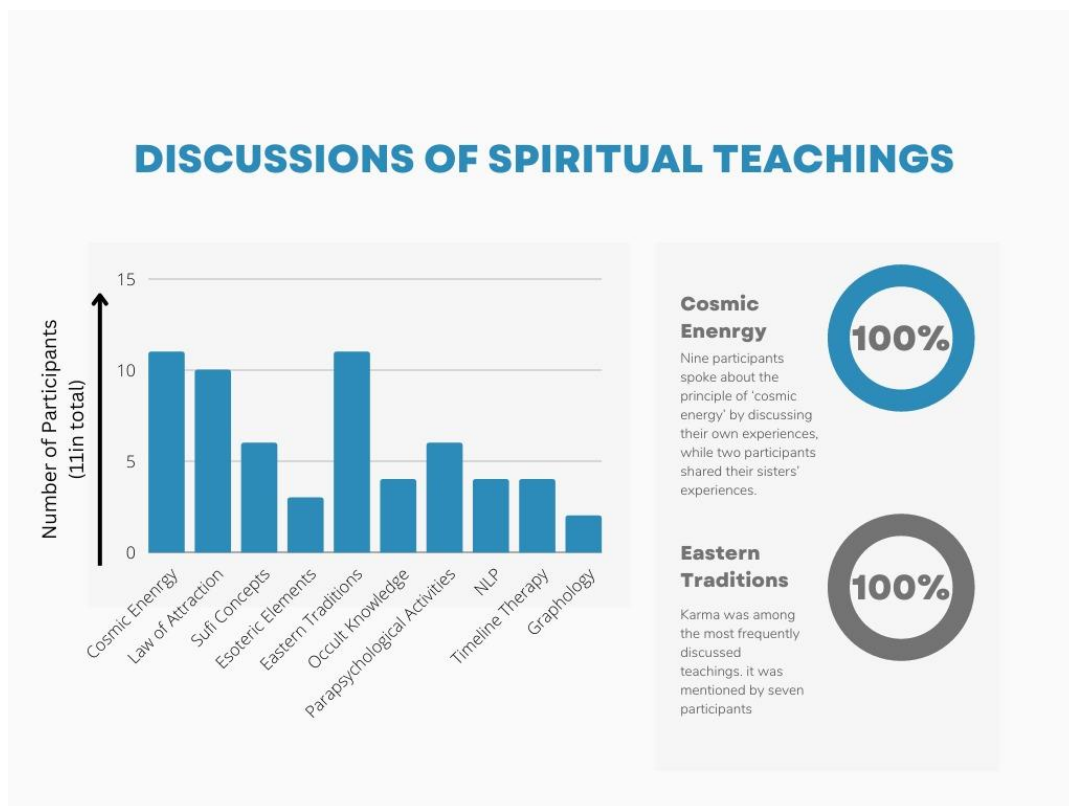
Summary and Analysis:

In this study, two participants shared differing perspectives on graphology based on their respective experiences with the practice. The first participant, who attended only one course, initially believed graphology to be a psychological discipline, only to find out that it wasn't. The second participant, who took multiple courses, raised ethical concerns about the practice. Specifically, she questioned the trainer's request for attendees to bring samples of their husbands' handwriting for analysis, as well as the definitive nature of the interpretations provided. Her reservations seemed to focus more on the ethical implications and the trainer's integrity rather than the validity of graphology itself. This led her to re-enroll in the course with a more critical perspective. She was particularly concerned about the potential misuse of handwriting analysis to predict individuals' traits and tendencies without their consent, viewing this as an ethical lapse and an invasion of privacy.

The contrasting experiences of the two participants highlight the role that depth of engagement plays in shaping perspectives on spiritual practices. The participant with more extensive exposure had a nuanced understanding of the ethical dimensions of the technique, which likely stems from her broader experience with various scenarios and applications. This highlights the significance of critical and ethical considerations concerning such practices, especially within a cultural milieu where traditional Sunnī beliefs might encompass distinct ethical guidelines that could intersect with these techniques.

- **Conclusion of Eclectic Teachings of Contemporary Spirituality**

The findings of this study reveal a complex tapestry of spiritual teachings and practices among the participants, encompassing a wide array from cosmic energy and Eastern traditions to Sufi concepts, esoteric elements, occult knowledge, parapsychology, NLP, timeline therapy and graphology (see graph 3.2). This diversity manifests as a form of eclecticism and syncretism, where participants selectively engage with practices based on their ideological alignment and perceived practical utility. Such selective engagement adds a layer of complexity and personalisation to an already diverse spiritual landscape. Consequently, the spiritual terrain becomes a patchwork of various beliefs and practices, often lacking a uniform or disciplined approach, which can lead to confusion.



Graph 3.2: Participants' discussions of spiritual teachings.

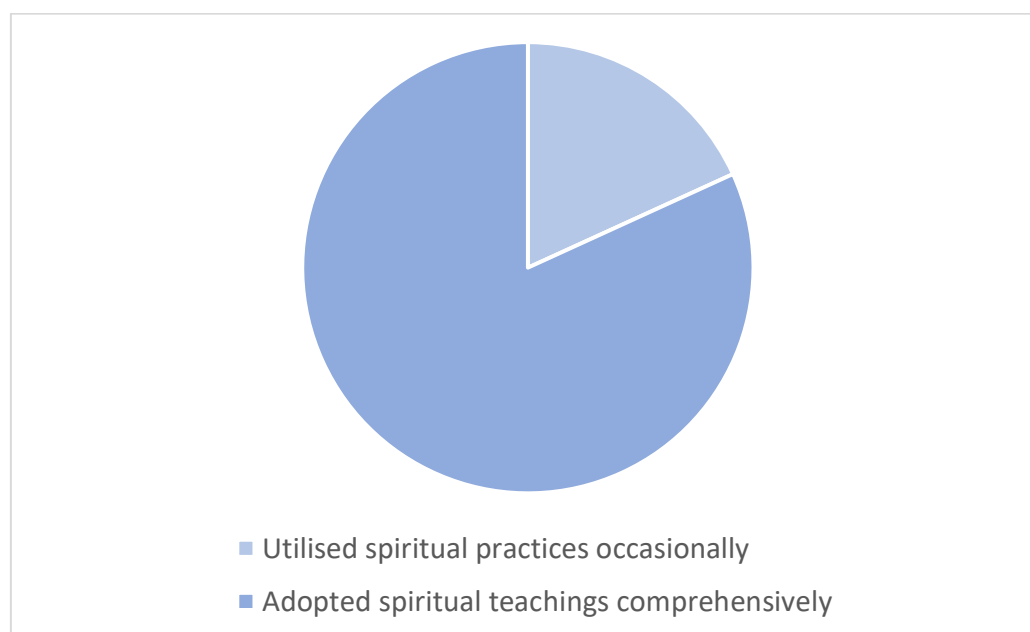
The study reveals that contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia is influenced by globalisation, incorporating both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. The West, in particular, has been instrumental in introducing Eastern spiritual philosophies to Saudi society, suggesting a blending of Eastern and Western elements. This synthesis indicates that contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia is a complex, global phenomenon with implications that extend beyond the nation's borders.

From a Sunnī Islamic perspective, the syncretism observed in these spiritual practices can be perceived as an intrusion into Islamic concepts. This is particularly evident when considering how contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia has been influenced by ideas from outside the Islamic context. These ideas are introduced, adapted or 'Islamised' to fit within the existing Sunnī Islamic framework in Saudi Arabia, a point that will be further discussed. This act of adaptation is not merely a neutral process but is shaped by the prevailing cultural and religious norms, highlighting the socially constructed nature of spiritual knowledge. This adaptability underscores the fluidity of spiritual practices, emphasising their openness to global influences and further complicating the spiritual landscape in Saudi Arabia.

The study also underscores the subtle integration of Sufī concepts into mainstream Sunnī societies in Saudi Arabia. Participants often embrace these spiritual beliefs without recognising their Sufī origins, a phenomenon largely attributed to the contemporary framing and presentation of these concepts. Instead of being introduced explicitly as Sufī teachings, which might face resistance due to historical tensions between Sunnī beliefs and Sufism, these concepts are often rebranded with modern terminologies or presented under a different guise. This approach makes them more palatable and easily assimilated into the Sunnī belief systems. The renaming or rephrasing of these concepts not only disassociates them from their original context but also emphasises the power of language and framing in spiritual discourse. It suggests that the acceptance of spiritual ideas is influenced not just by their core essence but also by their packaging and presentation.

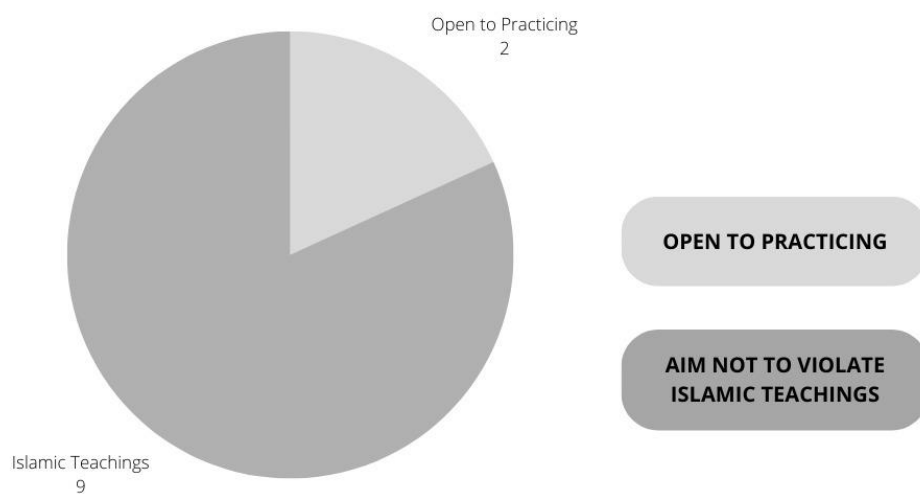
Participants' engagement with spiritual teachings has shown significant variability, influenced by personal interests and the eras in which they were introduced to these teachings. For example, during the early 2000s, respondents predominantly mentioned NLP and macrobiotics. In contrast, later decades saw a rise in the popularity of the law of attraction, Karma, meditation and Yoga. This evolution in spiritual practices over time mirrors the discussions in the second chapter about the prevalence of various spiritual traditions in Saudi society at different times. The shifts in spiritual inclinations can be attributed to the region's increasing globalisation, introducing individuals to diverse spiritual traditions from across the globe. Hence, it's crucial to factor in individual agency and the broader context when analysing the adoption and adaptation of these spiritual practices.

Additionally, the depth of engagement with spiritual practices among participants varied. As depicted in Graph 3.3, while some had a superficial interaction, others deeply integrated these practices into their daily routines and life aspects. This deep engagement was often driven by a desire for personal growth and emotional healing, indicating the profound impact of spiritual teachings on participants' emotional, physical and social facets. This underscores contemporary spirituality's potency in influencing individual behaviours and choices.



Graph 3.3: Level of engagement with spiritual teachings.

Participants in this study explored a range of physical and philosophical concepts linked to contemporary spirituality. The philosophical aspect mainly aims to understand existence, the meaning of life and its relation to beings, moving beyond traditional religious frameworks. While they showed interest in various spiritual traditions, they were careful to ensure they didn't conflict with Islamic teachings (see graph 3.4).



Graph 3.4: Participants' engagement with Spiritual teachings.

Yet, Interviews revealed that this form of spirituality might have adverse religious implications for its adherents. Many participants, perhaps inadvertently, embraced certain philosophies, likely influenced by the way modern spirituality is presented, making it more palatable within a Saudi Sunnī setting. Concepts like 'the sacralisation of the self' and 'the union with God' were introduced, suggesting a divine essence within humans. This clashed with Islamic Sunnī beliefs, a sentiment further emphasised by phrases like 'Allah resides within me'. The law of attraction, attributing divine powers to humans, was another point of contention. Recognising these conflicts, some participants distanced themselves from such teachings, believing that certain features and powers belong exclusively to God.

Concepts like Karma and the law of attraction brought feelings of anxiety and self-blame, particularly as they placed the burden of life events on individuals. This highlights the emotional and psychological challenges of navigating spiritual practices. As depicted in graph 3.5, many faced hurdles in their spiritual journey, with some ceasing their practices due to conflicts with Islamic beliefs or doubts about the scientific validity of teachings. The integration of these spiritual concepts in Saudi society, especially against the backdrop of Islamic teachings, underscores the tension between spiritual exploration and religious adherence. Given these intricacies, there's a clear need for further research to understand the effects of spirituality from both religious and psychological perspectives.



Graph 3.5: Participant engagement with spiritual teachings at present.

In summary, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the eclectic spiritual landscape in contemporary Saudi Arabia. It raises critical questions about the social, ethical and epistemological implications of these practices, especially within a predominantly Sunnī context. The findings suggest a need for further research to explore these complexities and their broader implications for spirituality and Islamic religion in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter IV: The Use of Contemporary Spirituality in Saudi Arabia: A Critical Analysis

The previous chapter revealed the first theme of the empirical study, the *Eclectic Teachings of Contemporary Spirituality*. The teachings utilised by the participants included physical techniques and philosophical concepts regarding the divine, the nature of the universe, the essence of existence and its correlation with beings. These meanings are grounded in a framework that did not rely on traditional organised religion forms. The spread of these concepts in Saudi Arabia raises the question of how and why they arrived and were accepted by a society that is unusually conservative in its attitude towards religion. Some may argue that Saudi Arabian society has become more open in recent years and thus more susceptible to external influences at every level of society. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, the spread of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia did not begin recently but decades ago, when the society rejected other views, beliefs and forms of religious beliefs.

A single cause cannot explain a social phenomenon that has persisted for decades, as factors often overlap and influence each other. Several participants identified reasons related to the spread of this phenomenon in general, while others highlighted reasons that were particularly appealing to them. In this section, I will address the second research question: What factors contributed to the rapid growth and use of contemporary spirituality? The factors mentioned by participants led to identifying three themes: *Repackaged Spirituality*, *Participants' Conditions*, and *Multiple Authorities*.

Theme One – Repackaged Spirituality

The first theme title, *Repackaged Spirituality*, is inspired by Sutcliffe and Bowman's definition of spirituality as a 'repackaging of popular and vernacular religion to suit the peculiar conditions of

industrial and post-industrial societies'.²²⁵ As has been demonstrated, contemporary spirituality often repackages, reshapes and tailors its elements to fit the culture in which it is practised, often leading to their acceptance. Participants discussed this theme as one factor influencing their engagement with spiritual teachings. According to them, spiritual concepts were repackaged with forms that suited Saudi culture, as its ideas would not have been acceptable if presented as they truly were. Some participants explained that the ambiguity surrounding certain aspects of spiritual practices sparked their interest. Others discussed how spiritual practices were embedded in an Islamic or scientific framework, which contributed to the acceptance of these practices in the society. Consequently, the process of repackaging contemporary spirituality involves three main factors: ambiguity, Islamisation and scientific frameworks, which are considered subthemes of *Repackaged Spirituality*.

- **Subtheme One - The Ambiguity of Contemporary Spirituality and its Gradual Rise**

Contemporary spirituality is a broad phenomenon, with ambiguity and a lack of clarity surrounding its nature or some of its components. This ambiguity was observed by ten participants, who used various terms to describe it, such as 'vague', 'unclear' and 'ignorant'. While some participants spoke of the unclarity of the term 'contemporary spirituality' as a label for its practices, others discussed their unfamiliarity with the philosophical component of spiritual teachings, particularly at the beginning of their experiences. This understanding was developed through questions posed to the participants, such as 'what ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?' and 'Have you become interested in or learned about the philosophical aspect of contemporary spirituality?' from which a clearer view of the concept began to emerge.

²²⁵ Sutcliffe and Bowman, *Beyond New Age*, 8, cf. 6. See also Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion', 3-4. Also, Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, xii.

- The Unclarity of The Term 'Contemporary Spirituality'

The experiences of eight interviewees showed that the term 'spirituality' did not clearly define what they embraced. Some attributed this confusion to the fact that spiritual trainers failed to explain clearly how the practices fit into a broader field called spirituality.

Q: What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?

Honestly, the term 'spirituality' was not even mentioned [by the spiritual trainers], and anything to do with spirituality was unknown. I mean, I embraced an idea without knowing what it was. I did not even know what to call it – whether it was called the science of energy or whatever. Only later did I realise what spirituality really was – (Samar).

When I was engaged in the practices, the term 'spirituality' was not widely used. There was still a lack of clarity on the topic of spirituality. There was a fear among the proponents of spirituality that it would be stripped of its disguise, like the science of energy, and thus rejected – (Zeena).

In the beginning, I was not aware that what I embraced was even called spirituality. The topic of energy was vague – (Malak).

Initially, I was unaware of the name of the umbrella for the practices I was adopting. I mean, what was I doing? What was I getting myself into? Even the meanings of the practices were unclear. I was overwhelmed by the energy ideas that were presented to me by the trainers. When I realised what world I had entered, I was surprised – (Wisam).

I initially thought that the practices were a matter of thought or science. Only after reading *Talbīs Iblīs* by Ibn al-Jawzī did I realise that it was a matter of spirituality – (Dalal).

It is commonly referred to as the topic of energy. I believe that most who believe in it are often attracted to vague themes – (Arwa).

Are you referring to energy? – (Karima).

Are you referring to fasting and prayer from a spiritual perspective? – (Maram).

Summary and Analysis:

Eight interviewees found the term ‘spirituality’ confusing. When six participants first began engaging in spiritual practices, they were unaware that their activities could be classified as spirituality. They were engaging in activities such as meditation, energy healing and Yoga, but were not familiar with the concept of spirituality. As they continued to practice, however, they began to understand the term better and realised how their activities related to the umbrella of spirituality. As a result of the question regarding the spiritual teachings participants engaged in, two respondents were confused about the term ‘spirituality’. They were, however, able to comprehend how their practices fit into the framework when examples and explanations were provided.

There has been some confusion among participants regarding the term ‘spirituality’ even though the first message they received before the interviews included examples of techniques demonstrating the type of spirituality discussed. According to some participants, this confusion was caused by spiritual trainers failing to adequately explain how these practices relate to the broader umbrella of spirituality. This may be due to the trainers’ fear of rejection since spirituality is composed of elements from different philosophical systems, which may be frowned upon in Saudi society, given its conservative nature. The notion of potential rejection may lead trainers to avoid raising contentious topics to maintain their program’s acceptability. This lack of clarity on the part of the trainers may have contributed to the attendees’ confusion since they did not receive a comprehensive understanding of the spiritual practices in which they were engaging.

The lack of awareness of the term 'contemporary spirituality' was accompanied by using the word 'energy' instead. Participants used the following words to refer to contemporary spirituality: 'these ideas', 'this thought', 'this topic', 'these practices', 'the science of energy', 'the topic of energy' and 'energy practices'. Seven respondents used the word 'energy' to describe the principles and practices they had used from the spiritual tradition. This suggests a potential association between contemporary spirituality and the widespread notion of energy in Saudi society.

The ambiguous nature of contemporary spirituality may cause it to be confused with other cultures, particularly since the word 'spirituality' today has a much broader connotation. This highlights the importance of understanding the cultural context in which the term is used. It is important to recognise that not all cultures use the same language or perceive the same meanings for the same words. By understanding the cultural context, we can better appreciate how the word is used and interpreted. For example, one participant confused the term 'spirituality' as contemporary spirituality with certain Islamic practices, such as prayers and fasting. This usage may have been caused by the Arabic translation of the word 'spirituality,' *al-Rūḥāniyya*, which is sometimes used to refer to *ʾīmān* (faith in the Islamic context). However, as discussed in Chapter Two, this term is not mentioned in Islamic sacred texts. That is, this analysis is further supported by the participant's statement, which implies that she interpreted the word '*al-Rūḥāniyya*' in the Islamic context rather than in its contemporary meaning. She stated that 'spiritual teachers are Muslim scholars who assist us with Islamic matters'. Therefore, I provided examples for the participant to gain a better understanding of the type of spirituality intend to discuss.

- The Unclarity of the Philosophical Aspects of Contemporary Spirituality

The ambiguity of contemporary spirituality is palpable, particularly in regard to its philosophical underpinnings that seek to understand the relationship between the divine, the humans and the universe. Through this study, ten responses revealed that the philosophical aspects of spiritual

teachings were not always easily understood, particularly at the outset of its rise. According to them, this is primarily owing to spiritual trainers who did not always provide a comprehensive explanation.

Q: Were you interested in learning about the philosophical aspects of contemporary spirituality?

Yes, of course, but it was the English websites that demonstrated the philosophy, not the Arabic books – (Ekram).

No, at the beginning of the emergence of these practices, the philosophical aspect was not presented in a clear, frank way. Instead, the trainers presented the practices as mere life techniques and never spoke about their philosophical dimensions. This vagueness is perhaps because the trainers were still testing the acceptance of the practices in society, but it may also be a reason why people were attracted to them. Over time, as these practices gained widespread acceptance and many people moved from superficial to deeper levels of studying them, the philosophical clarification became clearer and more direct. I have always said that some Sunnīs who rejected the Sufīs and mocked their superstitions are now practising Sufism under a different name; they are practising Sufism without realising it – (Lama).

Not at all. At the beginning of its emergence, the topic of energy was vague, and trainers were not explicit in their explanations. During the course, It was unclear to me that these practices were related to philosophy. For us, the lessons were merely life techniques on how to be a better person. I was completely ignorant of the philosophies behind them. Concepts of Karma and the divine spark, for instance, were not mentioned at all . Later, however, the trainers introduced these philosophical topics, which made me feel that these practices might lead to *Shirk* (association with God), so I stopped practising them immediately – (Malak).

When asked to elaborate on examples of philosophies that were vague, the participant replied:

Although the trainer did not discuss concepts such as ‘the divine spark’ in a public free course, I noticed that she did in private courses. The trainer herself stated that the content presented in public courses should differ from that presented in private courses. In one instance, she stated that ‘*Adhāb al-Qabr* (the punishment of the grave) was a myth, and when a school teacher transmitted these words to her students, she was subjected to discipline because students complained about her. So, the trainer blamed the teacher for her frankness and explained that she should not have expressed this belief in front of the public. This is because, according to her, this belief was not appropriate for the public and would not be accepted – (Malak).

Due to the unclarity of the philosophical aspects of contemporary spirituality, the participant also described how she engaged in specific practices despite her efforts not to:

Though I was sceptical of the Sufī beliefs of *Ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *Ittiḥād* (union) in the past, I eventually embraced the idea that Allah’s energy is infused into human beings. However, it never occurred to me that it represented the Sufī doctrine of *Ḥulūl*. It appeared to me as the light of Allah. I am not sure how I came to believe I could charge myself with Allah’s energy. I made no connection to *Ḥulūl* or *Ittiḥād* at all ... The teachers spoke about the idea of ‘Allah’s energy is everywhere’, but society’s and my own ignorance of its dimensions made the statement acceptable. We did not know it represented the belief of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Even though teachers and doctors were among the course attendees, no one criticised such expressions. It was introduced as if it were a reference to Allah’s mercy. I don’t know how they explained it in a way that made it acceptable. It was only later that I realised these concepts were philosophical or metaphysical – (Malak).

The depth of the concepts and their spiritual aspects were still not clear in the society when I engaged in the practices; it was not clear to me that they contained a philosophical dimension. Energy and the law of attraction were presented as life-changing techniques without considering their philosophical origins ... When I realised that these practices were related to non-Islamic beliefs, I told myself that I'd benefit from the useful parts and leave the parts that conflicted with my religion behind, but I could not after a while, so I stopped practising them – (Zeena).

I did not know that there was anything philosophical behind what I embraced ... For me, it was just about self-development, especially in relationships ... After a while, I felt that there was something wrong with this idea from an Islamic point of view and that it conflicted with Islamic doctrine, so I tried to adopt some parts that I thought did not conflict with my religion, but I couldn't, so I left it all. You see, in the past, the trainer was not explicit when presenting her ideas, but later she became franker and clearer – (Samar).

When asked what she thought caused people to turn to contemporary spirituality, the participant replied:²²⁶

I think one of the reasons it is so prevalent in our society is that people do not know that it is incorrect and that it conflicts with Islamic teachings. It is seen as a useful idea, so why not adopt it? The widespread adoption of these practices is also due to their penetration into many areas of life, including education, sports and nutrition. As the teachers said, pay attention to what you eat because food affects our bodies according to how we perceive it; how we perceive food affects it and, in turn, affects us. So, when we perceive that there are good foods and bad foods, healthy and unhealthy foods, food follows suit.

²²⁶ This question was asked to all participants, and it will be addressed in a subsequent theme. However, this part was moved here because it is in keeping with the theme above.

As I learned more about the subject depth, I grasped its concepts when combined with other subjects. It has spread across in all directions – (Samar).

Although I learned philosophical concepts like realise the truth within you, silence is the language of Allah, the universe is united by energy and we are all one, I did not know what they meant until much later. I mean, in these groups there are philosophical meanings, but they were never clearly explained by teachers; instead, they appeared as extravagant and beautiful terms, and I only realised later that they could influence my religious beliefs – (Wisam).

This participant shared another experience she had with the ambiguity of spiritual teachings:

When I was in high school, a relative gave me a book on Reiki. But she made me promise not to read it because she said I was still young, and my consciousness was unprepared to comprehend this knowledge. This obscurity surrounding the book and not being able to read it at that time made me more excited to learn about it ... I felt I was flying high because I felt I was learning new knowledge – (Wisam).

When we began our private course, we learned about food, decoration and lifestyle, as well as their connection to Yin and Yang. Over a few weeks, we absorbed the ideas of *Dīn al-Wiḥda* (religion of unity), unity with the universe, prayer to the universe and unity with all things, but we didn't really understand anything about what we were doing. When we reached that point [Mariam Nour's centre], our understanding was nonexistent... we were unaware that these ideas were even considered doctrine. Our perception of them was that they were sweet words. Even though I now understand the concepts and their opposition to *'Aqīda* (Islamic doctrine), I initially surrendered to and believed everything that the trainers said because they did not present their ideas honestly. It was wise of them to offer unclear ideas. During the course, Mariam Nour spoke about topics similar

to those she had presented on television; however, her words went beyond that, and she explicitly referred to philosophical issues – (Muna).

At the beginning of its rise, it was not clear that spirituality had a philosophical dimension ... Şalaḥ al-Rāshid and other trainers were reserved in expressing their opinions, especially in public. They did not explicitly say 'unite with the divine' but spoke of 'unity with cosmic consciousness' or 'collective consciousness'. However, in private courses, the clarity of thought was more evident. Even the esoteric courses I attended were offered secretly in a computer education centre ... Furthermore, translations of the texts were not accurate because if they were, they would have been rejected and disapproved of; instead, they were often translated depending on society's tastes in order to infiltrate it and gain acceptance. For example, phrases like 'the divine's spiritual breath' were translated into 'awareness'. This is why when I discovered the hidden meanings of some of the concepts, I found that they conflicted with my religion. – (Dalal).

When I took the first level of the NLP diploma a long time ago, most of what I learned from the trainer was about communication skills. Unlike the advanced levels, the first level did not include topics related to *Shirk* (association with God) – (Arwa).

I'm not interested in the spiritual or the philosophical aspects behind the practices ... I just aim to improve the quality of my life. I only take the practical aspects that I can apply and benefit from – (Karima).

When asked about the teachings she embraced, the participants replied as follows:

I believe there may be a collective energy that unites the entire universe ... I learned about soul contracts ... I released my intention and sent it to the universe – (Karima).

I am not interested in philosophy at all, and I know nothing about it. What matters to me about any exercise is how it benefits my body, whether it strengthens my legs or my stomach. I only use practices that benefit my body – (Maram).

When asked about the teachings she embraced, the participants replied as follows:

I strongly believe in the law of attraction, Karma and that human beings are fully responsible for their lives ... I believe that thoughts shape life ... thinking and eating also affect your soul ... that the moon affects our life and that we receive energy from the moon; however, on some days, this energy can be toxic – (Maram).

Summary and Analysis:

While one participant expressed her interest in the philosophy, ten respondents indicated a negative view of philosophy, contrasting it with their views on the Islamic metaphysics. Their perceptions are similar to al-Ḥamza's definition of philosophy as 'the study of divine matters, metaphysics and existence, that develops a way of life based upon that viewpoint distinct from the Abrahamic religions' revelation'.²²⁷ Philosophy provides to answer and interprets fundamental questions about the nature of existence, the purpose of life and the relationships between entities without relying on organised religion.

Eight participants suggested that spiritual trainers initially chose not to disclose all the philosophies underpinning spiritual teachings to ensure their acceptance by society. However, once spiritual practices had become commonplace, participants believe that trainers gradually revealed the philosophical basis of their teachings. This view was confirmed by al-Ḥamza who argued that 'spiritual trainers had adopted a gradualist approach to reveal the philosophies

²²⁷ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 15. See also Darrāz, *Al-Dīn*, 59-73. Also, Kurdī, *Al-Madhāhib al-Falsafiyya al-'Ilhādiyya al-Rūḥiyya wa Taṭbīqātuha al-Mu'āṣira*, 10. Also, al-Rashīd, *Al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 30 – 32.

behind their teachings'.²²⁸ Assuming this to be the case, this gradualist approach was likely employed to ensure that spiritual practices would not be rejected by wider society. Revealing the philosophies gradually has likely allowed trainers to slowly introduce their teachings and philosophies, while also giving participants the chance to become familiar and comfortable with the concepts. The interviewees revealed that they had engaged in spiritual practices without fully understanding the philosophies behind them. Over time, as the philosophical core was revealed more explicitly, many participants stated that they did not align with their views of Islam.

The ambiguity of contemporary spirituality has caused one participant to adopt beliefs she once viewed negatively. Despite her initial 'scepticism' about the Sufī belief of *Ḥulūl*, she eventually came to believe in similar ideas unknowingly. She embraced the concept that God's energy enters human beings, which, as she understands it, has similar connotations to *Ḥulūl*. She believed that this energy is a part of us, connecting us to God and each other, which, as she explains, aligns with the belief of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. This suggests that the lack of clarity and understanding of the underlying philosophies made spiritual concepts more acceptable. In response to the obscurity of spiritual teachings, eight participants highlighted that when they developed a further understanding of the philosophies, they appeared to be at odds with their views of the Islamic religion. Thus, some participants said they unknowingly engaged in '*Shirk*' and 'non-Islamic beliefs'. Others reported that spiritual teachings conflicted with Islamic doctrine and thus can harm a person's Islamic faith. As a result of this realisation, eight participants discontinued their practice of contemporary spirituality or certain aspects of it. This suggests that the lack of clarity about the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary spirituality contributed to participants engaging with it. Additionally, many participants would not have likely engaged in spiritual practices if the philosophical aspects had been more transparent from the outset.

Given the ambiguity surrounding the nature of contemporary spirituality, two participants expressed that they were uninterested in the philosophy behind the practices and only focused on the physical aspects. However, their experiences revealed that they were engaging in

²²⁸ Al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 36.

philosophical musings, albeit unconsciously. When asked about the ideas they had internalised, the participants stated that they had come to accept that there is likely a collective energy that unites the universe. They also stated that their souls had agreements before incarnating in their bodies and that Karma plays a role in life. In addition, they expressed faith in the idea that thoughts create one's reality and that the moon influences our lives. It is possible that they were unaware of the philosophical elements in their experiences. This is because these meanings were linked with physical activities that served to obscure their philosophical components.

Five participants suggested that contemporary spirituality had initially been presented as a means of enhancing the quality of life. This is because it had become pervasive in various aspects of life, such as sports, education and nutrition, which likely contributed to its widespread acceptance. For example, individuals who were interested in nutrition or other lifestyle topics may have been exposed to spiritual activities without even realising it. Subsequently, participants indicated that they engaged in spiritual teachings to take advantage of their potential benefits, without being aware of their underlying philosophical aspects. This implies that various fields served as gateways for individuals to gain access to spiritual teachings, which triggered its use and obscured its philosophical nature.

- **Subtheme Two – Islamisation:**

This subtheme title was inspired by the responses of participants who described Islamisation as a way to connect the teachings of contemporary spirituality with those of Islam. Nine respondents mentioned this concept as one of the factors that attracted them to spiritual practice. Six respondents defined the term Islamisation, while three only described it. Data collected under this subtheme was included in the responses to the following question: Is there anything about these ideas that particularly appeals to you? Would it be possible for you to briefly describe your experience?

Q: Is there anything about these ideas that particularly appeals to you? Would it be possible for you to briefly describe your experience?

The first time I learned about the concept of energy was in an online forum, which I guess was related to Ṣalāh al-Rāshid. He was Islamising many of its practices, giving them an Islamic character or providing an Islamic justification for them ... When we first heard about the law of attraction, everyone who promoted it was Islamising it, so I felt comfortable that nothing seemed to contradict my Islamic principles, and I thought the law of attraction was *Ḥusn al-Ẓan Billah* (a good opinion of *Allah*) – (Arwa).

According to the participant, she later realised those spiritual practices were not part of Islam, as she initially believed:

Recently, proponents of the law of attraction have become more explicit in their explanations. This has made me realise that this principle is in conflict with the belief in ‘trust in God’ and would damage my faith. As a result of my belief that I could attract anything led me, unconsciously, to attribute everything to myself rather than to God and His power – (Arwa).

In a course on energy, one trainer expressed his belief that the Prophet Ibrāhīm, peace be upon him, conquered fire by using energy. The words the trainer used made me afraid of this subject; how could he desecrate the miracle of the Prophet? As a result, I decided not to enrol in any energy courses. Then I attended a course on relationships, which was also about energy. This time, however, the trainer’s Islamisation of the course made me feel more comfortable with the principle of energy. She interpreted a number of *’Aḥādīth* of the Prophet Muhammed in light of the principle of energy and incorporated Eastern concepts into Islamic thought, such as converting ‘Chakras’ into ‘ports’.²²⁹ After a while, I realised that the principle of energy leads to *Shirk* (association with God). You see, I extended my prostration several times, not for God Almighty, but to attract energy. I also

²²⁹ *’Aḥādīth* is the plural of *Ḥadīth*.

attributed my success to the techniques of the law of attraction that I practised rather than to God's will – (Malak).

The participant then explained why she thought Islamisation was inaccurate:

Islamisation is wrong because this idea [contemporary spirituality] and its practices date back to non-Islamic religions. Even if we change the name of a practice, the act of *Shirk* (association with God) remains *Shirk*. Also, the trainer's attempt to use the *Ḥadīth* as evidence of the law of attraction is inaccurate since its philosophy contradicts the Islamic belief in destiny – (Malak).

Another method of Islamisation suggested by the participant was the following:

The trainer in one course seemed to focus her conversation on the interests of the participants. Because we were wearing a veil, a face cover and a head 'Abāya (cover), the trainer focused her speech on Islamic topics and associated energy with Islam. In line with the interests of those interested in science, the trainer linked the principle of energy to science-related topics ... A trainer in another course marketed himself as a committed Muslim. To persuade the audience, he repeated that he had been raised in a conservative family as if to deceive them. Since some people were born into a religious society, they were influenced by this kind of marketing – (Malak).

When the trainers associated the law of attraction, the law of intention and aura with Islamic worship and used Islamic texts to refer to them, I thought they were within our religion. In fact, I even thought that meditation was an Islamic practice. Then, I understood that these practices were wrong and incompatible with 'Aqīda (Islamic doctrine), so I stopped practising them – (Samar).

I thought that the concepts of the law of attraction and gratitude came from Islam after the trainer linked them to verses in the Qur'an. When I read about parapsychology, I believed that if I pursued my desires badly they would not be fulfilled. However, if I stopped chasing them, they would become true. Therefore, I stopped making *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication) for a while, thinking that it would activate attraction. But later, when I became mentally damaged by the concept of the law of attraction and realised it was a mistake to link it to the Qur'an, I stopped applying it and turned back to making *Du'ā'* – (Maram).

I was looking for someone who had Islamised this thought [contemporary spirituality]. If it was a useful thought, why was it not mentioned in Islamic texts? What led some Muslim scholars to describe it as heretical and atheist? My questions were rising inwardly; eventually, I reached out on Twitter to someone who seemed to be religious and spiritual at the same time. This teacher made me feel relieved that this thought was not wrong ... In my school days, I was a big fan of a Kuwaiti coach who divided the roles between herself and her ex-husband. While she explained affirmations and the law of attraction, her ex-husband Islamised the concepts and supported her from an Islamic perspective. He would come up with Islamic verses to denote these practices. He claimed to have studied Islamic doctrine because he wanted to strengthen his argument. He affirmed that the ideas presented by them were consistent with Islamic beliefs and were not linked to non-believing or atheistic notions ... [Later], I realised that this idea was not based on Islamic principles. Instead, it belonged to doctrines that I should not be using, so I stopped practising it – (Zeena).

In a spiritual group, I was inspired by an unveiled teacher because she used an electronic prayer bead while performing *Tasbīḥ* (a form of glorifying God). My assessment of people was superficial because it did not occur to me that she may have been reciting hymns – information I understood only later and which made me realise how ignorant I was ... When I became a trainer, I was relieved to hear that *Shuyūkh* (Muslim scholars) were

among the attendees at a course I was presenting. Even though I did not see any of them, I was reassured that I was on the right path ... When I realised the reality of this path and the fact that it conflicted with Islamic teachings, I felt ashamed that I had helped to spread it. I thought I was spreading useful knowledge. I was living a big lie – (Wisam).

This participant also gave the following example of Islamisation:

The coach deceived me; she guided me with love until she caught me in a trap. We prepared a course on the laws of gratitude from *The Secret* - a book full of myths about energy and the law of attraction. But we did not address these terms in our course because, according to the trainer, people's consciousness could not grasp the book's concepts. Instead, we used terms from the Qur'an, a language with which people are familiar. Instead of 'the laws of gratitude', we used terms like *Alḥamdulillah* (praise be to God), *Shukru lillah* (thanks to God) and *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication). The coach encouraged me to look for verses in the Qur'an that could fit the topic of gratitude and made me feel like I was doing the right thing. I was excited about the topic and started quoting from Islamic books. I was pleased to have Islamised the topic of gratitude to *Alḥamdulillah* (praise be to God). I thought I was doing the right thing and did not have the slightest doubt that the subject [contemporary spirituality] contained *Shirk* (association with God) – (Wisam)

The proponents of this thought [contemporary spirituality] do not Islamise it to make it Islamic or because they see it as connected to Islam. Instead, they Islamise it as a means of persuasion and a marketing tool to convince the audience and avoid conflict with society. That is why it was only when I insisted on understanding how this topic was compatible with Islam that the esoteric teacher used the Islamisation method. He stressed that everything came from Islamic sources and referred me to a man who claimed to be a Muslim scholar. The trainers' use of Qur'anic verses to illustrate this idea was somewhat convincing. Their strategy was to start and end with accurate, familiar

information and offer their myths in between. By presenting the initial and final correct information, the audience is persuaded that the myths are true. It is similar to the strategy of combining poison with honey – (Dalal).

As proponents put an Islamic touch on their ideas, they did it well ... If you look at Mariam Nour's old programs, you will find that they all included Qur'anic verse or *Ḥadīth*. She would talk about any subject and claim that Prophet Muḥammed had embraced it. Because the human soul needs a religious element to be fulfilled, Islamisation was an effective method of influencing individuals. But honestly, that is also the biggest mistake they make against Islam, against religion – (Muna).

Proponents of these ideas frequently associate them with Islam to manipulate those who may otherwise reject them. Thus, trainers would say that the Prophet spoke about the good omen to try to persuade a person to accept the law of attraction. This strategy is used against opponents who do not have sufficient knowledge of the Islamic religion – (Lama).

Summary and Analysis:

Nine respondents discussed 'Islamisation' as one of the strategies spiritual teachers use to promote spiritual teachings in Saudi Arabia; two tried to incorporate this approach into their spiritual practices. Six respondents referred to this concept using the term *Aslama* (Islamisation), while the other three expressed it in a different language. In essence, this strategy entails connecting spiritual teachings with Islamic ones using Islamic sources, such as the Qur'an and *Ḥadīth*, or Islamic terms to signify spiritual concepts. For instance, the use of *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication) as an expression of the law of attraction. This interpretation is consistent with the definition of 'Islamisation' provided by al-'Ajirī, which describes it as the utilisation of Islamic

terminology in a spiritual context, the use of spiritual terms in an Islamic context or the interpretation of Islamic texts in the light of contemporary spirituality.²³⁰

Seven participants reported that their engagement with contemporary spirituality was heavily influenced by the Islamisation strategy, whether it was implemented by trainers or the participants themselves. This strategy appears to reflect the participants' level of conservatism, commitment to Islam and reliance on Islamic texts and concepts for understanding novel meanings. It further underscores that Islam was seamlessly integrated into the respondents' lives, subsequently impacting their lifestyle choices. One respondent even stated that Islamisation 'was an effective method of influencing individuals'. It is, thus, evident that at the beginning of their journey, participants believed that spiritual teachings could be validated by Islam, making them more comfortable with their practices. Consequently, the strategy of Islamisation has proven to be essential in facilitating the acceptance and utilisation of contemporary spirituality.

Initially assuming that contemporary spirituality was intrinsically linked to Islam, seven participants soon discovered that this was not the case. Through further exploration of spiritual practices and in-depth understanding of their teachings, they came to realise that certain spiritual practices did not align with Islamic teachings - which was one of the reasons they ceased their spiritual practice. Additionally, some participants noted that their spiritual practices had an impact on their Islamic practice. For instance, one participant reported that she stopped performing *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication) out of fear that the law of attraction would be activated, due to her misguided belief that there was a connection between the two. Eventually, this participant returned to performing *Du'ā'*, foregoing the use of the law of attraction.

While some participants did not provide their opinion on why Islamisation was applied, five respondents suggested it was an influential persuasive factor. These individuals believed Islamisation was necessary for contemporary spirituality to be accepted and welcomed into Saudi society. According to them, a clear presentation of spiritual teachings would likely result in their

²³⁰ See al-'Ajirī, *Khurāfat al-Sir*, 16, 125. See also 'Intabī, *Theosophy*, 194.

rejection due to the potential conflict with society's views regarding Islamic teachings. One respondent noted that 'as proponents put an Islamic touch on their ideas, they did it well', indicating that this approach had an influential impact. The use of Islamisation is, thus, an influential persuasive factor, allowing for its acceptance and integration into the culture.

Some participants described Islamising, a deceptive strategy employed by trainers to introduce contemporary spirituality into society, as 'like combining poison with honey', 'used to strengthen their argument' and 'manipulative'. Bardīsī described this tactic concerning *The Secret*: 'in order to conform to Islamic belief, *The Secret* texts have been manipulated in their translation into Arabic'.²³¹ For example, original phrases such as 'you are God in a physical body' have been changed to 'you are a spark of the spirit of Allah' in the Arabic translation.²³² Though this type of translation is misleading and could be done to make the book palatable in some Islamic circles, there is insufficient evidence to confirm it was done to manipulate readers. Additionally, Islamising could be a natural reaction for Muslims, who tend to incorporate their existing religious knowledge into new information, such as when two participants in this study Islamised some spiritual concepts before recognising the conflicts with their Islamic beliefs. This may suggest that when an individual listens to a lecture or read a book, they will likely use their Islamic knowledge to interpret and process the newly acquired information.

- **Subtheme Three – A Scientific Framework:**

The title 'Scientific Framework' was inspired by the participants' responses. Nine participants indicated that contemporary spirituality had gained prestige through its promotion as a scientific field. According to eight participants, the trainers made this claim to facilitate the dissemination of spiritual teaching. After hearing about contemporary spirituality's scientific validity, six participants used its practices before realising this was untrue. Data for this subtheme developed

²³¹ Bardīsī, *al-Da'awāt al-Bāṭiniyya 'ilā al-Salām fī al-'Asr al-Ḥadīth*, 229.

²³² Byrne, *The Secret*, 164. The translation in Arabic language was as follows: '*Anta Qabasun min Rūḥ Allah*'. Rhonda Byrne, *Al-Sir (The Secret)*, translated by Jarir bookstore (Riyadh: Jarir bookstore, 2008), 164.

from the following question: How do you perceive the relationship between spiritual practices and science, and how has this affected your use of these practices?

Q: How do you perceive the relationship between spiritual practices and science, and how has this affected your use of these practices?

At the beginning of my experience with the principle of energy, the trainers talked about scientific experiments that supported this idea. They explained that energy could be measured with a specific device. At that time, I honestly didn't know what was meant by 'energy', how it was measured or whether this claim was scientifically correct or not. Instead, I believed that energy could be measured without discussing or questioning anything. But now I'm starting to question what I never thought about before: what is energy, and how is it measured? I'm beginning to feel that this is not science – (Arwa).

It was associated with science. I noticed how the trainer used scientific words, explaining the law of attraction and the principle of energy in a scientific way. She defined energy as frequencies and vibrations that exist in the universe and said that through the law of attraction, one could attract or send the frequency they desired – like a mobile phone call but without wires. These vibrations, according to the coach, arrive through the power of concentration and reach people anywhere in the world. I used to practice the law of attraction and direct my desires to the universe to fulfil them as if I were practising something physical or scientific – (Malak).

The participant stated that after a while, she found out that contemporary spirituality was not as scientific as she thought:

I was so confused when I learned that these practices were not scientific, so I wanted to make sure, and I contacted physicist Dr Reem al-Ṭuwayrqī, who clarified on her Twitter account that this type of energy was *Khurāfa* (a superstition) – (Malak).

When I was in high school, a relative told me about a new science, a new speciality in medicine called vibration and energy therapy ... As I got excited, a doctor who was my mother's colleague referred me to a Reiki trainer she knew. So I signed up for a Reiki course because I wanted to learn more about this medical field ... I [later] realised that the so-called 'science of energy' was a mash-up of various sources, including psychological, social, sporting and philosophical, and that it was not based on scientific evidence – (Zeena).

I embraced ideas like energy, the law of attraction and affirmations on the basis that they were real science. That's because I was introduced to them by a Saudi psychologist who claimed they were based on science. So, I thought she was conveying knowledge through psychological references. I did not know, not for a moment, that she was offering *Khurāfāt* (superstitions). During my time abroad, I received therapy as a free university service, which introduced me to other practices such as meditation, breathing exercises and Yoga. The biggest problem with these ideas [spiritual ideas] is that they appear under the guise of self-development and are mixed with some psychological theories, and the rest is all a hoax. This mixture confuses the audience and makes them believe what is being offered is true and scientific ... Later in adopting these ideas, I realised that these teachings were not based on science. I found that the psychologist who claimed to offer scientific concepts was conveying the teachings of Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid, Louise Hayes and others as scientific ... The books she was quoting were written by Westerners who were influenced by Eastern philosophies – (Samar).

I received an ad on WhatsApp about a graphology course – the science of calligraphy interpretation. The subject and the fact that it was a new science appealed to me. So I attended the course ... Then I discovered that what I thought was science was pseudoscience. I then understood why my analyses of different handwriting tended to produce similar results – (Lama).

For us, NLP was a science of programming ... we paid insane amounts of money for the courses we attended. The first course I took cost me SAR 10,000 for twelve full days. We joined on the premise that NLP was a science ... Later, when scientists and doctors told us it was nonsense, we felt like fools – (Muna).

As trainers frequently stated, I thought these practices were scientific. I was fooled by people's appearances and certifications. I was disappointed when I realised everything I had learned over the years was for nothing. Although I majored in psychology, I have lost faith in psychologists. This is because I have seen how some have deceived the audience by mixing psychology with these ideas [spiritual teachings] and offering them as psychology. The psychologist I put my trust in deceived me with her words and actions – (Wisam).

I believe these practices have a scientific basis. When I was in the US, the mother of a Korean colleague was an interior designer who was interested in the science of Feng Shui and designed furniture based on it – (Ekram).

Here, the participant described Feng Shui as scientific. However, when talking about her sister's experience, the respondent noted that after believing that the principle of energy was scientific, she found out that it was not:

My younger sister started doing spiritual energy practices with her friends ... At first, we thought it was a science, so we didn't pay much attention to the practices. But when my sister was mentally damaged and we tried to help her, I knew that her trainers were charlatans and that one should not delve too deeply into spiritual energy practices – (Ekram).

I was fascinated by the practices because I thought they were physics, especially after hearing the trainers say they were. An NLP trainer said it was science, and the esoteric teacher said that sorcery was a science like physics and chemistry ... During a Reiki course in Kuwait, the trainer spoke like a diviner: She tried to analyse my personality, but in fact, she was building on what I was saying. Nevertheless, she caught my attention at first. Then, with her bare hands, she measured the aura of an attendee who argued against her analysis because he felt his aura was more significant than her measurement. The way this argument played out left me with doubts and questions. Whose assessment was correct, the trainer or the attendee? Which criteria did the trainer use to evaluate the aura? If Reiki were a science, it would have to have a basis. Science is never based on feelings; repeated experiments should always produce the same results. Therefore, I felt that what the trainer was offering had nothing to do with science and was, instead, slippery information without any scientific basis. There is a contradiction between these practices and the basis of science; the way spiritual energy works is in opposition to how physical energy works. These practices are all based on sophistry and philosophy. Additionally, despite everything I did, I still failed to achieve my desires. I had no job and no husband, despite following everything they told me to do ... In the end, I stopped these practices altogether – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

Nine participants reported that contemporary spirituality had come to be seen as a scientific discipline, with spiritual trainers being accused of trying to 'deceive' and 'fool' the public to make them more receptive to their teachings. The participants argued that such manipulation and deception were unethical and viewed them negatively. Six interviewees further noted that they had been influenced by this claim and engaged in spiritual practices before discovering that scientific evidence did not support them. In conclusion, the participants showed a mistrust of some spiritual teachings due to the deceptive tactics employed by the trainers.

The term 'science' was frequently used by participants to refer to subjects such as scientific experiments, branches of medicine and areas of psychology. According to them, spiritual concepts and practices were touted as a scientific discipline or as scientifically valid. This finding is supported by the words of al-Ḥamza, who noted that 'contemporary spirituality often attempts to repackage Eastern beliefs and utilise modern scientific discoveries to validate them'.²³³ This repackaging has allowed spiritual teachings to be more widely accessible and more credible to a wider audience, as evidenced by the six participants who had embraced spiritual practices because they were presented as scientifically-based. Moreover, several participants overcame their doubts about the validity of certain spiritual practices after learning that they had scientific foundations. Thus, it is clear that the repackaging of spiritual concepts and activities as scientifically based has been successful in making them more widely accepted.

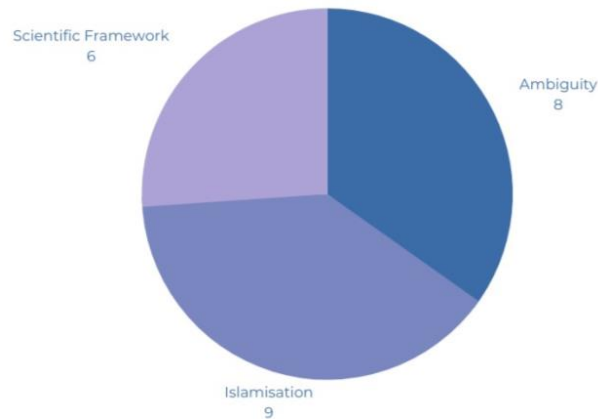
The nine participants involved in the discussion were surprised to discover that many of the spiritual teachings they had been using were not based on scientific evidence but on personal beliefs, superstitions and false claims. They expressed this discovery by referring to contemporary spirituality as 'superstition', 'a hoax', 'pseudoscience', 'nonsense', 'charlatans [trainers]', 'sophistry and philosophy' and 'slippery content'. Upon realising this, they ceased practising contemporary spirituality or some of its practices as they regarded them as unreliable and untrustworthy. One respondent, in particular, was unsure as to the scientific validity of spiritual teachings, as she viewed Feng Shui as a science while labelling energy trainers as 'charlatans'. She also noted that one should not 'delve too deeply into spiritual energy practices'. This confusion may be due to the ambiguous nature of contemporary spirituality and a lack of understanding that Feng Shui is based on the energy principle.

²³³ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 37.

- **Conclusion of Repackaged Spirituality:**

The rise of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia is distinctly marked by its repackaging through ambiguity, Islamisation and scientific frameworks (see graph 4.1). This adaptation, a blend of deliberate and unintentional strategies, has played a pivotal role in aligning contemporary spirituality with societal needs, facilitating its broader acceptance within the nation. The ambiguity surrounding the philosophical underpinnings of spiritual teachings has expanded their appeal, making them more accessible to a wider audience. The Islamisation of spiritual teachings has rendered them culturally and religiously palatable, easing their integration into Saudi Arabia's religious fabric. The framing of spiritual concepts within a scientific paradigm has bolstered their credibility, making them more accessible to a public that values empirical evidence. These repackaging strategies cater to various societal segments, enhancing the appeal and reach of spiritual teachings. For instance, those seeking personal growth are introduced to self-development techniques, devout Muslims encounter spiritual concepts harmonised with Islamic tenets and those inclined towards science are presented with spiritual teachings articulated in empirical terms. This multifaceted approach ensures spiritual concepts resonate with the target audience, making them more relatable and understandable.

The adaptation of spiritual teachings to align with prevailing cultural and religious norms in Saudi Arabia underscores the socially constructed nature of spiritual knowledge. The introduction of external ideas can be perceived as an intrusion, deeply influenced by the specific social and cultural contexts in which they are introduced. Such repackaging acts as a form of positionality, adapting these teachings to fit seamlessly within Saudi Arabia's pre-existing cultural and religious frameworks. This context, characterised by deep-rooted Islamic beliefs, plays a pivotal role in determining how contemporary spirituality is received, interpreted and integrated.



Graph 4.1: Engagement is influenced by repackaging spirituality.

The findings underscore that spiritual teachings in Saudi Arabia have been reframed, often sidelining or obscuring their philosophical dimensions. Participants noted that spiritual trainers frequently promoted these teachings without fully exploring their philosophical depths, leading many to adopt them without a comprehensive understanding of their implications. Intriguingly, the gradual unveiling of these philosophical underpinnings led some participants to re-evaluate and abandon certain practices, pointing to their misalignment with Islamic principles. This shift in stance suggests that the philosophical essence of these teachings, if made transparent from the onset, might have encountered skepticism or outright rejection. Consequently, the allure of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia seems not rooted in its philosophical essence but in its perceived alignment with Islamic or scientific frameworks and its practical benefits.

In essence, the repackaging of spirituality in Saudi Arabia, whether through ambiguity, Islamisation, or a scientific framework, has been a double-edged sword. While it has broadened the acceptance and integration of various spiritual practices, it has also introduced complexities, potential misconceptions and ethical dilemmas. While it may not always be deliberate, the intentional blending of spiritual teachings with Islamic principles might be considered a subtle obfuscation. This could inadvertently lead followers astray and alter Islam's conventional comprehension and practice within Saudi society. Furthermore, the purported scientific framing has not always been genuine. The use of scientific jargon and concepts, without substantial

empirical backing, can be misleading. While this approach amplifies the allure of spiritual teachings, it also risks diminishing trust, especially when the Islamic interpretation is found to be altered or the claimed scientific foundation is debunked. This realisation has led a number of participants to distance themselves from these teachings, turning the strength of contemporary spirituality into its Achilles' heel. The findings underscore the importance of transparency, genuine dialogue and critical consideration of spiritual teachings.

Theme Two - Participants' Conditions

A similar pattern among the participants' conditions contributed to their involvement in spiritual activities. As evidenced by the experiences of all eleven participants, participation in spiritual activities was often a means of seeking solutions to unresolved issues and concerns, including mental instability, physical illness and social problems. Ten participants reported that ignorance of Islamic knowledge contributed to the use of spiritual teachings. In comparison, four participants stated that spiritual concepts and practices were appealing because they offered quick fixes without much effort. This theme is explored through the following questions: In your view, why are people drawn to contemporary spirituality? And why were you drawn to it?

Q: In your view, why are people drawn to contemporary spirituality? And why were you drawn to it?

Our ignorance of Islamic knowledge and our distance from faith are the main reasons for engaging in this topic [contemporary spirituality]. If a Qur'an verse is misinterpreted and associated with the concept of energy, ignorant Muslims will not be aware of this error. For example, I was drawn to these practices for some time due to my ignorance. Then, when I discovered the errors in these practices, I decided to learn Islamic knowledge. This ignorance may result from parents' reliance on the religion taught in schools, so they do not put much effort into teaching it to their children – (Zeena).

This participant further described her experience:

It was my last year in high school, and I was lost and confused about what to specialise in. So, when I heard about Reiki, I wanted to learn about it, thinking it was a medical speciality. I also believe it relates to my personality, which strives for distinction; matters that stand out, not widespread or popularly practised and are unfamiliar to many people attract me ... As a result, when my relative informed me of vibration and energy therapy as a new medical speciality, I immediately applied ... One of the practices that appealed to me was the affirmation technique, as it is easy and does not require much effort on my part. It is basically a matter of repeating words to obtain what I wish for – (Zeena).

A major factor behind the popularity of this phenomenon may be the mental problems or crises that individuals have encountered and are unable to overcome. As they encounter a closed door or a blocked road, they see this subject as a lifeline to help them get through. For example, I have had problems in my relationships that I could not resolve, so I liked the idea of controlling my life through the thoughts that I found in the law of attraction, and I embraced it for a while. Then, I experienced a shock while studying abroad. It was the worst period of my life. I felt as though the world were black, and I was almost depressed. While the world around me was green and birds were flying, I did not hear their singing until six months had passed. In my mind, there was a cloud. I was in a very difficult situation. I am on the verge of tears as I recall this event. During that time, I would hold on to anything to get out of that situation. I entered the university's free consultation centre and was introduced to meditation, breathing exercises and Yoga... I was desperate to try anything; can you believe I was about to try Reiki even though I had no idea what it was? My only goal was to find practices that would help me calm down and relax ... I also had problems with my neck and back, so I practised Yoga to stretch my body ... I was hesitant to practice affirmation exercises. I felt they were superstition and not rational. I mean, how could I achieve whatever I wanted only by writing it down 21

times for 14 days? That's nonsense. But I said, why not try it since it was an easy approach? – (Samar).

The participant mentioned another reason for practising contemporary spirituality:

I also believe that it is due to a lack of heart presence. My heart was not attentive or present during the performance of *'ibāda* (worship), *Ṣalāh* (prayer) and *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication). I rarely read the Qur'an, and I had no faith in *Du'ā'*. As a practising Muslim, I was confident in what I was doing. However, I did not activate Islam's spiritual aspect [faith]. I was lacking in the worship of the heart... I was also lacking in religious knowledge. During a mental crisis, I used to tell my mother that I prayed, but nothing happened, as if I had lost hope and had no faith in *Du'ā'* - I ask God's forgiveness - (Samar).

People are tired and have lost control of themselves. So, when someone claims to have the key to solutions, people naturally follow them. When trainers said positive things, I was taken by them. The first thing they do in such courses is to boost your confidence and make you feel like a queen. So you end up believing that you can control everything. When I signed up for an NLP course, I was mentally broken down, and the course impressed me. As a result, I completed two levels and then signed up for energy courses. All these courses drew me away from the chaos of everyday life that I was living in. They put me in a world far from pressure. I was weak and looking for a cure; I was escaping from society, the pressure and the chaos of everyday life ... Mariam Nour's words were numbing; when she spoke about the soul, we felt drugged and we melted away. We wanted to reach out but didn't know what to reach for. We just wanted to feel comfortable outside the material life that was exhausting ... I attended a course on energy healing techniques to treat my infertility and improve my mental health. I also took macrobiotics, travelled to Lebanon to see Mariam Nour, and found out that what she was offering was nothing but a hoax. I personally know some life coaches who claim to be able to treat others but are

mentally ill themselves. Hello? How can you be a life coach? Shouldn't you check on yourself first? – (Muna).

Furthermore, the participant believed that her ignorance of Islamic knowledge contributed to her engagement in spiritual teachings:

We adopted incorrect practices, such as 'the unity with the universe', due to the inner emptiness we experienced due to our ignorance of Islamic '*Aqīda* (doctrine). Our knowledge of Islam was not enough; it was confined to the five pillars in general, and we had no knowledge of the meanings of '*Asma*' *Allah al-Ḥusnā* (Allah's beautiful names), which made it easy to fall into other beliefs. Out of ignorance, we performed rituals for religions other than our own. Our inner emptiness was also caused by our fast-paced lifestyle and our weak connection with God, including a lack of *Khūshu'* (reverence) and reciting the Qur'an and *Dhikr*. You see, I wasn't worshipping enough, so I was looking for something to fill the spiritual emptiness inside me ... We were secular, separating religion from our daily lives; we practised religion but with no understanding of its meaning, and that is why this wrong thought [spiritual concepts] permeated our lives – (Muna).

I think people who embrace such practices suffer from mental and social problems. They are exposed to severe pressure or a serious problem that they are unable to solve. So, they turn to these practices as a lifeline, a new way to survive, or an attempt to control their situation and solve their problems. Both of my sister's friends, who are energy coaches, suffer from mental disorders and have serious marital problems; one is divorced, and the other is getting divorced. My sister is another example. She was desperate for a while ... Then we noticed that these practices had an effect on her and had caused her to become detached from reality ... I think my sister reached this stage of adopting and being affected by such practices because of her weak religious faith and her lack of understanding of Islamic doctrine – (Ekram).

It may be because people don't understand Islam correctly. In fact, in the past, as I read some books and tweets on Twitter, I was sceptical about some religious topics. But then my doubts faded away. It may also refer to people's weakness in '*Imāniyyāt* [faith] – (Maram).

The participant also explained why she practises contemporary spirituality:

I feel that the way I was raised is the main reason for my interest. My social upbringing was very wrong. My family sensitised me, ostracised me and gave me many complexes. In my childhood, they accused me of things I didn't even understand. When I was younger, they told me that I was mean. I didn't understand what they meant, but they kept saying it. Now, I don't feel so much love for my family, and I try to avoid them. That's why I want to attend such courses to address my childhood trauma. Another problem is that I become very attached to people, and my mood is strongly related to them and affected by their opinions of me. So, I need to get rid of this problem. I don't want to be affected by others. That's why I started listening to coaches' lectures At first, I was fascinated by the idea of being responsible for my life. I also believed that what was happening to me was caused by my thoughts, which made me eager to control every situation. But then I became stressed and depressed. I felt pressured as the problems increased in my life. This idea made me mentally exhausted – (Maram).

I think people have a spiritual emptiness because they do not understand Islam. As a child, I misunderstood Islamic teachings and wondered why we pray and fast, if there is a God, if there is a day of judgement and why evil exists. But thankfully, these kinds of questions quickly disappeared as I discovered that a supreme being must run the universe. Reading the Qur'an and the religious upbringing I received also helped me overcome my doubts. I also had the wrong understanding of *Du'ā'* (prayer of supplication), expecting to always get something in return. When the *Du'ā'* was not fulfilled, I stopped practising it and stopped praying the five daily prayers. But eventually, I returned to practising them as I

understood their true meanings. Now, I worship without expecting anything in return – (Karima).

The participant then discussed specific mental and social concerns she had:

I was lost, afraid of society and had conflicts with it. Specifically, I suffered from social phobia and deep remorse and began to fall into depression; I could not express myself and felt that no one could understand or help me. My energy was depleted, I was emotionally exhausted, and I was unable to express myself the way I wanted. I began reading self-development books hoping to find a solution to my problems, which continue to this day, although I am trying to overcome them. The therapist I see has prescribed me Xanax and sleeping pills several times and advised me not to feel too badly when I was going through a hard time – (Karima).

The people I met who are often attracted to this topic [contemporary spirituality] have things in common, including a feeling of disconnection from their families and an inability to get along with community members. Therefore, they often seek support, love, tenderness and kindness in such groups. One girl, for example, called her spiritual coach 'mom'. They also often seek compliments from those who praise them ... Listening to these groups speak about peace, I was left in doubt, as most of their members had problems that were not indicative of a peaceful life. It appears that their lives are miserable; where is the peace that they claim to have? Take me as an example. I was ostracised by my family. I suffered through difficulties; I had mental traumas, one of which caused my father's stroke, and then he died. I blamed myself and was blamed for his death and was tortured by some relatives. I was in so much pain, so a friend took me to a tapping therapist. He sympathised with my intense crying and asked if he could be my father. His kindness and tenderness treated me, not his tapping; he was affectionate and treated me like a father, so I trusted him. I also began meditating to treat my leg; I had a

limp for ten years due to snake and scorpion bites. I did not find a cure, although I visited many hospitals – (Wisam).

In her explanation, the participant provided further detail:

I was mentally exhausted at some point; I quit my job and moved from a privately owned home to a *Ribāṭ*.²³⁴ I was also disconnected from my family, who did not support me. Instead, they humiliated and mocked me. The only thing I was looking for was safety and stability. If my mother had hugged me, I would have done anything for her. I blame her for not being present when I needed her the most ... I felt lonely as if I were a splintered tree stump, so I tried to find happiness, contentment and peace. I've always wanted to hang out with my sister, but she enjoys spending time with other people. I feel as if I were a child who needs to be taken care of, and it hurts to express such feelings as a grown-up ... I had so much anger and a feeling of rebellion because of I was belittled. My reaction was that I wanted to succeed and control my life. So, I spent all the money that I had saved on spiritual courses. I attended weekly gatherings with several [spiritual] groups whose members I loved because I was coming out of a crisis, resignation and poor family relationships, and with such groups, I found what I needed: kind words, respect and support, but the wrong kind of support as they provided me with the knowledge that conflicted with my beliefs. That is why I became isolated again. I was afraid that I would make another mistake because of my emotions_... There was an appeal to these techniques because it seemed easy to get what I wanted without much effort. In order to get rich, I write in the currency that I want to get rich; to obtain a car, I visit a car dealership and gaze at the model I want. What kind of nonsense is this? – (Wisam).

The participant provided another reason why people are attracted to spiritual teachings:

²³⁴ *Ribāṭ* is a charitable residence for poor and needy women and families. They were constructed by their owners as a means of seeking reward from God Almighty. (See Su'ād bin 'Afīf, *Al-Arbiṭa fī al-Mujtama' al-Muslim (Arbiṭa in Muslim society)*, (2015). Available: <https://waqfuna.com/waqf/?p=2648> (Accessed 27 Feb 2023)).

A second reason for adopting these courses is ignorance of God Almighty and alienation from Him. This thought can easily affect you if you do not have a strong fortress of faith, just as I was. This is likely due to a weak religious upbringing. Furthermore, the wheel of life and its rapid pace increase our need for God and faith, and if someone's faith weakens, they may be easily influenced by any idea. So, after leaving this thought behind, I have begun to learn Islamic knowledge and applied for a diploma in *Shari'a* (Islamic law). Finally, some people may find this thought appealing because they seek a spiritual life without being bound by religion – (Wisam).

The majority of those affected by promoters [of contemporary spirituality] are often unaware of their Islamic teachings. Though they may be conservative, their ignorance of Islam makes them more vulnerable to deception and Islamisation. Another reason for this is the strong desire for knowledge and practices that do not require effort, which are perceived as magical solutions that improve people's lives ... In my case, I had multiple phobias, so when I heard that Timeline Therapy could help me, I enrolled in a course – (Lama).

I have been trying to get pregnant for 17 years. All my attempts at medical treatment were unsuccessful, so I was very frustrated. A friend recommended that I try energy therapy and the law of attraction ... However, as it appeared to be a *Shirk* act (association with God), I halted and asked for forgiveness from God - (Arwa).

One of the important reasons is the lack of doctrinal knowledge. Having encountered an empty heart, it [contemporary spirituality] took possession of it. We have been practising Islam without knowledge, which empties our souls. I practised some techniques in ignorance and almost fell into *Shirk* (association with God). Previously, my knowledge of *Shirk* involved only action, and I was unaware of *Shirk* of the heart, so my faith was polluted by this esoteric thought [spiritual teachings]. In addition, I believe that weakness

in faith and worship is a contributing factor. While I wished to become a better Muslim, I mistakenly believed that these practices would enhance my religious growth ... I also frequently practised energy cleansing at home to increase my vitality and activity. I attended energy cleansing sessions for healing to clear out my emotions and reduce negativity since I had problems with my husband ... It is also possible that some individuals use these practices [spiritual practice] because they desire a flexible, rubberised Islamic religion that can be adapted to their individual needs – (Malak).

The majority of individuals I have observed in such groups are in mental or social distress, whether they have suffered from divorce, orphanhood, their parents' divorce or lack of family stability, but they have found happiness, security and containment in these groups – (Dalal).

The participant then elaborated on her own experience:

People may also wish to be free from religious restrictions but, at the same time, believe in a higher power, which provides a sense of mental comfort. To me, however, it was more about understanding God and His actions. My understanding of the relationship between God and myself as a servant was incorrect. I misunderstood the meaning of worship, believing that if I worshipped God, I should receive something in return. When my prayers were not answered, I became angry with God - *Astaghfirullah*, and I stopped praying the five daily prayers. When I realised my understanding of God was incorrect, I had countless questions about God, his actions, fate and good and evil ... The first time I heard about the law of attraction on TV, I assumed it was the answer to all my questions, and from there, I began to attribute everything to myself instead of God, thinking that I was attracting events and blaming myself for the bad ones. However, as I became aware that the law of attraction was an illusion, the questions arose again, and I was able to find answers through my exploration of Islamic knowledge. In this regard, my experience was based on an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of God and His actions – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

The theme of 'Participants' Conditions' underscores the intricate interplay between personal circumstances and the appeal of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. A common thread among all 11 participants was their use of spiritual practices due to personal issues, ignorance of Islamic teachings, and the allure of quick fixes (see graph 4.2).

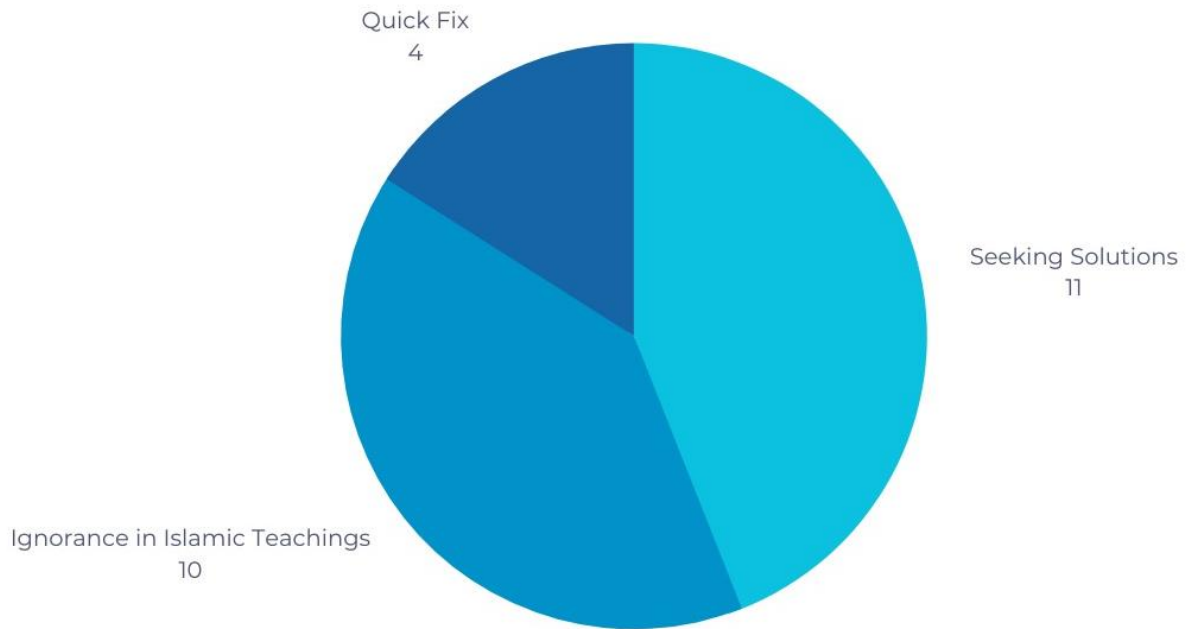
A primary driver for participants' engagement with spiritual practices was their quest for solutions to unresolved personal challenges. These ranged from mental health issues to physical ailments and social concerns. Al-Ḥamza's assertion resonates with this observation, noting that 'the pursuit of worldly benefits, such as health and enhanced social relations, is a significant motivator for the allure of spiritual philosophies among Muslims'.²³⁵ The perceived simplicity and immediacy of spiritual solutions further amplified their appeal. The allure of contemporary spirituality, as perceived by four participants, lies in its promise of swift solutions, often marketed as 'magical' remedies to life's challenges. This predilection for quick fixes could be attributed to the fast-paced modern lifestyles, where instant gratification is sought, and there's a yearning for control in an increasingly unpredictable world.

A significant number of participants, specifically seven, turned to contemporary spirituality during periods of mental distress. While some sought solace from feelings of despair, trauma and loss, others grappled with more severe conditions like depression and emotional burnout. However, the journey into contemporary spirituality was not without its pitfalls. The overwhelming responsibility of controlling every life event, as propagated by concepts like Karma and the law of attraction often backfires, intensifying feelings of stress, self-blame and anxiety. The unrealistic expectation of having complete control, and the subsequent realisation of its impossibility, further spiraled them into feelings of helplessness and self-doubt.

²³⁵ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 420 - 421.

Ignorance of Islamic teachings emerged as another significant factor influencing participants' gravitation towards spiritual practices. Ten participants opined that a limited understanding of Islam rendered individuals susceptible to misinterpretations of the Qur'an and potential deviations. Such ignorance, they felt, made individuals prone to 'deception and Islamisation'. This aligns with al-Sayf's assertion that 'a solid foundation in Islamic doctrine is pivotal to safeguarding against teachings that deviate from the faith. Without this foundation, there's a heightened risk of individuals embracing non-Islamic knowledge or being misled by teachings incongruent with their beliefs'. Some participants candidly admitted that their limited understanding of Islam led them to unknowingly engage in practices that bordered on *Shirk* (associating partners with God). A few others expressed that their initial state of confusion and quest for answers drew them to spiritual teachings. However, a deeper introspection made them realise that the answers they sought were embedded within their own Islamic faith. This realisation emphasised the value of grounding oneself in their own religious traditions rather than before learning about other perspectives.

Given the findings, the allure of quick fixes and the promise of control inherent in spiritual practices are undeniably compelling. However, it's paramount to remain vigilant of the potential pitfalls these practices might bring, while maintaining a strong connection to one's foundational Islamic beliefs. The inclination towards these spiritual practices may not always be rooted in a genuine quest for spiritual enlightenment but could be influenced by societal pressures and individual challenges. Adopting these practices with a utilitarian lens, where they are primarily viewed as tools for immediate gains, risks overlooking their deeper intricacies and foundational philosophies.



Graph 4.2: Engagement is influenced by participants' conditions.

Theme Three – Multiple Authorities:

Participants' engagement with contemporary spirituality often began with multiple authorities. In addition to the means used to transmit spiritual teachings, participants also discussed how these teachings were sold, significantly contributing to their popularity. There was also a role played by the instructors who imparted these teachings.

- **Subtheme One - Authority of Means**

Several means contributed significantly to introducing and encouraging participants' engagement with contemporary spirituality. Various old and new media channels contributed to reach all interviewees and introduce them to spiritual concepts and beliefs. Six participants reported becoming acquainted with contemporary spirituality or specific components of its activities through their kin and friendship networks. Four participants mentioned that they were familiar with specific activities of contemporary spirituality through travel, and one interviewee

stated that her experience with contemporary spirituality began at work. In this subtheme, the data was gathered from answers to the following questions: How did you become acquainted with contemporary spirituality, and what was the beginning of your experience like?

Q: How did you become acquainted with contemporary spirituality, and what was the beginning of your experience like?

As for my sister, she became involved in spiritual energy activities after two of her friends became interested in this field. There is no doubt or dispute about the influence of friends. The role they play in causing any social phenomenon or problem is enormous ... As for myself, I learned about Feng Shui when I was studying in the USA from a Korean colleague. I started reading more about it and applying its principles in my home – (Ekram).

This story begins with an ad I received on WhatsApp about a graphology course – the study of character through handwriting ... This ad intrigued me, so I attended the course – (Lama).

My first step was to read translated books on self-development. I then went online and started watching online videos – (Karima).

I was not acquainted with the concept of energy until a relative told me about it as a newly discovered science, a medical speciality. This led me to attend a Reiki course and learn about it. Then, I was greatly influenced by the book on Karma, written by a Saudi writer – (Zeena).

Al-Riyadh newspaper published information about free developmental courses organised by *al-Bābṭayn* charitable centre. I attended a course entitled 'Awaken the Giant Within', which was widely popularised in the country. Then, I enrolled in online classes on energy

and read self-development books. Later, I started taking courses on energy and the law of attraction – (Malak).

The first time I read about the concept of energy was through an online forum, which I guess was established by Salāh al-Rāshid. Then I attended courses on NLP, hypnosis and timeline therapy. After a while, we heard of the law of attraction, and I read the first book to promote it, *The Secret*, which made me stop everything as I felt these practices were incompatible with Islam and would ruin my faith ... Seven years later, a friend who believes in these topics convinced me to practice the energy of Alpha and the law of attraction as solutions for my infertility. Even though I didn't believe in these ideas, her words rang in my head in a moment of weakness when I felt extremely frustrated. I was like, 'Why not try what she said'? – (Arwa).

I was first acquainted with contemporary spirituality through an interview with Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid I had come across on an Arabic TV channel. On the second day, I purchased all of his books on self-development and the law of attraction. Then, I read esoteric books on numbers and philosophical topics ... I read all the recommended books in the courses I attended, such as those by Deepak Chopra, Joseph Murphy, Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Lynne McTaggart and Ṣalāḥ al-Rāshid. I visited Kuwait twice after some time to attend Reiki and anger management classes – (Dalal).

My work required that I enrol in a package of educational courses provided by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. The courses included an introductory lecture on NLP, which attracted me to enrol in all of the coach's NLP courses. In addition to NLP courses, I also studied energy and Reiki. My attention was captivated by Mariam Nour's television programs on satellite channels, and I did not miss a single episode. As a result of our admiration for Nour, I visited her institution in Lebanon and enrolled in one of her courses. Although her lectures resembled her TV programs, she overstepped her bounds by emphasising philosophical meanings she did not address on television – (Muna).

Social media platforms significantly influence the popularity of contemporary spirituality. This is due to their relevance to the fast-paced nature of the modern world. It facilitates teachers' access and gives them platforms to influence considerable numbers of people worldwide; it was at the forefront of their strategy to reach people ... and today's youth often listen to easily reachable influencers. I would not turn on the TV or read a book; rather, I would like to gain knowledge as quickly as possible. Even if I was highly interested in a particular topic and found it on YouTube, I would speed up the video to get the long and short of the topic ... My friend introduced me to these concepts through the Snapchat account of a Saudi trainer. Later, similar accounts began to appear; Snapchat began to display related accounts, including an Egyptian trainer whose videos I also watched. I spent a lot of time watching their content on Snapchat and YouTube. Furthermore, I listened to a Kuwaiti life coach podcast, Tony Robbins and Deepak Chopra's interview with Oprah. I have also practised Yoga with an American instructor via YouTube – (Samar).

In addition, the participant shared the following experience:

When I arrived in the UK during my scholarship period, I was shocked because I had not expected the situation to be that way, and I almost became depressed. So, when I heard about the university consultation – which was a free resource - I made an appointment with a therapist who introduced me to exercises like meditation, breathing exercises and Yoga – (Samar).

When I was in high school, a relative gave me books on Reiki, Macrobiotics, NLP and *Unlimited Communication*. Then I started to watch Mariam Nour's programmes on macrobiotics. The media plays a key role in promoting these practices; Yoga practice appeared in a Kuwaiti soap opera, with a rich man's wife regularly practising it to rid herself of negative energy. Similarly, cartoons have been influenced by spirituality; my

nephew watched a cartoon movie on Cartoon Network presenting a bear meditating, and he began to imitate it – (Wisam).

The participant also discussed the following books commonly used by spiritual groups:

In the spiritual groups I joined, Osho's articles and Eckhart Tolle's books were frequently discussed. We read *Stillness Speaks*, *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth* and discussed their concepts. I have also read Wayne Dyer's *The Power of Intention* and *You'll See It When You Believe It*. Besides reading *The Magic* by Rhonda Byrne and *The Intention Experiment*. A spiritual teacher gave me the Sufi book of *Mathnawī* and directed me to read it to raise my awareness. I was also instructed to read books by Ibn 'Arabī and al-Ḥallāj, which were unavailable in Saudi Arabia, and were to be sent to me by a specific online accounts. In all three [spiritual] groups I joined, we read and discussed *The Forty Rules of Love*. The members expressed their admiration for and adherence to its ideas – (Wisam).

First, I came across a tweet on Twitter. Then, I started reading a book on parapsychology ... Now I regularly listen to random videos on YouTube and follow Snapchat accounts for influencers speaking about the law of attraction and Karma ... There is a particular teacher that my sister and several friends have told me about; they regularly watch her videos on YouTube – (Maram).

Summary and Analysis:

Participants in Saudi society were exposed to spiritual teachings through various means, such as books, television shows, social media, travelling and word of mouth. Like a snowball rolling downhill, participants sought more information after their initial exposure. This snowball effect demonstrates the power of different media channels to introduce contemporary spirituality to participants and encourage them to explore it further. These external authorities had such a strong influence that it outweighed participants' hesitation or discomfort with some practices,

and they returned to them as a result. For example, one participant stopped practising the law of attraction when she felt it was not aligned with Islam. Despite her initial hesitation, she eventually returned to it after her friend convinced her in a moment of weakness. This suggests that the power of external authority can significantly override one's internal reservations, causing them to take action they may otherwise have avoided. Even if the individual initially felt something was not in line with their beliefs and values, the power of external authority can be strong enough to make them reconsider their stance and shape their behaviour.

All participants reported that TV channels, the internet, newspapers, books, and magazines were all influential in introducing them to spiritual concepts and activities. In addition to Arab satellite channels, the participants mentioned that American spiritual programs that featured influencers and spiritual activities, such as Oprah Winfrey's show, were popular. This aligns with Hayfā' al-Rashīd in that 'the content that young Muslims consume is not limited to Arab satellite channels; they also watch foreign television programs and films that are concerned with spiritual matters. Some of these programs and films have been translated into Arabic'.²³⁶ These programs provided a platform for spiritual influencers to share their messages and granted participants access to a wider range of spiritual content. Translating these programs and films into Arabic makes them more accessible to a larger audience. Overall, these means of exposure demonstrate the power of the media as an external authority in shaping participants' behaviour and decisions.

The internet is the most influential tool for spreading spiritual teachings to interviewees. Social media platforms are particularly useful for this purpose, as they are suitable for the fast-paced nature of modern life and make information accessible to a wide range of people. Today, social media spread information as quickly as the push of a button, making it accessible to almost all segments of society. Most importantly, it even provides spiritual ideas for those not searching for them. Through social media, participants discovered spiritual teachers from Saudi Arabia, the Arab world, the West and the East, allowing them to access a range of external authorities. Additionally, social media algorithms recommend similar accounts for the user to follow based

²³⁶ Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Asr al-Jadīd*, 567.

on the accounts they have already interacted with, helping to maintain user engagement with spiritual content.

Books have also helped participants become more acquainted with spiritual teachings. Respondents have read books written by Saudi, Arab Western and Eastern spiritual instructors in their language and in translation. This suggests they have access to a wide variety of books, which helps them expand their spiritual knowledge further. They have also expressed interest in various topics, such as healing and self-help books, books on cosmic laws, esoteric concepts, and Sufi literature. This indicates that teachers from various parts of the world have contributed to influencing the views and behaviours of participants. Overall, books are essential sources of information for those actively seeking knowledge and guidance on spiritual traditions, as they allow a more in-depth understanding of spiritual beliefs and teachings.

- **Subtheme Two - Authority of Selling Contemporary Spirituality**

This subtheme explores how specific selling strategies have influenced the spread of spiritual teachings among participants. Based on eight respondents' experiences, various methods were employed to sell spiritual teachings. These strategies included storytelling, recruiting, offering free courses at a high price and using persuasive language to promote further courses. The subtheme title of 'selling contemporary spirituality' was derived from the expressions of participants. While some participants described selling strategies, three individuals used the term 'sell': 'These folks know how to sell their merchandise and attract customers, treating them in the most professional way possible'; 'they are typically sellers' and 'these people use specific selling strategies to recruit people'. In this subtheme, data were gathered from answers to the following questions: How did you become acquainted with contemporary spirituality, and what was the beginning of your experience like?

Q: How did you become acquainted with contemporary spirituality, and what was the beginning of your experience like?

First, I attended a free course entitled 'Awaken the Giant Within'. Then I enrolled in intensive courses on energy and the law of attraction. Even though the courses were sometimes expensive (SAR 2,000 per course), I did not mind registering ... When a famous Arab figure recovered from illness, our energy coach attributed his recovery to the healing energy sent to him by a healing session group she had joined. She was certain that his improved health was due to his increased energy – (Malak).

It was fascinating to hear the coach's stories of how energy healing and the law of attraction practices changed her and her trainees' lives for the better. For instance, she became thin, and her husband's hair grew back after he had been bald for some time... The registration fee for the Reiki course was extremely high. It cost SAR 1,000 for three days. I begged my mom to give me the amount, and she agreed – (Zeena).

When I heard the Kuwaiti life coach speak of the many cases she had treated, I was extremely excited to get life coaching sessions from her – (Samar).

As our trainer repeatedly attributed our difficulties to untreated childhood problems, she promoted her course, Theta Healing, as the solution to all our suffering and trauma; I honestly believed her for a very long time – (Maram).

I attended NLP, energy and Reiki courses. The cost of the last course I attended was exorbitant. It cost me SAR 8,000 a week. Later, I visited Mariam Nour's centre in Lebanon, which was 100% commercial. They charged me \$500 per week. When I asked for a discount, the instructor looked at me from top to bottom to assess whether I was wealthy and refused. Their goal is entirely materialistic, and they are typically sellers – (Muna).

The respondent then clarified the difference between free and charged courses:

All courses were for a fee; it was daylight robbery. However, free courses were offered for marketing purposes. People often continue to join such courses to become trainers and earn the money they lost on previous courses. It is like entering a whirlpool of courses and being dragged from one course to another and from one place to another to obtain the trainer's certificate – (Muna).

When I ordered Eckhart Tolle's book from a Facebook account, the sales representative was the supervisor of *Salām* group [a spiritual group]. After a while, he came to my workplace with new books as gifts and said they would be helpful for my personal growth. His actions were an attempt to lure me into their group. These folks know how to sell their merchandise and attract customers, treating them in the most professional way possible. A new member is treated as the palace lord for no reason other than money. They even carefully choose who meets with new customers; I was among them because I was told to have a compelling and charming way of dealing with others ... I call this field 'the knowledge of the affluent'. Most of those attending these courses are from the upper class due to their high cost – (Wisam).

With a unique spiritual group, the participant showed a more elaborate way of selling spiritual teachings:

In a course I attended, the trainer brought in people to validate and support what he was saying, either by nodding and agreeing with his beliefs or by coming up with stories that supported his ideas – (Wisam).

I registered for a graphology course after I heard it would heal my phobia. During the course, the graphology trainer told me that she urgently wanted to meet outside the course. She told me that I had the potential to become a coach and that it was my thing. She even said that my handwriting analysis showed my capabilities, emphasising that the trainers' team wanted me to join them and train in graphology. When I asked her what I

needed to do to join their training team, she said I had to attend five more courses, but I found the price too expensive – (Lama).

Afterwards, the participant described why some individuals are attracted to spiritual teachings:

One of the main reasons people are drawn to this concept is the sense of superiority: attendees of private courses feel that they possess abilities that others do not possess. The study of telepathy, for example, makes participants boast about their unique abilities and, as a result, they become the talk of the town – (Lama).

After seeing their ads online, I ordered esoteric books. However, I was surprised by the representative's curiosity. He asked questions about topics that interested me without bringing the books I had ordered. During that period, one lady enrolled in the courses I was offering. She became friends with me, and we discussed deep topics like the interpretation of the Qur'an and its connection to energy and esoteric knowledge. The way this girl approached me and everything about her made me feel like she was recruiting me. When she found that I agreed with her ideas, she considered me ready to receive esoteric knowledge and introduced me to her esoteric teacher: a Syrian living in Saudi Arabia who called himself 'the father of esoteric' and gave me the books I purchased earlier, except one book on esoteric numbers, which he said was not suitable for my level of consciousness – (Dalal).

The respondent also described the selling method below:

These people use specific selling strategies to recruit people. They promise them fame and success. When the esoteric teacher realised I needed specific certificates to begin training officially, he presented me with three fake certificates: psychological counselling, marital counselling and family counselling, all signed and stamped by an authorised centre in Madinah City. Without attending a course, I received certificates. Obviously, I

burned them and did not use them. In addition, the esoteric teacher said he could make me a famous trainer whose courses are attended by people from around the Arab world – (Dalal).

According to the respondent, a third selling method was the following:

The teacher, who I believe was not a Muslim, invited me to attend a course, which I believe was designed to recruit me. Additionally, I think that the thirty attendees were there only to convince me - for they were all members of the herd. As the teacher spoke, they nodded their heads in agreement. There is the possibility that they were brainwashed, ignorant or part of the recruitment process. This is because the teacher spoke against Islamic beliefs, and the attendees seemed impressed despite being Saudi Muslims. Their full approval made me feel that the session was directed at recruiting and reassuring me. It was a type of psychological trick because people are usually comfortable in crowds – (Dalal).

As a final selling method, the participant suggested the following:

As I kept arguing, the teacher felt I was not ready to receive all the information he offered and transferred the course to a meditation session. The teacher emphasised that esoteric knowledge, Karma and reincarnation are aspects of Islam, and he introduced me to a man who claimed to have studied *ʿAqīda* (Islamic doctrine), although I believe he only did this to reassure me of the course's validity. He even tried to convince me that Islam had no so-called 'creed'. During my recruitment, this man wore a beard and short thobe, but his true appearance became apparent after I left the group.²³⁷ They would do anything persuasive to carry out their plan – (Dalal).

²³⁷ This is the typical appearance of a Salafi individual in Saudi Arabia who is devoted to the Islamic religion.

Summary and Analysis:

Based on eight participants' experiences, it seems that spiritual teachings are disseminated through specific selling and marketing tactics. Five respondents' experiences show they were influenced by certain selling methods, whereas three participants directly stated that trainers used specific selling strategies to sell their courses. These strategies included using storytelling, recruitment, offering free courses, offering courses at a high price and using persuasive language to encourage participants to buy additional courses. They also promise that taking their courses or applying their advice will help people reach their goals. Similarly, Carrette and King describe contemporary spirituality as follows: 'From Feng Shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to Yoga weekends, spirituality is big business. It promises to soothe away the angst of modern living, and to offer an antidote to shallow materialism'.²³⁸ The strategies appear to be designed to create a trusting atmosphere, leading people to believe that they must purchase the spiritual course or follow the trainer's advice to achieve the desired results.

According to two participants, they were introduced to contemporary spirituality through free courses, which motivated them to seek out more classes and engage in spiritual activities. One respondent suggested that free courses were a marketing tool to get people interested in paying for courses. These courses provide a cost-free introduction to contemporary spirituality and are often stepping stones to more spiritual courses and activities. As is typical in business, it is as if the free courses were used to simulate the effect of free samples on consumer behaviour. These free courses allow potential customers to get a taste of what the more in-depth courses and activities have to offer, allowing them to decide if it is worth enrolling in the more expensive courses. This is similar to offering free samples in a store to encourage customers to purchase the product.

Five participants spoke about high-priced courses, which seem to be a result of the marketing tactics of the free course provider. As expressed by one participant, this selling method may

²³⁸ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 1.

attempt to target a certain kind class of person. Several participants reported that they had enrolled in expensive courses, although they were too expensive for them. The participants' stories suggest that this selling method is appealing to people because, as one participant expressed, it provides knowledge that is not accessible to everyone. The exclusivity that individuals obtain from expensive courses may give them a sense of distinction similar to the feeling they have when wearing luxurious clothing. As a result, even those from lower socioeconomic classes who could not afford such courses attempted to take out loans to attend them. This distinction may be especially attractive to those from lower social classes because it gives them a sense of belonging to a higher class, even if this only comes from attending an expensive course.

Five participants reported being persuaded by the stories narrated by spiritual coaches. This suggests that the use of case studies and stories relating success or healing to the practices employed is an effective selling tool to attract the attention of interviewees to the information presented. Participants noted that the stories were captivating and made the practices more convincing and compelling, making them more likely to try them out. This is likely because the stories humanise the practices, making them more tangible and easier to relate to. They allow interviewees to visualise the potential outcomes and feel a sense of connection to the stories. Furthermore, stories often evoke strong emotions, which can increase the influence of practices and the likelihood that interviewees will be motivated to try them. Finally, they provide a real-world example which creates an environment of trust, as participants feel that the information is credible.

According to three interviewees, they were approached by spiritual trainers and persuaded to join a specific spiritual group, or as one respondent put it, 'recruited'. Through the use of the same word, recruitment appears to be a method of selecting, stimulating or persuading individuals to become members of spiritual groups or networks. That being said, recruitment here does not signify a conspiracy theory. Instead, this process appears to be similar to that of general recruitment systems. This is regardless of whether it is used to recruit distinguished

employees for a company or for other purposes. Recruiting into the spiritual milieu appears to be an effective strategy for marketing, selling and spreading spiritual products. It may be slow and attract fewer individuals than other selling methods. It appears, however, that the impact of recruitment will last longer and attract more people in the long run. This is especially true if the recruit is trained and begins recruiting groups. An example of recruitment methods is the presence of attendees in a course who, according to two participants, are part of an acting scene intended to recruit them. Attendees' approval of everything the teacher presents creates an environment of credibility and acceptance, which can be very attractive to potential recruits. It also makes the teacher seem knowledgeable and capable, increasing the likelihood of someone wanting to join the group. Furthermore, seeing others' agreements in a course can make potential recruits more comfortable.

- **Subtheme Three - Hierarchical Authority**

Hierarchical authority is a third type of spiritual authorities that emerged from the data and contributed to spreading spiritual teachings among the participants. Seven participants spoke about a chain of authorities that transmit spiritual teachings through the spiritual milieu, beginning with a teacher and ending with a recipient. This subtheme investigates the influence of spiritual teachers on interviewees in various ways. According to participants' experiences, there are three types of hierarchical authorities: direct hierarchy, branched hierarchy and organised hierarchy. The data in this subtheme was gathered in response to the following question: Could you please elaborate on the experience that you have had?

Q: Could you please elaborate on the experience that you have had?

I believe that it is our hearts that guide us. When I have a strong feeling, I will follow my heart ... In my university years, I began to view the videos of the [Saudi] coach. I have watched almost all of her videos, and I still do so every night. I learned the Hawkins scale of consciousness, the concept of soul contracts and cosmic laws from her. I try to apply

these concepts to my way of thinking and my practices. I also want to join her energy cleansing courses – (Karima).

Following the Kuwaiti's coach instructions, I embraced this thought and believed in it wholeheartedly. She was my primary reference and my role model. I listened to her daily and her words affected me greatly. I followed her on social media and retweeted almost all her tweets ... It was the first time I heard ideas such as “follow your heart” – (Zeena).

I believe that I should always follow my heart and intuition ... I liked the coach's insights after listening to her episodes. Taking a course with her will help me grow – (Maram).

My family and I watched all the programmes presented by Mariam Nour on satellite channels, and we followed all her instructions. We made macrobiotic diet recipes at home exactly as she directed. She advised us to follow our hearts since they will direct us on the right path. We would repeat her words as if they were the Qur'an and treat each other as if we had sinned if we missed applying her instructions. Our admiration for Nour extended beyond applying her instructions, embracing her thoughts and reading her books. I travelled to her institution in Lebanon to meet her in person and to enrol in her sessions. Even though it was not common in our culture back then for a lady to travel alone, I waged war against my family and flew to her ... In her sessions, Mariam Nour was proud to be one of Osho's students, calling him an enlightened master and describing how she and others bowed down to him. Nour not only belongs to Osho's school, but she also financially supports his institution – (Muna).

I attended several courses and sessions with my [Saudi] coach, a loyal student of Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid. In her courses, she often expressed her admiration for the teachings he offered and taught us a technique he proposed, which we should repeat every day. She also introduced every new cosmic law that Western coaches offered. She also advised us to always follow our hearts first instinct – (Malak).

My sister became acquainted with a group of energy healers located inside and outside the Kingdom: from Saudi, Egypt and Kuwait, where their big boss was. Based on the instructions of a Saudi healer, my sister had remote energy healing sessions with the Kuwaiti healer; the boss of the healers' group – (Ekram).

I followed a Kuwaiti life coach and listened to all of her podcast episodes. I also followed an American Yoga instructor on YouTube and practised with her ... I invested much time watching a [Saudi] and an Egyptian trainers' videos. I was so impressed with them that I watched almost all of their videos and applied many of the ideas and techniques they conveyed – (Samar).

Next, the participant discussed a branching form of authority as follows:

I was very impressed with a Saudi psychologist I followed on social media ... With time, I found out that she was conveying the teachings of Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid, Louise Hayes and others, which made me watch their videos too. The books she was quoting were written by Westerners who were influenced by Eastern philosophies ... I almost listened to all of the podcasts of a Kuwaiti life coach who, I believe, took courses from Tony Robbins – (Samar).

Because I admired Wayne Dyer, I memorised his book *You'll See It When You Believe It...* I followed and imitated all of the practices offered by Mariam Nour... I was also instructed to read books by Ibn 'Arabī and al-Ḥallāj, which were unavailable in Saudi Arabia, and were to be sent to me by a specific online accounts ... Osho was very popular in the spiritual group I was a part of, where people regularly downloaded his articles, read them and discussed them – (Wisam).

Following this, the respondent described a branching authority as follows:

I worked with a Saudi trainer who hosted a French teacher to offer a course on Feng Shui ... the coach frequently mentioned that she received her knowledge from outside the country ... Our [Saudi] teacher is very inspired by *The Forty Rules of Love* that he extracted thirty more rules from the book and taught them in his courses – (Wisam).

Next, the respondent described a form of organised authority as follows:

Salām group members always repeated phrases such as “follow your heart”, but the fact is, they did not implement this idea. They cannot. In fact, they all followed the instructions of their spiritual father, Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid – (Wisam).

When asked more about how the group followed their teacher’s instructions, the respondent replied:

Salām group has many branches around the world led by supervisors with whom Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid frequently communicate. Every week, al-Rāshid sends guidance to supervisors, who in turn circulate it to their groups’ members so that they may apply it simultaneously. Our group supervisor in Jeddah never took a step without al-Rāshid’s approval. His books were also circulated and followed. If he praised a specific figure or claimed they were avatars, all members would read books written by this praised man. To apply the instructions, we used to meet once a week on the beach to meditate, send intentions, chat and drink coffee. We usually met up in restaurants and cafes, and some of us also travelled together. Taking part in the activities, getting to know the members of the group and becoming friends was not arbitrary but part of a program – (Wisam).

Based on my research, I concluded that all spiritual trainers are not random individuals working independently; they form a system and work systematically according to schemes within a global organisation - whether Freemasonry or the World Organisation.

To create a new world, each trainer markets some of the principles of the organisation. Although trainers appear to serve different spiritual schools, they all serve the same concept. In various ways, they all argued that we are divine beings and spirits of Allah, so we should follow our hearts – (Dalal).

Further details were provided by the participant as follows:

In Madinah City, the esoteric teacher runs *Khalāya* (cells) that meet regularly and discuss topics related to religion and philosophy. I found this teacher's exact beliefs on a Masonic website, including the afterlife, esoteric numbers and cosmic energy. They also use the same selling strategies when recruiting people by promising fame and success – (Dalal).

Following that, the participant described a conflict she had observed:

It was my responsibility to coordinate Ibrāhīm al-Faqī's courses. During his course, an unfortunate incident occurred in Kuwait: a water pipe burst, and sewage poured over the audience. As a matter of fact, I believe this incident was fabricated since al-Faqī's path changed, and he may have departed from the global system to which he had belonged; Freemasonry. Thus, it is possible that this system began to fight against him in a variety of ways. After opening the door for al-Faqī in the Arab world, several run-ins occurred, so they attempted to close it – (Dalal).

Summary and Analysis:

The respondents reported receiving spiritual teachings from a variety of spiritual teachers. In addition to Arab trainers from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon and the Maghreb countries, there were also Western and Eastern spiritual teachers and mystics. In reviewing how participants described the authority structures they encountered in their spiritual experiences, I

identified three main types of authorities: direct hierarchical authority, branched hierarchical authority and organised hierarchical authority. This division helped to understand the different types of authority structures that may be present and how they can intersect in reality.

Direct Hierarchical Authority

All respondents said certain spiritual teachers had directly influenced them. In this study, a teacher's direct influence on a participant is called 'direct hierarchical authority'. Such authority can be described as a narrow hierarchical influence involving two levels, the coach and the trainee, through various means. The direct authority of spiritual teachers was manifested in the participants' admiration of their teachings, which they constantly followed and embraced. This kind of authority takes several forms:

- Several participants watched daily videos and posts by a spiritual teacher over a course of months or years. It stands to reason that exposure to the same teacher's videos and posts every day over an extended period will likely impact one's thoughts, interests and, consequently, convictions and behaviours. This is because a person's beliefs, values and attitudes are strongly influenced by their environment, including the people they interact with, the media they consume and the books they read.
- In one case, the participant was explicitly instructed to read Sufi books at a time when reading such books was forbidden in Saudi Arabia. This shows that the trainers had a great deal of influence over the participants, and they were able to use that influence to encourage the participants to do something that was against the laws of the country. This demonstrates the power of trainers to shape the behaviour of participants.
- In another case, the participant was so enthralled by an author's book that she claimed to have memorised it. Her memorisation can be seen as genuine memorisation or as an expression of strong attachment, admiration and repeated reading of the book. This

expression demonstrates the extent to which the participant was captivated by the author's message and the author's impact on her. Memorising a book is a difficult task, and it shows just how deeply moved the participant was by the trainer's words. It also suggests that she was deeply engaged in the content, likely reading it over and over again.

- One participant expressed that she considered the spiritual teacher a role model who guided her followers to practise the spiritual techniques she offered. The strong influence is evident in the interviewee's descriptions of her admiration for the teacher and the extent to which she applied her teachings.
- A participant reported that it was not customary for Saudi women to travel alone as if it were a cultural authority. She clarified, however, that she had waged war against her family and travelled abroad to attend a course with a spiritual teacher. This decision suggests that the participant rebelled against her family's wishes and cultural norms to pursue her spiritual journey. Furthermore, her resistance indicates that the spiritual teacher's authority held more weight than cultural and family authority in this instance. As a result, this conflict between authorities was inevitable and demonstrated the power of the spiritual teacher over cultural norms in this case.
- The influence of spiritual authority, which one participant compared to the influence of the Qur'an, had a surprising power. According to the participant, she and her family followed the instructions of a spiritual teacher as carefully as if they were practising the teachings of the Qur'an. They considered themselves culpable if they failed to follow them. Such a statement indicates the power of spiritual authority that led the participant to utter it. In theory, the authority of the Qur'an is unmatched by any other authority in Saudi society. This authority is reflected in the participants' statements that they felt guilty if they failed to follow the teachings of the spiritual teacher as if they were failing to follow the Qur'an. This also indicates that the Qur'an authority is central to the participant and is respected and taken seriously.

- Seven respondents reported being guided to follow their hearts and intuition. This is because, in spiritual teachings, the individual is encouraged to be in contact with their inner wisdom and to use it as a guide rather than relying on external sources of information. This allows them to make decisions most aligned with their values and goals. However, as they follow this advice, they are, in fact, following an external source: their spiritual teachers. This advice may seem contradictory in light of the advice to follow their hearts. The paradox arises because, on the one hand, they are told to trust their inner guidance and intuition. Yet, on the other hand, they are also asked to trust the advice of an external authority. This can be confusing and cause individuals to question their decisions.²³⁹

Branched Hierarchical Authorities

The second type of 'hierarchical authority' that appeared in participants' experiences is 'branched authority' - a kind of breadth and ramification through the levels and layers of the spiritual hierarchy (three layers or more). For example, a participant follows a teacher who transmits the teachings of a higher leader. However, this type of authority does not appear to be systematic or organised, and it is often unclear where this type of authority ends due to its manifold nature.

Three respondents' experiences indicated their spiritual teachers were part of a larger chain of authorities in the spiritual milieu. The teachers often passed on the teachings of higher authorities, including spiritual figures and books. From these examples, we can see how Western and Arab authorities imparting Eastern knowledge have shaped the spiritual teachings of Saudi teachers. For this reason, spiritual trainers do not typically provide original information; rather, they promote the teachings of other teachers, whether they are Arab, Western or Eastern. The trainers' constant references to other teachers (the higher authority) served as a form of

²³⁹ See Chapter Five for more details.

marketing that triggered participants' desire to listen to them, resulting in a distinct division of authorities. This intentional or unintentional marketing may deepen the audience's experience of contemporary spirituality and expand the circle of spiritual authorities who influence them. When trainers reference other teachers and spiritual authorities, they create a sense of credibility and trust. It also implies that the trainer has a certain amount of knowledge about a particular topic, so people may feel more inclined to listen to them.

Organised Chain of Authorities

The third type of 'hierarchical authority' that emerged from the data may refer to a systematised and planned chain of authorities. This chain transmits and implements instructions received from higher authorities. Consequently, this type of authority will likely consist of a purposeful network headed by one leader or several leaders (a chain of higher authorities) who guide the network by exercising their authority. Furthermore, this type of authority is likely to provide clear and consistent instructions expected to be followed and implemented by all lower-level members of the hierarchical structure. Four participants' experiences demonstrate that the concept of 'organised hierarchical authority' comes in different forms:

- The first is disseminating and promoting spiritual teachings and instructions from higher authorities to lower ones and to group members who work together to implement these instructions. This systematic application of work seems to have an effect similar to that of soldiers following their commander's orders. This process of passing on teachings and instructions provides guidance and direction to group members as they work together towards a common goal. It also allows higher authorities to ensure that the group is working together in a unified way.
- The second form of 'organised hierarchical authority' is a kind of cooperation between spiritual healers or teachers working under the authority of one leader, which sometimes involves financial support between authorities. The hierarchical authority structure

allows the leader to ensure that all healers are working towards the same goal. This structure also creates a sense of unity among the healers.

- The final form of ‘organised hierarchical authority’, as one participant put it, is a global organisation that helps to ensure that the leader’s vision is implemented uniformly and that all lower authorities are on the same page. This structure allows for a more systematic organisation, as the higher leader can easily and quickly communicate with all leaders and coordinate their efforts.

Despite the emphasis on self-authority in contemporary spirituality, the participants in this study were significantly influenced by various external authorities. For example, Şalaḥ al-Rāshid, a prominent proponent of self-authority, represents hierarchical authority by establishing organised groups worldwide that follow his instructions and regard him as their ‘spiritual father’. His leadership appears so influential that the members obey him and submit to everything he says. Considering the speed with which his instructions are implemented without any discussion, as explained, this indicates the extent to which the members submit to their ‘spiritual father’, who represents the highest authority within their groups. As one participant explained, it also demonstrates that members of spiritual groups who assert the premise of self-authority do not act on it. This is in accordance with Wood:

The people I researched were affected by numerous authorities, their lives becoming entwined with these in complex and subtle ways. The idea of separating their self-authority from these authorities, of seeing the former taking primacy over the latter, seems as false as viewing these people as moulded by such authorities as if they were inert lumps of clay.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Matthew Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

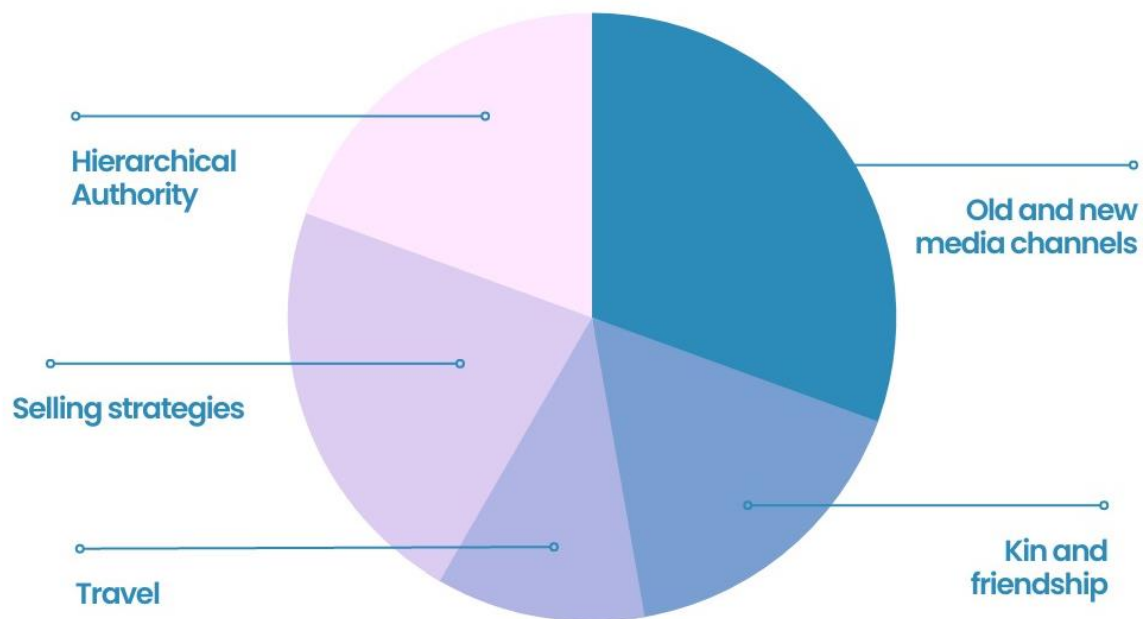
This suggests that humans are inherently social creatures who find comfort within the framework of external authority structures and that even those who reject the idea of external authority are unconsciously drawn to it. Essentially, the spiritual authority that disapproves of external authority is likely the first to apply it. On the other hand, those who advocate self-authority are often attracted to the structure and guidance of external authority figures.

The spiritual groups that constitute an 'organised hierarchical authority' do not necessarily appear this way to all members. However, in some cases, this authority resembled a youth club where members enjoyed themselves. According to one respondent, this indirect, fun method of organising and applying instructions was intentional, which attracted her to the group. It is possible that by providing a fun and relaxed atmosphere, the group was able to attract young members and give them spiritual instruction while creating an appealing environment. Therefore, this indirect approach to providing instruction may be more effective in attracting young people than a formal method.

From the information provided, it seems that one participant drew attention to potential links between contemporary spirituality and Freemasonry, implying that the latter may possess a spiritual element that warrants additional exploration. However, the claim that contemporary spirituality represents a cohesive structure directed by a higher power requires supporting evidence. The respondent also described spiritual trainers as working within a structured global organisation, which she believed to be Freemasonry. This led to the respondent's conclusion that a power struggle between the organisation and a specific trainer resulted from the trainer's decision to change his path, which challenged the organisation's structure. This action caused the organisation to take disciplinary action against the trainer, ultimately decreasing his influence. Nevertheless, this conspiracy theory cannot be taken seriously without further evidence supporting its claims. Therefore, to verify the information, it is necessary to provide verifiable evidence supporting the theory.

- **Conclusion of Multiple Authorities:**

The theme of 'Multiple Authorities' highlights the complex network of influences that have moulded the spiritual landscape in Saudi society. Various channels, from media outlets to personal interactions, have been instrumental in disseminating contemporary spirituality, leading to its widespread proliferation (See graph 4.3). This snowball effect, where one medium leads to another, is evident in participants' ongoing search for more information after their initial exposure. Such external media channels not only introduce but also reinforce spiritual concepts, occasionally overriding personal reservations. With the advent of media platforms like television shows, books and especially the internet, access to spiritual content has broadened. Concurrently, they have amplified the voices of certain spiritual influencers. The pervasive influence of these external authorities, exemplified by a participant revisiting a previously abandoned practice, raises questions about the independence of individual spiritual journeys. Are participants genuinely charting their spiritual paths, or are they subtly influenced by external entities?



Graph 4.3: Engagement is influenced by multiple authorities.

The commercial strategies employed to promote contemporary spirituality, from storytelling techniques to free courses, reveal a commercial undertone reminiscent of marketing tactics in our consumer-centric society. The allure of 'quick fixes' and the promise of transformative experiences, often with a significant price tag, can be perceived as commodifying spiritual enlightenment. This commercial angle invites reflection on whether such methods genuinely align with the proclaimed core values of spirituality or are simply lucrative business tactics.

The conspicuous presence of Western spiritual teachings, combined with Eastern philosophies and regional Arab figures, highlights the globalised nature of spiritual traditions in Saudi Arabia. This blend of Eastern and Western influences, occasionally adjusted to fit an Islamic context, raises important questions about authenticity, interpretation and potential cultural appropriation, especially when practices are adopted without a deep understanding of their foundational principles.

A notable observation from the study is the paradoxical concept of 'self-authority' within contemporary spirituality. Despite its vocal emphasis on personal autonomy and the rejection of external influences, the actual scenario is markedly different. Participants' experiences suggest a significant reliance on external authorities, whether in the form of instructional mediums, marketing techniques or the hierarchical structures within the spiritual domain. This dependence challenges the core principle of 'self-authority' that contemporary spirituality claims to uphold. It also prompts deeper reflection on the genuineness of this claim, especially when participants are introduced to the spiritual realm through various external avenues. Interestingly, the very spiritual teachers, who champion the renunciation of external authority, paradoxically exercise a form of external dominion themselves. They not only promote spiritual beliefs but also employ marketing tactics, prescribe specific practices, recruit individuals for propagation and institute organisational hierarchies.

The emphasis on self-authority in spiritual teachings suggests a relative approach to understanding truths and values, standing in stark contrast with the Sunnī tradition's unwavering commitment to the immutable truths of Islamic texts. Promoting individual interpretations without a foundation in traditional references can lead to diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings. This disparity, influenced by personal experiences and perceptions, can stray from the foundational tenets of Islamic texts. Furthermore, spiritual viewpoints on divinity, cosmology and existence often differ from traditional Islamic teachings, leading to selective engagement with texts and a broader range of interpretations.

In conclusion, the concept of 'self-authority' in the spiritual realm appears more idealistic than practical. Participants' narratives highlight the multifaceted role of external authorities in shaping, and at times directing, their spiritual beliefs and practices. Thus, 'self-authority' seems to be more a product of external influences than an intrinsic attribute.

Chapter V: Discussion

This thesis set out to explore the emergence and dissemination of contemporary spirituality within Saudi Arabia. As delineated in Chapter One, a confluence of historical events and evolutions has paved the way for the rise of contemporary spirituality. Originating in the 19th century and evolving throughout the 20th, contemporary spirituality, as defined in this study, represents a dynamic reconfiguration of older traditions tailored to the exigencies of modern societies. Distinct from traditional organised religions, it emphasises internal sources of authority over external dictates or established dogmas. The adaptability inherent in this repackaging has facilitated the assimilation of spiritual teachings within Saudi Arabia, a predominantly religiously conservative milieu.

Chapter Two elaborated on Saudi Arabia's pronounced religious conservatism, rooted in the Salafī strand of Sunnī Islam. As articulated by al-Salūmī, the Salafī doctrine not only permeates but also profoundly influences Saudi society, positioning it as conservative and resistant to change, save for religious directives and the guidance of 'Ulamā' (religious scholars).²⁴¹ This deep-seated ideology not only shapes societal norms and behaviours but also moulds public sentiment, reinforcing specific values. The pervasive influence of the Salafī interpretation of Islam underscores its governance in Saudi society. It elucidates the stringent opposition to practices perceived as incongruent with its interpretation, leading to the marginalisation of many Sufī practices, often labelled as taboo, subversive, or even heretical, encompassing notions of *Shirk* (association with God) for extended periods.²⁴²

Guided by the dual research inquiries— discerning the nature of spirituality that has surfaced in contemporary Saudi society and understanding the reasons behind its emergence— this study employed a qualitative lens. It delved into the burgeoning realm of contemporary spirituality in

²⁴¹ See Al-Salūmī, 'Ideologyā al-Mujtama' al-Su'ūdī wa al-Taghīr'.

²⁴² See Chapter Two in the current thesis.

Saudi Arabia, spotlighting the elements fuelling its growth. The research unearthed four main themes, as presented in the results chapter: the eclectic teachings of contemporary spirituality, its repackaged essence, participants' conditions and the interplay of multiple authorities. This chapter seeks to weave these themes together, categorising and discussing them under five distinct umbrellas: firstly, the portrayal of contemporary spirituality as a Western interpretation of Eastern traditions; secondly, its self-sacralising or self-blaming characteristics; thirdly, the significance of repackaging in spirituality; fourthly, the juxtaposition of self-authority against multiple external influences; and lastly, the pivotal role of individual needs in shaping spiritual engagements.

Furthermore, while not directly emerging as a theme from the study, I will also provide a comparative analysis of vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality. It's worth noting that the concept of vernacular religion was introduced earlier in the thesis in a dedicated section. This additional discussion aims to further enrich the discourse, offering a more comprehensive perspective on the subject.

Discussion of Category One: The Interplay of Western Interpretations and Eastern Spiritual Traditions

The research underscores the pivotal role of Western culture in facilitating the assimilation and propagation of Eastern spiritual ideologies within Saudi Arabia. Delving into the data, it becomes evident that many spiritual tenets embraced by participants, such as Karma, Yoga, Yin Yang and Chakras, have their roots in Eastern traditions. Yet, their introduction to the participants predominantly occurred through Western mediums—media, literature, prominent spiritual personalities and television broadcasts. This underscores the instrumental role of Western culture in the diffusion of Eastern spiritual ideologies within the Saudi context. This observation resonates with Frisk's assertion that while the foundational components of contemporary

spirituality are largely derived from Eastern religions, the primary trajectory of their cultural dissemination remains 'from West to rest'.²⁴³

This is further substantiated by the predominance of English as the primary medium for spiritual discourse, even in non-English-speaking regions. Moreover, many influential spiritual personalities and seminal works in this domain predominantly hail from Western nations, with the United States being particularly notable.²⁴⁴ Echoing this sentiment, Kuwaiti spiritual instructor, Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid, observed: 'The United States stands out for its contributions in evolving advanced theories and philosophies. It was only after these practices gained traction in the US that we became acquainted with Eastern traditions like Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga and Kung Fu, as well as Eastern religions like Buddhism and Taoism'.²⁴⁵

The synergy of technological advancements and the pervasive influence of Western culture has expedited the infusion of Eastern spiritual concepts into diverse global regions, including traditionally religiously conservative nations like Saudi Arabia. As articulated by Hayfā' al-Rashīd:

Eastern spiritual concepts, after garnering significant popularity in the West over several decades, have permeated the Muslim world through the conduit of contemporary spirituality. Absent the Western catalyst, these ideologies might have remained distant from Saudi Arabia. This phenomenon is a testament to both technological advancements and the reverence some Muslims hold for Western culture.²⁴⁶

The amalgamation of Eastern spiritual philosophies with Western interpretative lenses has rendered these teachings more palatable and intriguing to a global audience. The West, in its interaction with Eastern elements, has often recalibrated them to align with its cultural

²⁴³ Liselotte Frisk, 'Globalization or Westernization? New Age as a Contemporary Transnational Culture', in *New Age Religion and Globalization*, ed. Mikael Rothstein (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001), 39.

²⁴⁴ See *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Ṣalaḥ al-Rāshid, 'Nashrat Nādī al-Sa'āda' (Happiness Club Bulletin), *Fawasil*, 126: (2003), 1.

²⁴⁶ Al-Rashīd, *al-Taṭbīqāt al-Mu'āṣira li Falsafat al-Istishfā' al-Sharqiyya*, 273, 345.

paradigms, thereby igniting global curiosity and fostering their dissemination to regions previously unfamiliar with them. For Saudi nationals, traditionally circumspect about engaging with non-Islamic religious ideologies, the Westernised renditions of Eastern philosophies present a more acceptable avenue. These adaptations allow them to explore Eastern tenets without the apprehension of compromising their foundational beliefs or embracing entirely alien concepts.

In summation, the spiritual landscape in Saudi Arabia exhibits a pronounced imprint of Western spiritual trends, drawing heavily from Western spiritual luminaries and literature. This accentuates the profound influence of Western culture on global spiritual paradigms and underscores the necessity to understand the intricate tapestry of cultural interplays that sculpt spiritual beliefs and practices.

Discussion of Category Two: The Dual Nature of Contemporary Spirituality: Self-Sacralising and Self-Blaming

The study underscores the prominence of the self-sacralisation concept among its participants. This idea suggests that divinity is not an external, distant entity but is intrinsically present within individuals and the natural world. This sentiment is eloquently captured by a spiritual teacher's words: 'for ages, you have been taught that God is outside of your kingdom, somewhere in the fathoms of space. Many of you have believed this and accepted it as truth. But God, the principal cause of all life, has never been outside of you. It is you'.²⁴⁷ Many participants, perhaps inadvertently, resonated with this concept of self-sacralisation. Expressions such as 'Allah resides within me' or the ability to channel His 'energy' were common. This shift towards self-sacralisation in contemporary spirituality is echoed in the observations of Aupers and Houtman. They suggest that a defining characteristic of contemporary spirituality is the 'sacralisation of

²⁴⁷ Ramtha, *The White Book* (Washington: JZ Knight Publishing, 2004), 69.

the self'.²⁴⁸ They further contend that a central belief in today's spiritual milieu is 'the belief that in the deeper layers of the self, one finds a true, authentic and sacred kernel'.²⁴⁹ This beliefs contrast sharply with traditional religious teachings, which uphold the distinct separation between God and His creations. Houtman and Aupers further note that contemporary spirituality leans towards an immanent understanding of the sacred, a departure from traditional beliefs like the Christian view of a transcendent God.²⁵⁰ In the realm of Sunnī Islam, as articulated by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, 'there's a clear demarcation: God is entirely distinct from His creations, with no overlap in essence'.²⁵¹ This Sunnī perspective accentuates the divergence between traditional religious convictions and the notions of self-sacralisation prevalent in contemporary spirituality.

This belief in self-sacralisation has led some participants to endow humans with divine attributes. Hayfā' al-Rashīd elaborates on this, suggesting that 'the belief in one's divinity or possession of a divine essence inherently implies the attribution of supernatural abilities. This is evident in spiritual dialogues where it's commonly believed that humans can shape their own reality and destiny'.²⁵² Such convictions, however, are in direct contrast with Sunnī beliefs. Al-Sabt clarifies that 'only Allah wields absolute control and the power to heal'.²⁵³ This belief underscores that such omnipotence is solely God's domain, not a human's. As a result, when participants recognised the implications of these beliefs, many distanced themselves, concerned they were inadvertently assuming divine roles.

Yet, there's a flip side. While spiritual concepts, like the law of attraction and Karma, suggest empowerment and control over one's destiny, they can inadvertently lead to excessive self-

²⁴⁸ Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 'Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21 (2007): 201-222. See also Houtman and Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition', 305, 307.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁵⁰ See Houtman and Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition', 307.

²⁵¹ See Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Rad 'ala al-Jahmiyya wa al-Zanādiqa (Response to the Jahmiyyah and the Heretics)*, Taḥqīq: Sabrī Ibn Salāma Shāhīn (Riyadh: Dār al-Thabāt, 1424/2003), 150.

²⁵² Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 284.

²⁵³ See al-Sabt, *Al-Shāfi*.

blame when outcomes fall short of expectations. Numerous participants conveyed feelings of anxiety, guilt and a sense of helplessness, burdened by the belief that they were the sole architects of their adversities. Such self-blame can be particularly detrimental for those already navigating mental health challenges. Al-Ḥamza's observations resonate with this, noting the psychological strain of the Karma doctrine: 'Individuals adhering to Karma often grapple with persistent anxiety, feeling accountable for unavoidable misfortunes. The doctrine implies that one's current life is influenced by past life actions'.²⁵⁴ Similarly, al-Shamsān points out the emotional toll of such beliefs, stating that believers in Karma often bear the weight of their challenges, attributing them to their own past actions.²⁵⁵ This belief, that adversities are a reflection of one's past deeds, can amplify feelings of guilt and powerlessness, especially when individuals feel ensnared by past actions they cannot alter.

In summary, contemporary spirituality embodies a dichotomy. While it empowers individuals by positioning them as divine entities with agency over their destinies, it can also induce feelings of powerlessness and self-blame when they encounter challenges perceived as self-inflicted. This juxtaposition —between empowerment and self-blame—underscores the multifaceted nature of contemporary spirituality and its significant impact on individuals' self-perception and worldview. Such a dynamic prompts reflection on how individuals integrate these spiritual beliefs within their lived experiences.

Discussion of Category Three: The Role of Repackaging Spirituality in Contemporary Contexts

The phenomenon of repackaging spirituality emerged as a salient theme in the study, highlighting its role in the proliferation of contemporary spiritual practices among participants. This repackaging is not merely a superficial rebranding but a deep, strategic adaptation of spiritual concepts to resonate with the evolving values and circumstances of modern societies,

²⁵⁴ Al-Ḥamza, *Al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 288.

²⁵⁵ See Al-Shamsān, 'Reiki wa al-'Ilāj al-Prānī', 42.

particularly in Saudi Arabia. The majority of respondents felt that spiritual teachings have undergone significant modifications to align with modern Saudi societal values. Echoing this sentiment, Sutcliffe and Bowman characterise spirituality as a modern reinterpretation of ancient traditions, tailored to suit to the conditions of contemporary societies.²⁵⁶ This adaptation stems from the perception that traditional expressions of ancient practices might be viewed as outdated or superstitious, and thus, less relevant or appealing to modern societies.

However, a critical observation from the study was the perceived deception involved in this repackaging process. Participants often felt that spiritual teachings were presented in ways that obscured or concealed certain elements, making them more palatable for a wider audience in Saudi Arabia. This strategy, described using terms such as ‘deceiving’, ‘manipulative’, a ‘marketing tool’ and a ‘combination of poison with honey’, mirrors the critiques of Arab scholars, both ancient and modern, regarding the esoteric approach, *Manhaj al-Bāṭiniyya*. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for instance, described this method as a tactic employed by esoteric sects to subtly introduce their doctrines, aligning them initially with mainstream Islamic beliefs and gradually revealing their deeper, often controversial tenets.²⁵⁷ This gradual adaptation and immersion of belief can be seen as a strategic, yet potentially manipulative, method of gaining wider acceptance in Islamic conservative societies. While al-Ghazālī originally referenced this approach in relation to early *Bāṭiniyya* sects in the Islamic world such as the *ʿIsmāʿīliyya* and *Qarāmiṭa*, modern Arab scholars have applied the same term, *Manhaj al-Bāṭiniyya*, to characterise the proliferation of contemporary spirituality within Muslim communities.²⁵⁸ Kurdī

²⁵⁶ See Sutcliffe and Bowman, *Beyond New Age*, 8.

²⁵⁷ See Muḥammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Faḍāʾih al-Bāṭiniyya (Scandals of the Esoterics)*, ed. Abdurrahmān Badawī (Kuwait: Dār al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1964), 18-19, 23-24.

²⁵⁸ *ʿIsmāʿīliyya* is a *Bāṭinī* sect that branched from *Shīʿa* Islam in the eighth century. It is affiliated with Ismaʿīl Ibn Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. (Muḥammad Jamāl Addīn, ‘ʿIsmāʿīliyya’, in *Mawsūʿat al-Firaq wa al-Madhāhib fī al-ʿĀlam al-ʿIslāmī (Encyclopedia of Sects and Orientations in The Islamic World)*, ed. Maḥmūd Zaqqūq (Cairo: Wazārat al-Awqāf, 2007), 39).

Qarāmiṭa is a group of extremist *Bāṭinī Shīʿī*t who broke away from the *Ismaʿīlīs*. It was associated with Hamdān Qurmuṭī, a preacher of *Bāṭiniyya* in the ninth century (Muḥammad Abū Saʿda, ‘Al- Qarāmiṭa’, in *Mawsūʿat al-Firaq wa al-Madhāhib fī al-ʿĀlam al-ʿIslāmī (Encyclopedia of Sects and Orientations in the Islamic World)*, ed. Maḥmūd Zaqqūq (Cairo: Wazārat al-Awqāf, 2007), 525).

further elaborates on this point, suggesting that the ambiguous nature of *Manhaj al-Bāṭiniyya* enables movements like contemporary spirituality to introduce their beliefs in a manner attuned to societal norms:

Manhaj al-Bāṭiniyya, a secretive and ambiguous approach, is predominantly utilised by *Bāṭiniyya* movements, including contemporary spirituality, to disseminate their beliefs. To avoid conflict with conservative societies, these movements refrain from disclosing their true doctrines at the outset of their emergence, instead, they promote their ideas in a manner that takes into account the beliefs of the respective societies. In the modern era, *Manhaj al-Bāṭiniyya* has been updated to suit the specific requirements of modern societies. For instance, in the case of contemporary spirituality, its beliefs are advanced through training, healing, science and Islamic teachings.²⁵⁹

For Kurdī, this strategy ensures the spiritual teachings are palatable and adaptable across different cultural contexts without having to compromise its core beliefs. It also allows its proponents to tailor their teachings to specific needs and values of different societies, thus ensuring that their message is well-received and accepted. Al-Ḥamza, on the other hand, emphasises the esoteric characteristics of contemporary spirituality, noting its reliance on gradual revelation and secrecy, especially in conservative societies:

Contemporary spirituality, like other esoteric orientations, is characterised not only by the belief in the absolute, the unity of existence and union with the divine but also by its reliance on secrecy and gradualism in revealing its teachings. To gain acceptance in conservative societies, these orientations do not reveal their beliefs but instead conceal them.²⁶⁰

Al-Ḥamza explains that contemporary spirituality, as an esoteric orientation, is characterised by secrecy and gradualism because its proponents recognise that their beliefs may be considered as controversial, following which society may reject them. Therefore, they seek to protect themselves from criticism and persecution by not openly expressing their beliefs, which allows them to operate within the confines of societies that are not open to their teachings. This

²⁵⁹ Kurdī, 'Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd', 41. See also al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 150 - 151.

²⁶⁰ al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 36. See also Badawī, *Madhāhib al-'Islāmīn*, 754.

gradualism allows them to slowly introduce their teachings to people in a more palatable way and gain acceptance and grow in conservative societies.

The ambiguity surrounding the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary spirituality was an area of concern. Participants often engaged in spiritual practices without fully grasping their philosophical implications. Many felt that spiritual teachings were presented in a manner that obscured their foundational beliefs, leading some to abandon practices once they grasped their philosophical implications, especially when they perceived potential conflicts with Islamic principles. This lack of transparency is emphasised by Hayfā' al-Rashīd, who posits that 'many people engaging in spiritual practices are unaware of the contradictions these practices have with Islamic beliefs. If they had known that they were practising non-Islamic religious rituals, they would have ceased to practice them'.²⁶¹ The absence of clarity can foster confusion and misinterpretations, complicating participants' ability to discern what aligns with Islamic principles. Such obscurity not only questions the credibility of the teachings but also brings forth ethical concerns. The fact that participants discontinue practices once they grasp their philosophical underpinnings indicates a shortfall in open communication from spiritual teachers.

The framing of spiritual teachings within Islamic or scientific frameworks, especially to enhance their appeal in a conservative setting, is another area warranting critical examination. While the former attempts to align spiritual teachings with Islamic doctrines, the latter aims to lend credibility of spiritual practices through their association with scientific tenets. Both strategies, however, have faced skepticism and are often seen as misleading, exploiting individuals' lack of knowledge of spiritual teachings. The critiques by al-Sayf and al-'Ajīrī on the Islamisation of non-Islamic concepts are especially striking. They argue that such practices risk muddling distinct beliefs, potentially fostering misconceptions. Al-Sayf describes this Islamisation as a 'distorted' method, posing challenges for the promotion of contemporary spirituality.²⁶² She elaborates:

²⁶¹ Al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Aṣr al-Jadīd*, 346.

²⁶² See Al-Sayf, *al-'Uṣūl al-Falsafīyya Litaṭwīr al-Dhāt fī al-Tanmiya al-Bashariyya*, 1158, 1159.

Islamisation suggests the validity of non-Islamic beliefs, like Hindu Karma, by leveraging Qur'anic verses. It merges spiritual practices with Islamic rituals, exemplified by the fusion of *Du'a*' with the law of attraction. This also extends to the translation of texts, where Islamic terminologies replace Eastern beliefs.²⁶³

Such Islamisation is perceived as perilous, potentially allowing the integration and validation of non-Islamic beliefs within the framework of Islam. Al-Sayf underscores the importance of clearly demarcating Eastern spiritual practices from traditional Islamic worship to preserve the integrity of Islamic teachings. Echoing this sentiment, al-'Ajirī argues that there's an ongoing effort by some spiritual advocates 'to infuse non-Islamic metaphysical ideas with an Islamic essence, further reinterpreting Islamic sacred texts to endorse these concepts'.²⁶⁴ Delving into the Arabic translation of '*The Secret*', al-'Ajirī notes:

The challenge with Islamisation arises from forged Arabic translations. Such translations often commence with *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah) and interpret the content through an Islamic lens, catering to the sensibilities and beliefs of Muslim readers. Notably, in the Arabic adaptation, the term "the Creator" replaces "the Universe". As a result, "*The Secret*", which originally makes minimal references to "God," becomes densely populated with mentions of both "God" and "the Creator" in its Arabic iteration.²⁶⁵

A translation of this kind, whether intentional or not, is misleading and may have gone through several changes to make it more acceptable to the Sunnī Islamic viewpoint. While such translations aim to appeal to a broader audience, they can deviate from their original intent, especially when adapted to resonate with the Sunnī Islamic perspective. As discussed in Chapter Four, certain phrases, which might be seen as *Shirk* (associating partners with God) within this context, could be modified or omitted. From a Sunnī Islamic viewpoint, such repackaging, while potentially widening acceptance, can be perceived as an intrusion into Islamic concepts and

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Al-'Ajirī, *Khurāfat al-Sir*, 125.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 125 – 126.

practices. This alteration risks presenting a distorted view of Sunnī Islam and can mislead followers, leading them away from traditional practices, often unbeknownst to them.

On the scientific front, the portrayal of spiritual teachings as scientific disciplines or possessing scientific foundations has been met with skepticism. This echoes al-Ḥamza's critique that, 'while contemporary spirituality is deeply rooted in Eastern beliefs and terminologies, there's a deliberate attempt to modernise these traditions by integrating current scientific knowledge'.²⁶⁶ Such a fusion of spiritual beliefs with scientific rationale, without clear distinction, can blur lines and foster mistrust. By framing spiritual practices as 'scientific', they gain an unwarranted veneer of credibility, making them more palatable to those unfamiliar with such teachings. Feedback from participants indicates that this scientific recontextualisation has influenced their acceptance of spiritual teachings. Yet, this amalgamation of spirituality with scientific validity hasn't been without its detractors. Figures like 'Abdulghani Melaibārī have voiced concerns over the potential misrepresentation of metaphysical beliefs as empirical scientific truths. He differentiates between the metaphysical notion of cosmic energy and the tangible concept of physical energy. Melaibārī challenges the assertions of some spiritual advocates who equate cosmic energy with electromagnetic phenomena, labeling it as 'vibration'.²⁶⁷ For him, such portrayals are devoid of empirical support and risk misleading those in search.²⁶⁸ He advocates for a clear demarcation between metaphysical constructs, like cosmic energy, and verifiable scientific principles. In his view, conflating the two is a misrepresentation that can lead to confusion and potential clashes with well-established scientific tenets.

The participants' experiences underscore a pressing need for clarity and transparency in spiritual teachings. Their astonishment upon realising the true essence of certain practices they believed

²⁶⁶ Al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 37.

²⁶⁷ 'Abdulghani Melaibārī and Fowz Kurdī, *Ḥaqqiqat al-'Ilāj Bi al-Ṭāqa bayn al-'Ilm wa al-Qur'an* (*Energy Therapy Between Science and the Qur'an*) (Jeddah: King Abdulaziz University, 2007), 3-4.

²⁶⁸ See *Ibid.* See also Ṭalāl al-'Otaibī, 'Al-Rad al-'Ilmī 'alā Khurāfat Qānūn al-Jadhb wa al-Dhabdhabāt wa al-Ṭāqa' (*Scientific Response to the Superstition of the Law of Attraction, Vibration and Energy*, 2014. Available: <http://4talal.blogspot.com/2014/01/blog-post.html?m=1> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

were Islamic-centric is telling. Furthermore, the revelation that some spiritual practices lacked a genuine scientific foundation was eye-opening for many. These insights highlight potential gaps in spiritual teachings, suggesting a disparity between the propagated spiritual narratives and the foundational essence of these concepts. Such revelations prompted some participants to discontinue certain spiritual practices, as they began to question the reliability and trustworthiness of the teachings they were receiving. Concerns about the alignment of spiritual teachings with Islamic tenets, especially their potential to 'lead to *Shirk*' and 'damage faith', were palpable. Some participants even labelled spiritual teachings with terms like 'superstitions', 'hoaxes' and 'pseudoscience'.

In summation, the reframing of spiritual teachings through ambiguity, Islamisation and a scientific lens, while aiding their dissemination, has multifaceted implications. The participants' deeper exploration of the underlying philosophy often resulted in distancing from these teachings. This prompts the question: Without such repackaging, would these teachings have been accepted? The ethical and religious dilemmas, particularly the risks of intertwining with Islamic tenets, underscore the fine line between accessibility and authenticity. When does adaptation start to skew or misinterpret core teachings?

Reflecting upon the context of this category, it becomes evident that knowledge is often moulded and defined by distinct origins and viewpoints. The way spiritual teachings are conveyed, especially in relation to Islamic doctrines, is deeply rooted in the societal, cultural and religious landscapes from which they arise. The endeavor to repackage spirituality in a conservative environment like Saudi Arabia signifies a complex interplay between traditional Islamic tenets and spiritual practices. While the repackaging approach plays a pivotal role in making spiritual teachings more accessible to a broader audience, it also underscores the challenges of introducing external belief systems into established Islamic frameworks. There's a palpable tension between upholding the sanctity of traditional Islamic teachings and embracing spiritual expressions. Such tension is manifest in participants' experiences, particularly as they wrestle with the foundational beliefs of the spiritual practices they engage in, and then abandon them

when they find that these practices conflict with their Islamic beliefs. Given the influence of societal values, cultural norms and religious convictions, it's imperative to critically evaluate the vantage point and lens through which knowledge is relayed.

Discussion of Category Four: Navigating the Interplay of Self-Authority and External Influences in Spirituality

The emphasis on inner guidance and self-authority, as highlighted by the participants, underscores a significant shift from traditional religious paradigms. This shift offers individuals the freedom to craft a spiritual path that resonates with their personal beliefs and experiences. However, it also raises questions about the implications of such individualised faith. Participants' responses revealed a spectrum of beliefs regarding inner guidance and self-authority. While a segment of participants inherently aligned with the notion of trusting their inner instincts, others traced their convictions to spiritual mentors. These mentors emphasise the significance of acknowledging one's 'divine' essence and the potential of inner wisdom, urging participants to trust their inner instincts and judgments. Such guidance promotes the belief that one's inner voice is the most reliable compass for decision-making.

At the heart of many spiritual teachings lies the principle of self-authority, emphasising a deeply personal and intimate relationship with faith. This perspective not only allows but actively encourages individuals to craft their religious beliefs and practices by amalgamating elements from various traditions. Instead of adhering rigidly to established systems or dogmas, individuals are empowered to embrace or discard elements based on their personal resonance, fostering a more individualised understanding of faith. This evolving landscape of spirituality has given rise to descriptors like 'do-it-yourself religion' and the 'pick-and-mix approach', likening the process to a 'spiritual supermarket' where beliefs can be chosen based on personal preference.²⁶⁹ Possamai even asserts that we are dealing with an 'eclectic – if not kleptomaniac – process of

²⁶⁹ See Malcom Hamilton, 'An Analysis of the Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit, London', 193, and see Sutcliffe and Bowman, *Beyond New Age*, 7, and see Possamai, 'Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Culture and Religion', 35-40.

selecting culture(s) and religions'.²⁷⁰ Sutcliffe's research provides a window into this phenomenon, capturing the sentiments of a respondent who navigates spirituality with a fluid identity, drawing from various traditions as they resonate. The respondent's statement, 'At the moment, I tend toward Eastern religions, but I do not follow anything specific. I like to pick out what is true for me and follow that and use it', encapsulates the essence of this individualised approach.²⁷¹ Tacey's insights further illuminate this trend, suggesting a shift in spiritual dynamics where individuals take authority 'into their own hands and refus[e] to be told what to think or believe'.²⁷² This shift not only challenges traditional power dynamics within religious institutions but also champions the autonomy of individuals in their spiritual journeys. The overarching message is clear: every individual has the sovereign right to their beliefs, free from external impositions.

However, the study also revealed a tension between the idea of self-authority and the influence of multiple external authorities within contemporary spirituality. Despite the rhetoric of self-reliance, participants were consistently influenced by various external sources. They encountered spiritual teachings through media channels and were influenced by spiritual instructors, who were themselves inspired by Western and Eastern spiritual figures. Wood argues that contemporary spirituality is characterised by a 'proliferation of authorities' encompassing multiple texts, teachers, traditions, and practices, which significantly shape individuals' experiences and self-perceptions.²⁷³ According to Wood, these authorities

Cannot be brushed aside as mere resources between which each individual picks and chooses without surrendering their essential self-authority or through which they learn the ability to value

²⁷⁰ Possamai, 'Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Culture and Religion', 40.

²⁷¹ Steven Sutcliffe, 'Wandering Stars: Seekers and Gurus in the Modern World', in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 27. See also Houtman and Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition', 306.

²⁷² Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 4. See also al-Rashīd, *Ḥarakat al-'Asr al-Jadīd*, 554

²⁷³ See Mathew Wood, *Possessions, Power and The New Age: Ambiguities of Authorities in Neoliberal Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 3-4. See also Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 3.

and express such self-authority. They strongly affect people's experiences during the day, remaining afterwards as ways they thought about themselves and their lives.²⁷⁴

This challenges the notion of self-authority as an entirely independent concept, as individuals are consistently shaped by external influences. Due to the pervasive influence of external factors, complete independence and decision-making based solely on one's own agency may not be possible. One participant noted that despite the emphasis on following one's heart, members of a spiritual group were unable to do so. Instead, they adhered strictly to the instructions of their 'spiritual father'. As a result, it appears that spiritual teachers who advocate rejecting external authorities inadvertently represent an external authority themselves. Aupers and Houtman discuss this notion, asserting that 'participants undergo a process of socialisation ... [and] the doctrinal idea of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced'.²⁷⁵ They contend that spiritual instructors advise their members to prioritise personal feelings and follow their hearts. Consequently, they emphasise that,

The process of socialisation into a spiritual discourse about the self reveals that participants in the spiritual milieu are less authentic than they often believe they are. After all, how authentic can they be when they have, in fact, been socialised into a shared emphasis on the primacy of personal authenticity?²⁷⁶

This highlights the paradox: while individuals may seek authenticity in their spiritual journey, they are often socialised into a shared principle, thereby challenging the very concepts of self-authority and authenticity. Additionally, although these individuals are encouraged to resist external authorities, they ultimately adhere to a specific type of external authority and a transmitted tradition within the spiritual milieu. Contemporary spirituality, as I have observed, presents a complex interplay of authority. On the surface, it champions the notion of self-authority, advocating for resistance against external influences outside its domain. Yet, there

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷⁵ Aupers and Houtman, 'Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket', 201. See also Houtman and Aupers, 'The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition', 317.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 210-211.

exists an underlying paradox. This same spirituality also strengthens allegiance to certain spiritual authorities within its realm. Many individuals, while valuing their autonomy, seem to deeply resonate with and seek guidance from their spiritual community. This dynamic suggests a transformative shift in authority, where traditional pillars like religion, family and culture might be increasingly overshadowed by influential spiritual figures. A poignant example from my study involves a participant who, challenging Saudi cultural norms, ventured alone to meet a spiritual teacher. This act highlights the profound and often underestimated influence of spiritual authority in today's contexts.

From a Sunnī perspective, this emphasis on self-authority and individualised spiritual practices can be perceived as a deviation from traditional Islamic teachings. Sunnī Islam, rooted in a rich history of scholarship and jurisprudence, prioritises the ancestors' collective understanding of faith, drawing from the Qur'an and the Hadith. The trend of selectively adopting or discarding religious practices based on personal inclinations could be contentious, risking misinterpretations or straying from core Islamic tenets. While the Qur'an encourages personal reflection, it simultaneously underscores the importance of seeking knowledge from the learned. The 'pick-and-mix' approach to spirituality might be perceived as eroding the foundational religious authority and scholarship that Sunnī Islam has upheld for centuries. Moreover, the focus on heeding one's heart and instincts could be at odds with the Sunnī emphasis on guidance from established religious avenues, such as scholars or imams. Interestingly, the rejection of authorities outside the spiritual milieu might have ramifications beyond the religious sphere, potentially impacting political and cultural authorities. This intricate relationship between spirituality and broader societal frameworks is a fertile ground for further research, especially in settings where religion, culture and politics are intricately linked.

While the previous discussion delved into the concept of self-authority in the context of multiple external authorities, another angle has piqued my interest and merits thoughtful examination. The influence of various authorities within the spiritual milieu, though significant, is just one facet of a broader academic debate. Several scholars challenge the prevailing narrative that the celebrated 'eclecticism' or 'bricolage' in contemporary spirituality inherently signifies the

‘primacy of self-authority’. They contend that beneath the veneer of individual choice and diversity, there’s a consistent ‘clear tradition’ or ‘common core of teaching’ that resonates across the spiritual milieu. Woodhead’s assertion that contemporary spirituality has a discernible tradition that cuts across cultural divides is intriguing.²⁷⁷ However, if such a clear tradition exists, why is it often overshadowed by the louder narrative of individualism? Vincett and Woodhead’s argument, that contemporary spirituality, while championing individual choice, isn’t devoid of a collective essence, further complicates the matter. They highlight a ‘common core of teachings’ prevalent in most of its forms.²⁷⁸ Houtman and Aupers present an intriguing perspective, suggesting that the apparent diversity in contemporary spirituality might mask a foundational belief that remains consistently present. They highlight a ‘shared doctrine’ that challenges the claims of spirituality’s ‘authenticity’, self-authority, or individualism. Their identification of this ‘shared doctrine’ as esoteric philosophy suggests that spirituality, regardless of its contemporary manifestations, remains anchored in longstanding philosophies and teachings.²⁷⁹ Al-Rasheed’s observation that contemporary spirituality, despite its eclectic facade, is anchored in a common esoteric orientation further reinforces this notion.²⁸⁰ Corroborating these academic insights, several participants in this study specifically highlighted the role of esoteric traditions in shaping their spiritual teachings. This underscores the continuous influence and presence of a shared tradition, challenging the prevalent narrative of contemporary spiritual practices that seemingly champion eclecticism and self-authority.

Upon reflection and juxtaposition with these scholarly insights, it becomes evident that the narrative of self-authority in contemporary spirituality is more nuanced than it appears on the surface. While individualism and self-authority are undoubtedly prominent themes, the undercurrents of tradition and shared doctrine cannot be ignored. The interplay between these elements is intricate and, as researchers, careful consideration is required to ensure that the

²⁷⁷ See Woodhead, *Religion Beyond its private role in Modern Society*, 38.

²⁷⁸ See Vincett and Woodhead, *Spirituality, in Religion in the Modern World Traditions*, 1-2, and see Aupers, Houtman, *Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket* . . . , 1.

²⁷⁹ See *The Spiritual Turn*, 306, 307 and *Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket*, 203, 204.

²⁸⁰ See Al-Rasheed, *New Age Movement*, 62. (Ar)

complexities inherent in contemporary spiritual practices are neither oversimplified nor overlooked.

Discussion of Category Five: Addressing Individual Needs through Spirituality

A consistent theme emerged from the discussions with all participants: the utilisation of spiritual activities as a means to address unresolved challenges, which became the primary catalyst for their involvement. These challenges spanned a spectrum, from mental health issues like depression, trauma and phobias to physical health concerns such as fertility issues. Others highlighted social challenges, notably marital discord. In their quest for relief, participants gravitated towards recommended spiritual practices, hoping to find guidance, solutions and healing. This observation resonates with al-Ḥamza's statement that the allure of spiritual philosophies and practices among Muslims often stems from the pursuit of tangible benefits, encompassing health and harmonious social relations: 'An important reason for the spread of spiritual philosophies and practices among Muslims is the pursuit of worldly benefits such as health and good social relations. Such motivations drive almost all practitioners and adherents of spiritual philosophy'.²⁸¹ This suggests that individuals grappling with health adversities or strained relationships might be particularly drawn to spiritual teachings, viewing them as a potential source of relief and resolution.

The inclination towards spiritual teachings, as indicated by several participants, might also be driven by the allure of seemingly instantaneous solutions requiring minimal personal investment. The promise of swift and effortless remedies is undeniably enticing, offering individuals the prospect of ameliorating their circumstances without significant effort. Al-ʿAjīrī's analysis of the widespread appeal of *The Secret* encapsulates this sentiment:

The book's allure lies in its proposition of a novel life management technique, where desires—be it pleasure, wealth, or other aspirations—can be attained merely through thought and emotion,

²⁸¹ Al-Ḥamza, *al-Qawānīn al-Kawniyya al-Rūḥāniyya*, 420-421. See also Kurdi, 'Athar al-Falsafa al-Sharqiyya fī Barāmij al-Tadrīb wa al-'Istishfa' al-Mu'aṣira', 5.

bypassing the need for tangible effort. *The Secret* claims to empower readers to fulfill their dreams using simple visualisation techniques, all while lounging at home.²⁸²

In our fast-paced modern era, where every moment is valuable and obstacles are ever-present, the idea of realising one's dreams through mere visualisation, particularly in the comfort of one's own space, holds a potent allure.

It's crucial to critically examine the motivations behind such inclinations. Individuals facing pressing challenges, be it health, relationships, or other personal issues, are often in a vulnerable state. This vulnerability can make them more susceptible to promises of quick fixes, especially when they are desperate for solutions. The allure of spiritual teachings that offer instant remedies can be especially potent for these individuals, as they might be willing to try anything that promises relief. Furthermore, the fact that participants are often driven to spirituality by specific issues they are seeking solutions for underscores the importance of considering such teachings with a discerning eye. While spirituality promises solace and guidance, it's essential to be wary of teachings or courses that capitalise on individuals' vulnerabilities with exaggerated promises.

The allure of rapid solutions, especially in the realm of health and wellness, is further magnified in an age where individuals grapple with numerous responsibilities. When faced with health adversities, the natural inclination is to seek solace and solutions. It's noteworthy that this very vulnerability appears to be exploited in the marketing strategies of spiritual practices and courses. One participant's recounting of a course, primarily centered on communication skills, serves as a case in point. The promotional material for this course, rather than focusing on its core offering, grandiosely claimed to provide 'the key to controlling the world'. Such hyperbolic marketing, labelled by the participant as 'exaggerated promises', can be especially enticing for those in desperate situations, capitalising on their vulnerabilities. Carrette and King echo this sentiment, portraying contemporary spirituality as a burgeoning industry that promises relief from the superficialities and anxieties of modern life: 'From Feng Shui to holistic medicine, from

²⁸² Al-'Ajiri, *Khurāfat al-Sir*, 13.

aromatherapy candles to Yoga weekends, spirituality is big business. It promises to soothe away the angst of modern living and offers an antidote to shallow materialism'.²⁸³ The marketing strategies employed by these spiritual courses often exude an aura of exclusivity, insinuating that only by joining these elite circles can one access the coveted answers. Such tactics can induce a sense of urgency or a fear of missing out (FOMO), compelling individuals to make impulsive decisions. Yet, more often than not, these lofty promises fall short, leaving seekers not only empty-handed but also disenchanted.

Discussion of Vernacular Religion and Contemporary Spirituality: A Comparative Analysis

The current study draws parallels between contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia and elements of vernacular religion as conceptualised by Primiano. Both realms integrate a mix of diverse teachings, doctrinal ambiguity and intricate authority dynamics. Primiano's framework highlights three key dimensions of vernacular religion: 'the significance of creativity and artistry to religious life; the ambiguous nature of people's religion; and the relationship of religious creativity to forms of power in particular as contestation to that power'.²⁸⁴ These facets resonate with the characteristics of contemporary spirituality observed in this study.

Contemporary spirituality emphasises individual autonomy, mirroring Primiano's notion that individuals can 'create and re-create their own religion'. This idea accentuates the role of personal interpretation and engagement with a range of influential sources.²⁸⁵ Bowman's insights further this notion, suggesting that vernacular religion places importance on individual decision-making, reinterpretation and sometimes even the bypassing of tradition. She notes that individuals form complex identities by drawing from diverse, and occasionally expanding, sources of tradition.²⁸⁶ This flexibility in interpretation is also a hallmark of contemporary spirituality.

²⁸³ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 1.

²⁸⁴ Primiano, 'Afterword: Manifestations of the religious vernacular: Ambiguity, power, and creativity', 387.

²⁸⁵ See *Ibid*, 383 - 384

²⁸⁶ See Bowman, '25 Years of Vernacular Religion Scholarship', 409.

According to Primiano's framework, this form of religiosity can mirror the ambiguous nature of vernacular religion, leading to a range of, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations.²⁸⁷ Yet, the inherent ambiguity in vernacular religion, akin to contemporary spirituality, complicates its definition, especially as beliefs evolve based on follower interpretations. Furthermore, vernacular religion provides an avenue to challenge established religious norms. Primiano describes it as a form of 'contestation', paving the way for a new religious understanding.²⁸⁸ This view supports individual interpretation and the reevaluation of religious norms.

In examining the interplay between vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality, it's clear that both share commonalities, yet they also present unique characteristics, especially within the context of Saudi Arabia. Vernacular religion tends to foreground the tangible aspects of faith, emphasising the application and reinterpretation of religious teachings. This often finds its roots in a broader religious framework and emerges from the lived experiences within specific cultural and social contexts. Conversely, contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia can be perceived as an external influence, delicately integrating itself into the societal fabric. This introduction of external spiritual practices prompts individuals to engage in a hermeneutic exercise, reinterpreting Islamic texts to harmonise these new practices with their existing religious beliefs and values. This dynamic highlights the flexibility of spiritual beliefs and the complexities of weaving them into a firmly established religious culture.

Additionally, although vernacular religion typically emphasises daily practices over doctrinal tenets, participants in this study demonstrated a pronounced preference for doctrinal principles while delving into spiritual teachings. This was especially evident when they identified discrepancies between spiritual and Islamic beliefs. In a conservative setting like Saudi Arabia, where religious doctrine typically takes precedence over practice, any deviation from established beliefs becomes a significant concern. For example, some participants chose to abandon practices such as the law of attraction after identifying conflicts with '*Aqīda*' (Islamic doctrine). Similarly, others refrained from engaging in practices associated with concepts like Karma and

²⁸⁷ See Primiano, 'Afterword: Manifestations of the religious vernacular: Ambiguity, power, and creativity', 388.

²⁸⁸ See *Ibid*, 390.

the divine spark, fearing they might inadvertently commit '*Shirk*' (associating partners with God). Given these observations, it can be posited that participants' engagement with spirituality in Saudi Arabia might not align seamlessly with traditional notions of vernacular religion. While there are undeniable intersections, the unique socio-religious landscape of Saudi Arabia introduces nuances that differentiate its spiritual practices from conventional vernacular expressions. It's essential to approach this understanding with an appreciation for the region's distinct religious and cultural dynamics.

Furthermore, in the context of Saudi Arabia, with its deeply rooted religious traditions, the concept of vernacular religion may encounter nuances in its interpretation and application. Typically, vernacular religion places an explicit emphasis on personal agency in shaping religious beliefs, allowing for a dynamic understanding and practice. However, in Saudi Arabia, where religious tenets are firmly anchored, this explicit emphasis on reinterpretation might not find the same resonance. The nation's religious fabric is woven predominantly by the Sunnī interpretation of Islam, which sets clear parameters for religious beliefs and practices, restricting room for personal reinterpretation and diverse religious practices. The essence of vernacular religion, seen as a 'process of contestation', might be challenging to uphold in Saudi Arabia, given the potential repercussions of openly challenging established religious norms. Conversely, contemporary spirituality, while sharing similarities with vernacular religion, has charted a different course in the region. Introduced as a non-religious concept, its evolution in Saudi Arabia, marked by adaptations, wasn't framed as contestation against the dominant Sunnī interpretation. This highlights the complexities of comparing contemporary spirituality with vernacular religion in a unique setting like Saudi Arabia, where the lines between 'religious' and 'non-religious' are distinctly drawn.

In drawing this comparative analysis to a close, it's evident that the relationship between vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia is multifaceted, especially given the nation's conservative religious backdrop. Both realms exhibit shared attributes, such as individual agency, a blend of teachings and doctrinal ambiguity. However, their roots and modes of expression differ notably. Vernacular religion is embedded within established religious

frameworks, emphasising the tangible aspects of faith and often challenging established religious norms. On the other hand, contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia presents itself more as an external influence, prompting an adaptation of spiritual tenets to accommodate the Islamic framework in Saudi Arabia. This dynamic is further highlighted by the participants' inclination towards doctrinal tenets, as opposed to the more practice-oriented focus of vernacular religion. The analysis also suggests caution when directly equating contemporary spirituality with vernacular religion, especially in contexts like Saudi Arabia where religious norms are rigorously maintained. Such comparisons bring to light the intricacies of studying religious and spiritual expressions across varied cultural and theological landscapes. Indeed, the interplay between these two domains presents intriguing avenues for continued academic exploration.

Conclusion

This research embarked on an exploratory journey into the intricate landscape of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia. Through a qualitative analysis of 11 participants, it aimed to uncover the form of spirituality that has emerged in Saudi society and the underlying reasons for its emergence. The findings revealed an eclectic form of spirituality, heavily influenced by Western spiritual trends. This dissemination was facilitated by factors such as the repackaging of spirituality, the influence of multiple authorities and the specific conditions and experiences of the participants.

The interconnectedness of the themes emerged prominently. The reshaping of spirituality—through ambiguity, Islamisation and scientific frameworks—directly impacts the eclectic nature of spiritual teachings that participants engage with. While this adaptation of spiritual teachings makes them more approachable, it also introduces complexities, potential misunderstandings, and ethical challenges. Alongside this, participants' conditions, whether mental, physical, social, or stemming from ignorance in Islamic teachings, also play a significant role in their engagement with spirituality.

From a broader societal perspective, the ascent of contemporary spirituality marks a pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia's cultural and religious transformation. As global influences permeate the nation's spiritual fabric, understanding and navigating the implications for cultural identity, societal values, and traditional beliefs become crucial. The role of technology, especially social media, used by spiritual teachers has been instrumental in this transformation, enabling access to diverse spiritual teachings and facilitating a global exchange of ideas.

However, the landscape of spiritual exploration in Saudi Arabia is not without its challenges. Alongside the rise of contemporary spirituality, there's a noticeable religious resistance. Islamic scholars, utilising media platforms, caution against practices they perceive as contrary to traditional Islamic teachings. This cautionary stance resonates with some participants, who

reported family warnings against certain spiritual teachings and voiced their own concerns when sensing conflicts with Islamic beliefs. As contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia grows, a clear tension emerges. Participants are attracted to spiritual teachings yet often find them at odds with foundational Islamic beliefs, leading some to abandon these teachings. The future holds a pressing question: Will there be a synthesis between traditional beliefs and these new spiritual practices, or will the divide intensify? As spiritual practices gain momentum, the tension between new spiritualities and traditional beliefs becomes increasingly evident, setting the stage for a compelling narrative in the years ahead.

This research offers a fresh perspective on the landscape of contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, building upon existing literature while introducing novel insights from firsthand participant experiences. A standout contribution is its examination of the historical emergence of this form of spirituality in the region. The study identified a harmonisation between Arabic and English interpretations of contemporary spirituality, with both delineating it as a modern adaptation of ancient traditions, distinct from traditional religions, and attuned to current societal dynamics. In practice, Saudi Arabia's spiritual engagements mirror these definitions, drawing from historical philosophies but reshaped to fit the nation's cultural fabric.

The research also echoes the broader academic narrative on the commodification of spirituality. The amalgamation of technology with commercial strategies by spiritual influencers exemplifies this phenomenon. However, the commercial aspect raises ethical quandaries, particularly when individuals are potentially swayed by promises of immediate spiritual solutions or life-altering experiences, emphasising the necessity for discernment and critical evaluation.

The study sheds light on the 'Islamisation' of spiritual teachings in Saudi Arabia, adapting them to appeal to those who perceive spirituality within an Islamic context. The vague philosophical underpinnings of these teachings, coupled with their purported correlation with scientific paradigms further enhances their appeal. Contrary to some Western perspectives that link the rise of contemporary spirituality in the West to a decline in traditional religious influence, suggesting a spiritual void, this study indicates that Saudi participants were primarily attracted

to spiritual practices they perceived as aligning with Islam, a realisation that often came undone later. The 'Islamising' of spiritual principles was a key factor, emphasising the participants' sustained respect for Islam, even as Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape evolves.

Two central findings emerge from this study. First, the allure of repackaging spiritual concepts represents a double-edged sword: while it attracts participants, any perceived misalignment with Islam or lack of a scientific foundation can hinder sustained engagement. Notably, some participants expressed strong reservations, perceiving the repackaging process as a deceptive tactic that alters the core essence of the teachings to enhance their appeal. Consequently, this thesis posits that in conservative contexts like Saudi Arabia, the extent of repackaging plays a pivotal role: the more spiritual teachings are repackaged, the greater their acceptance; conversely, minimal repackaging increases the likelihood of rejection and discontinuation of the practices. The second finding emphasises a marked influence of spiritual authority on participants, sometimes equating to the Qur'an's stature. This points to a potential transfer in allegiance from traditional authority to spiritual authority, amplifying the influence of spiritual leaders, and underscoring the shifting dynamics of spiritual authority in the region. While contemporary spirituality advocates for self-authority and resistance to external influences, it paradoxically reinforces adherence to specific spiritual authorities within its own domain.

The exploration of contemporary spirituality in Saudi society is deeply influenced by the cultural lens through which individuals view and interpret these teachings. The process of knowledge acquisition and interpretation are coloured by cultural, social and religious backgrounds. The introduction and adaptation of spiritual teachings from external sources into Saudi society are influenced by cultural norms, determining how these teachings are received, understood and practised. In a society where Islamic tenets are paramount, any introduced spiritual concept undergoes scrutiny, consciously or subconsciously, against the canvas of Islamic doctrines. This dynamic potentially elucidates the acceptance, modification, or rejection of certain spiritual teachings.

Spiritual teachers play pivotal roles in introducing and disseminating these teachings. Their cultural backgrounds and comprehension of the socio-religious landscape shape their interpretations. When they repackage Eastern and Western spiritual philosophies, it is influenced by their discernment of what aligns within the Saudi cultural and Islamic framework. This perspective is mirrored in the study's participants. Their affinity or aversion to specific spiritual teachings can reflect their positions within Saudi society, their understanding of Islam and their personal experiences. Their accounts provide not merely individual viewpoints but also insights into the broader interplay of external spiritual ideas and indigenous Islamic teachings within this context.

This research highlights how engaging in spiritual teachings can significantly impact an individual's religious paradigm. Participants increasingly emphasise inner guidance and self-authority, indicating a potential departure from the established Sunnī traditions. These traditions have historically emphasised the collective insights of ancestors, drawing extensively from the Qur'an and the Hadith. The contemporary trend of selectively embracing spiritual practices, often influenced by external concepts, can be perceived as an intrusion into the core tenets of Sunnī Islam. While this 'pick-and-mix' approach resonates with some, it risks eroding the religious authority that Sunnī Islam has cherished. The emphasis on personal intuition might conflict with the Sunnī tradition of seeking guidance from established figures like scholars or imams. Furthermore, the inclination to reject authorities outside the spiritual realm could have wider implications, affecting not only religious but also political and cultural spheres. This intricate interplay between contemporary spirituality, external influences and traditional Sunnī beliefs underscores the complexities inherent in Saudi Arabia's spiritual transformation, especially in a setting where religion and culture are deeply intertwined.

In conclusion, this research offers a comprehensive look into contemporary spirituality in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the experiences and perceptions of Sunnī Muslim participants. It emphasises the significance of grasping how Saudi individuals and communities interpret and understand contemporary spirituality through their distinct cultural perspectives. While the study lays a foundational understanding, there's a vast expanse yet to be explored. Future investigations

could encompass varied demographics, methodologies and culturally akin regions. Quantitative methods also hold promise for a more comprehensive understanding. Delving into areas like Sufi or Shi'i traditions and examining the societal and psychological effects of spiritual teachings could yield richer insights. This research marks a crucial advancement, but many facets of Saudi Arabia's spiritual landscape still await exploration.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Demographic Information:

1. Age:
2. Ethnicity:
3. Education:
4. Career:

Introduction to Contemporary Spirituality:

5. How did you become acquainted with contemporary spirituality, and what was the beginning of your experience like?

Personal Engagement and Experience:

6. What ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality interest you, and have you embraced?
7. Is there anything about these ideas that particularly appeals to you? Would it be possible for you to briefly describe your experience?
8. Could you please elaborate on the experience that you have had?

Philosophical and Scientific Aspects:

9. Were you interested in learning about the philosophical aspects of contemporary spirituality?
10. How do you perceive the relationship between spiritual practices and science, and how has this affected your use of these practices?

General Perceptions:

11. In your view, why are people drawn to contemporary spirituality? And why were you drawn to it?

Appendix A: List of Framing Questions Used for the Interviews.

Home Import Codes Memos Variables Analysis Mixed Methods Visual Tools Reports MAXDictio Stats

New Project Open Project Reset Activations Document System Code System Document Browser Retrieved Segments Window Layout Logbook Teamwork Merge Projects Save Project As Save Anonymized Project As Project from Activated Documents External Files Archive Data

Document System

Document	Paragraphs
Samar	556
Maram	225
Zaina	170
Arwa	90
Karima	149

Code System

Code	Count
بيانات المشارك	78
الفكر الروحاني المتبنى (المتنشر)	135
أسباب الجذاب للمشاركة للروحانية في المجتمع السعودي	0
إعادة تغليف الروحانية	222
ظروف المشاركين	285
وسائل نشر الفكر الروحاني في المجتمع السعودي	0
الإعلام	0
الانترنت	0
منصات التواصل الاجتماعي	2
سناپ شات	2
واتس اب	3
انستجرام وتويتر	2
يوتيوب	4
مواقع ومندديات	2
برامج للتزويجة	5
الكتب	12
البيئة المحيطة: الأهل والأصدقاء	9
السفر	3
العلاج النفسي	2
سلطة التسويق	17
السلطات الهرمية	259

Document Browser: Samar (443 Paragraphs)

تمتع السعودي < الإعلام < الانترنت < منصات التواصل الاجتماعي

0/0 Aa a* abc

ايه.

- برضو أحس انها تغلغل في مجالات كثيرة لدرجة ما عاد الناس تقدر تفرق - زي ما قلت لك

- نقص الوعي ان هذا الشي غلط فعادي فكرة حلوة why not اني اتبناها.

- طبعا السوشال ميديا سهّل وصول هذول الناس - يعني عطاهم منصات انهم يوصلون فيها لأعداد كبيرة من العالم. فال platforms لها دور في السوشال ميديا .

Simple Coding Query (OR combination of codes)

Appendix B: Sample Interview Transcript with Coding.