



# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications  
and other research outputs

## Touched by spirit: sensing the material impacts of intangible encounters

### Book Section

How to cite:

MacKian, Sara (2012). Touched by spirit: sensing the material impacts of intangible encounters. In: Paterson, Mark and Dodge, Martin eds. Touching Space, Placing Touch. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 249–268.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2012 Mark Paterson, Martin Dodge and the contributors

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

[http://ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title\\_id=9510&edition\\_id=12910](http://ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=9510&edition_id=12910)

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

## **Touched by spirit:**

### **sensing the material impacts of intangible encounters**

Sara MacKian

#### **Introduction**

'Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one' (Albert Einstein. Quoted in Tyler, 2009. No page number).

Since time immemorial the human relationship with spirit, whether all-embracing or outright hostile, has been a key part of how people sense and make sense of what they perceive as their own personal realities. The archaeology of our social and physical worlds gives testament to the tangible imprint of spirit and spirituality through time. Spirit touches our world and leaves its mark, whether we believe in it or not.

The dominant cultural expression of human relations with spirituality is in the form of religion (Hay and Nye, 2006). From the stone boulders of Castlerigg to the cathedral of Notre Dame, the Western world bears the physical imprint of religious beliefs and practices. Whole societies are defined and recognised by their religious identities – 'Christian enclaves', 'the Islamic world', the 'Amish community' or disputes over the route of Protestant Orange Parades through largely Catholic areas in Northern Ireland. In these we witness very tangible articulations of the human relationship with the spiritual, in the form of buildings, church-going, ritualised prayer practices or particular styles of dress. Yet lost and hidden beneath an over-familiarity with such explicitly religious imprints in our social and physical landscapes is the invisible 'spirit' which still possibly lies somewhere at its heart. In part this reflects the demise of the supernatural worldview. Many believe the disenchanted modern Western world no longer has need of spirits, angels and divine beings (Lasch, 1979). Since the Age of Enlightenment, leading social

thinkers have suggested that religious practices, rituals and superstitions would decline in importance with the path of modernity (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Indeed the tendency towards secularization in the late twentieth-century appears to confirm such predictions. However, with the apparent demise of organised religion, we have simultaneously witnessed the proliferation of 'personally adopted' and 'eclectic' spiritualities (Hay and Nye, 2006), with spiritual exploration being divorced from traditional religious contexts and opening up uniquely personal opportunities to touch the divine. This reflects the broader tendency towards reflexive individualisation, social atomisation and detraditionalisation in late modernity (Giddens, 1994; Beck, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). A core feature of this latest spiritual evolution has been a return to supernatural beliefs and otherworldly interests as a means for 'spiritual seekers' to seek out a meaningful relationship with 'spirit' (Partridge, 2004; MacKian, 2012).

The collapse in Christian church attendance in Britain at the close of the twentieth century coincided with a 60 per cent rise in reported spiritual experiences; patterns reflected across the European continent and Australia (Hay and Nye, 2006). We are told that some 27 per cent of the British public believe in reincarnation, 22 per cent believe in astrology and even 15 per cent believe in the power of fortune telling (Spencer and Alexander, 2009); 47 per cent of Canadians believe in ghosts (Ipsos Reid, 2006); Italians, Germans, Swedes and Icelanders have all reported experiences of contact with spirit (Hart Wright, 2002); and three out of every four people in the USA believe in paranormal phenomena, including extrasensory perception, spirits or spiritual healing (Moore, 2005). As a result, a generation of 'spiritual but not religious' individuals has emerged (Roof, 1999), its exponents characteristically distancing themselves from institutional versions of religion, preferring to develop their own 'reflexive spirituality' in an attempt to find meaning and purpose in their lives. A growing part of this more reflexive approach to the spiritual involves an active engagement with 'spirit' as an otherworldly agent.

This contemporary alternative spiritual landscape offers a unique opportunity therefore to explore the less visible manifestations of earthly relations with spirit. Not everyone needs to sit in a church pew to get in touch with the divine, as there are other less physically obvious ways in which

individuals are touched by spirit. In this chapter I suggest that the role of spirit should be revisited to reflect this growing popularity amongst alternative spiritual seekers to directly touch and be touched by the putatively intangible divine. In particular, by exploring this relationship through the lens of touch, we can gain deeper sociological insight into the way in which the touch of spirit is felt and seen in the modern world. Despite this apparent spiritual turn, critical social science has so far failed to grasp the significance of the re-enchantment of people's relationship with spirit, with leading commentators continuing to insist that 'God is dead' and there is no place for the supernatural in today's modern world (Bruce, 2002). I suggest instead that there is actually an intimate – and very touching – relationship between the two.

I begin with some background to the empirical study underpinning the chapter, and then go on to outline – and in turn to challenge – the prevailing sociological thesis, grounded in the Weberian approach, that the modern world is a 'disenchanted' one with no place for spirit. Drawing on fieldwork evidence of the impact of spiritual encounters in participants' everyday worlds, I move on to suggest these give us 'new imaginations' of the world and how that world works (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009). In these imaginations emphasis is placed on the way in which points of contact – or moments of touch – between spiritual practitioners and spiritual energies map across the contours of everyday life, marking the interface between a world we think we know through the senses and an 'otherworld' less readily available. Contact has its roots in 'Tactus' the Latin word for 'touch' or 'sense of feeling', and is therefore particularly apposite here; for it embodies both the act of physical touching and the 'sense of *feeling*' which are key to the notion of spiritual touch I am exploring. Furthermore, given its association with distant communication – to be 'in contact with' – grounding my understanding of touch in the language of contact hints also at the extrasensory nature of spirit's 'touch'. Through attending to the 'touch of spirit' in moments of contact between 'this world' and 'the other', we can uncover new realities suggesting the imprint of spirit in our material world may be more persistent than the disenchantment thesis maintains.

## **Background to the study: 'reaching for the unseen'**

The empirical research underpinning this chapter began as an exploration into contemporary alternative spirituality (MacKian, 2012). Early on in my investigations I discovered that it was common for these spiritual seekers to speak of being 'touched by spirit', and for feelings of security, love, benevolence and 'vastness' to accompany such sensations. This relationship with spirit was not an optional part of what spirituality meant for them, but a central feature. For many, it was only when they met spirit in the form of guides or angels that their spirituality became 'real' as these encounters served as evidence of a connection between, and transgression across, the boundary between this world and the world of spirit (MacKian, 2010).

My interest grew in the worlds inhabited by those who routinely sought such a relationship with the otherworldly, and I explored a group of people who exhibited diverse interests and practices, but who nonetheless reflected the same broad approach to and understanding of their spirituality. For them spirituality was not housed within any particular religious tradition and did not require any regular, dedicated ritual or practice. It did, on the other hand, involve contemplation of what lies beyond our apprehension of the physical and material world, and much of this contemplation led to a sense of being connected spiritually (and through spirit) to something 'more than' that physical world. Therefore my research participants included, amongst others, spiritual mediums, angel healers and Reiki Masters (see MacKian 2012 for a full account of the research process and methodology). 'Spirit' to them might be defined differently, as the spirit in nature, the spirit of angels, spirits of the deceased, or universal spirit; but at the heart was the consistent desire to touch and be touched by something.

In most academic accounts of contemporary alternative spirituality there is a distinct lack of attention given to the 'mystery' or 'otherworldliness' which seemed to me to be an essential part of such spiritualities. There is even less account given of how this otherworldliness may affect the everyday world as we know it. Indeed, you will be hard pushed to find any serious or explicit engagement with mystery, enchantment and its relation to the quotidian and

mundane. Numerous authors stress the material and earthbound orientation of contemporary spirituality, focusing on consumer behaviour in the spiritual marketplace, or giving accounts of isolated individualised and narcissistic self-worshippers (Bruce, 2002; Carrette and King, 2005). The emphasis is on self-contemplation, the inner life and the divine within (Heelas, 2008); and Voas and Bruce (2007: 51) go so far as to claim this spirituality has 'little to do with the supernatural or even the sacred; it appears to be a code word for good feelings'.

Any mention of 'spirit' as part of these spiritualities is apparently overlooked, and you will not even find the word 'spirit' listed in the indexes of most of the leading texts in the field. If there is an attempt to engage with the more mystical aspects of spiritual pursuit the usual approach is to suggest they pertain to very specific times and places, such as yoga retreats (Hoyez, 2007), the privacy of very personalised rituals in the home (Holloway, 2003), or the intimacy of the treatment room (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). However, it should not be forgotten that spirituality affects *all* aspects of life, and can have profoundly world-changing effects as a result. My fieldwork suggested that practitioners routinely incorporated otherworldly connections in their daily lives, and this everyday imprint of spirit's touch in the modern world is being overlooked in mainstream sociological discourse.

### ***The importance of touch***

Is the omission of spirit from the discourse because it is hard to get a handle on precisely what spirit might be and how we can measure its impact in everyday life? 'Spirit' is commonly assumed to be related to that which is *not physical*, those characteristics which are *not of the body*, but relate to deeply held beliefs or feelings, or even another supernatural world entirely. Spirituality accordingly is a concern with these non-physical elements, with these deep feelings and beliefs, and maybe even the ethereal or supernatural, rather than the more physical aspects of life, thereby involving potentially greater challenge to social scientific approaches.

Perhaps a more useful approach is to focus not on the ontological basis of what we are dealing with, but rather on the implications of being in

the world in relation to certain core beliefs about spirit. Social science seems more willing to grasp the 'absent divine' in more earthly, concrete contexts. Hetherington (2003) uses the example of holy relics as *praesentia* to suggest the 'experience of mingling' between human and non-human – presence and absence - can be apprehended to witness the 'involvement of the absent Other within the material presence of social life' (2003: 1940). With the material presence of holy relics, the absent divine is touched both directly – with fingers tracing the contours of the material artefact, and indirectly as a form of 'tacit understanding' about what those relics represent. However, as stated previously, the act of touching the 'supernatural' in contemporary spirituality – either directly or indirectly – has been strangely neglected to date.

A range of 'present absences' (Wylie, 2009) – from haunting memories in particular places experienced by almost everyone, to the more otherworldly hauntings of 'ghosts' and other inexplicable happenings – exist all around us. Space is 'shot through' with 'praesentia' – intimate and touching encounters with the 'presence of an absence' (Hetherington, 2003, 1937), and holy relics offer a tangible way of encountering that. However, those encounters which lie at the more otherworldly, and less culturally acceptable end, continue to challenge the rationalist scientific mind. Even literature purportedly dealing with the place of the spiritual in the modern world fails to take account of the *praesentia* of spirit, dismissing any direct otherworldly interactions as 'paranormal' rather than 'spiritual' (see for example Heelas, 2008).

In this chapter I suggest there is an alternative reading if we focus on moments of contact with spirit in the everyday lives of practitioners. As I will show, touch – as an act of connection and contact - is a fundamental feature of these encounters:

'I felt these wings wrap around me, just like an angel, and I was literally lifted from the bed and for the first time in days I felt at peace. I just knew I was being looked after by spirit' (Kathryn, research participant).

Sometimes practitioners 'reach out to' spirit, at other times – like for Kathryn - spirit 'comes knocking'. The *implications* of such moments of 'being touched'

would appear to be that the spiritual itself is given agency. It is the centrality of touch to this agency that I explore in this chapter through the worlds and experiences my participants shared with me.

Touch is of course far from straightforward. Whilst we might most commonly associate touch with something that happens primarily physically, and is the result of things and us being in 'a particular position, at a particular temperature' and possessing 'certain textural qualities' which are sensed through the act of touch (Paterson, 2009a: 130); as Paterson goes on to state, touch can also be something which is mediated and illusory, extended in less direct ways by 'haptic technologies', changing the ways in which the body 'talks' and is 'addressed' (Thrift, 2004). Furthermore, to talk of 'being touched' can extend the vagaries of touch even wider into the emotional, the intangible and the metaphoric.

Notwithstanding the complexities of touch, the centrality of the tactile to what it means to be and feel human appears largely undisputed. To touch and be touched, and to sense and respond to touch not just physically but also emotionally and even spiritually, is part of what it means to be human in relation to everything around us. The things we are touched by shape our worlds, marking out the contours of the tangible and intangible 'realities' we live in. As a result: 'Life without touch is almost unimaginable' (Paterson, 2009a. 129). Furthermore, evidence suggests that touch has profoundly therapeutic benefits. Of particular interest here, this 'touch' need not consist of direct physical contact to achieve results. The potentially therapeutic effects of touching the human biofield – or 'aura' – has been the subject of scientific investigation, and 'significant effects' have been reported from the energy medicine 'Therapeutic Touch' (TT) (Monzillo and Gronowicz, 2011). Also known as 'Non-Contact Therapeutic Touch', the practice involves the practitioner placing their hands near to a patient - rather than touching the body - to manipulate the energy field and promote therapeutic benefits. TT has been demonstrated to improve recovery for postoperative patients (Coakley and Duffy, 2010), reduce pain, depression and sleep disturbance in patients with chronic pain (Marta et al., 2010), and enhance psychological processes to promote optimum health for psychiatric patients (Vickers, 2008). Despite an overwhelming focus on the body in discourses of touch, the

success of TT is indicative of the importance of touching other levels of existence of consciousness (like Kathryn's experience in her hospital bed), not just the body.

To be spiritually active has also been shown to have health promoting qualities (Miller and Thoresen, 2003; Levin, 2003), and reinforces a sense of ontological security (MacKian, 2012). Contemporary alternative spiritualities in particular have been described as ultimately 'therapeutic' (Horowitz, quoted in Winston, 2009; see also Heelas and Woodhead (2005) on the 'holistic milieu'):

'hundreds of thousands of people dabble in all kinds of esoteric healing therapies, varying from mesmerism to spiritual healing, from Reiki to neo-shamanism or reincarnation therapy' (Vellenga, 2008. 331).

The popularity of these distinctly esoteric, and even otherworldly, forms of treatment is possible testament to the fact that such therapies often involve more time, care and attention being given to the individual than with standard biomedical treatment regimes. A standard esoteric consultation may involve taking an extensive personal history, a considerable amount of relaxing hands on 'treatment' of some sort, and quite often this is accompanied by an element of counselling where it might be deemed appropriate. These elements of personal time, attention and extended consultation in themselves have beneficial therapeutic impacts, even if actual 'cures' are not part of the prescription.

However, such mediated healing opportunities were not the only type of personal healing reported to me. A number of participants perceived a more direct healing intervention from spirit. Richard was one participant who described his experience of suffering a mental breakdown followed by physical illness and an extended period of absence from work. During this time he was visited by the 'healing angel' Archangel Raphael:

'For me it was like spirit pulling me up short and giving me a rap across the knuckles. And then a much needed tonic!' (Richard).

The place and role of touch in relation to the spiritual is therefore particularly interesting, as it lies at the intersection of these overlapping therapeutic spheres. The moments of touch I discuss in this chapter would on

the face of it appear to primarily fall into the category of 'non-contact' touch, like Kathryn's and Richard's angel experiences, rather than for example hands-on healing sessions. However, I also stress that by locating the *everyday spaces* in which these moments of touch occur, it is possible to identify associated physical consequences in the material world. These are understood by practitioners to be the direct result of these touching encounters. Therefore, as well as communication with spirit, there is I argue, also 'contact' made between spirit and the material world.

Of course this argument asks the reader to suspend judgement over the 'paranormal' claims being made by my participants, and this was my stance for the fieldwork. After all:

'experiences do not have to be "explained", but simply "understood" as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider' (Knibbe and Versteeg, 2008: 49).

Foltz (2000), in participatory fieldwork with witches, recognised the transformative effect of spiritual practice on the women's everyday lifeworlds, and in part it seems through the process of conducting the fieldwork, was touched herself as she began to feel a deeper sense of connection and awareness of her own place in the world. Understanding living in the world as *experienced* by those who we research is therefore a very valuable thing for researchers, but something which is not easily achieved. Paterson (2009b: 779) has suggested that ethnographic fieldwork sensitive to the 'haptic geographies' of touch, emotion and unusual bodily sensations can open up new possibilities for seeing, hearing and representing 'the taken-for-granted, the left unsaid, and sometimes the ineffable or tacit knowledges that emerge through encounters'. I believe my approach to these encounters has done precisely that, in opening up new possibilities for sensing and representing these touches from otherworlds. Before exploring them in detail however I wish to look a little closer at the thesis of disenchantment which appears to have prevented such stories from being heard in critical social science studies of contemporary spirituality; and to offer an alternative view that allows us to embrace the otherworldly as a legitimate focus of study.

## **Disenchantment and the death of spirit?**

The 'supernatural has departed from the modern world' (Berger, 1970: 1).

The prevailing view has long been that we live in a disenchanted world in the West, where there is little room or need for anything we cannot verify by rational means. The argument is that modernisation brought with it rationalisation, bureaucratisation and a steady erosion of the conditions needed to experience the world as some kind of enchanted and enchanting 'creation' (Wirzba, 2003). Since Weber, an enduring myth of the history of modernity has characterised as inevitable the 'gradual demise of the social significance of the supernatural worldview' (Partridge, 2002. 237); hence the apparent dismissal of spirit from spirituality. In this 'disenchanted' world, stripped of magic and meaning (Schneider, 1993), there is supposedly little room for mysticism and wonder, as all areas of human experience have purportedly been 'conquered by' science and rationality (Jenkins, 2000). The culmination of this for Weber was to trap individuals within an 'iron cage' of rational control. This narrative of a disenchanted modernity, inspired by Weber's iron cage, leaves us with a 'cold and uninspiring world' (Bennett, 2001. 60), which prevents us from contemplating what might lie beyond the lacklustre façade. With this general disenchantment, knowledge and perception of what might be widely accepted as 'real' is generally restricted to what people can experience with their five senses, and what can be measured empirically and 'known' rationally. In relation to the spiritual or religious, the argument is that disenchantment led to secularisation and the decline of mysticism, and removed the possibility for the individual to directly experience, know or be touched by the divine. The 'removal of God' from this world, rendered a divine reality a matter of belief or hope rather than direct experience (Griffin, 1988).

Weber's analysis has proved enduring and influential, and many contemporary theorists agree that what we now call modernity has an undeniable ability to 'kill the spirit' (Flanagan, 2010: 1). However, some have argued this is becoming an increasingly outdated view, claiming that we are in fact entering a new, more magical, modernity that embraces the irrational,

the intangible and the uncanny (see for example Bennett, 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Krieger, 1981; Partridge, 2002, 2004; Ruickbie, 2006). Such accounts challenge the Weberian description of disenchantment as a unidirectional and universalising tendency in modernity (Jenkins, 2000), suggesting that 'outside the iron cage there is another enchanted garden' (Ruickbie, 2006: 124). The 'massive spiritual shift' described above, with its growing interest in the more otherworldly, esoteric and occult, reflects this trend (Partridge, 2004). There is, suggests Jenkins, evidence therefore of 'decidedly modern' re-enchantments which must be recognized as an integral element of modernity.

My ongoing research suggests this new magical modernity is a key part of the spiritual landscape today, and one which must be acknowledged in critical social science analysis if we are to fully understand the impact of spirituality in the lives of those who practice it. As part of that project I have begun to take a more critical look at spirit's touch in our contemporary world and the consequences arising. It is my belief that the spiritual evolution we are witnessing now is premised upon a re-enchantment of the world, allowing an active role for spirit to touch the lives of participants in numerous ways. This means the individual practitioner comprehends the world in radically different ways, and the consequence for us as social scientists is that we might have to embrace Einstein's illusion of 'reality' more firmly, and open up our interpretations to acknowledge a place for more fluid, malleable and enchanting possibilities.

### **Exploring spiritual-material touch**

'When we change the way we think about the universe, we change the way we act upon the universe. The universe then changes the way it acts upon us' (Kaiser, 2000:10).

In order to touch or be touched by spirit it is necessary to establish some tangible way of initiating that contact. A popular means of grasping an elusive and unknowable spirit is through the incorporation of material objects into ritual practices designed to open a channel between the 'material' and 'immaterial' worlds. Here particular objects become offerings to spirit, or become possessed by spirit as a mechanism – often in the form of sacrifice or

gifts – to help spirit work in the earthly plane. The centrality of material proxies for immaterial spirit in such settings is significant, yet the objects used in rituals and offerings do not just embody or represent spirit at that time, their effects extend well beyond it (Espirito Santo, 2010). Through this 'spiritualisation' of material objects (Eipper, 2007) our relationship with those objects and their meaning in the world change. Touching spirit through the material world therefore has consequences, as the function of objects used in this way can change and even change society itself (Graves-Brown, 2000). The result can be very powerful, for once an object is attributed powers of its own it becomes a force, with a capacity to touch others:

'It doesn't require belief in a phenomenon to be affected by it. Christian missionaries destroyed the pagan idols of indigenous peoples around the world not from fear of being converted, but because the power of those objects had to be destroyed' (Eipper, 2007. 256).

The warning being then, that whilst we do things with objects, 'objects also do things to us' (Buggeln, 2009. 357).

Holloway (2003) explores the power of both spiritualised commodities – such as candles and crystals, and much more protean everyday objects – such as televisions and sofas – during the act of enframing 'a space-time' for spiritual insight. For Holloway, carefully crafted spiritual moments are carved out almost despite the immateriality of spirit, and materiality plays a fundamental part in meeting that immateriality. However, is a focus on the *objects* – the touching and placing of the candles, the distractions of televisions, the ritual offerings or religious props – distracting our gaze from another part of the relationship being enacted? Holloway's objects are organised as a stage for meditation, to receive messages from spirit. Other enframings of such space-times might be the act of holding a crystal to 'tune into' otherwise intangible universal spiritual energies, or the casting of rune stones to receive an otherworldly message. However, a more detailed investigation would question whether this is the full extent of the objects or agents we are dealing with in relation to a contemporary enchanted spirituality (MacKian, 2012). Such accounts only focus on the spaces and objects we recognise as part of habitual 'reality' – the candles, crystals and

rune stones, and the hands and body of the individual manipulating them. What other objects or agents might we need to incorporate into our analysis to ensure we capture moments of contact in spiritual-material space which might be overlooked by simply observing what people do with material things?

By way of illustration, I now explore two moments of spiritual-material touch. The first example focuses on the experiences of Mark Hankin. Mark runs his own tarot reading and ghost hunting business in the North West of England. A civil engineer by training, he told me his first profound contact with spirit came when he was in his teens and was visited in hospital by a healing angel in the guise of a staff nurse. In the example I draw on here we see the hand of spirit acting quite literally in the material world, giving him a very tangible feeling of having being touched by spirit. In the second example, I look at one participant's experiences of working with spiritual energies. 'Penny' (a pseudonym) runs a private clinic in the North West of England with her family, offering chiropractic treatment, massage, bush flower therapies, homeopathy and acupuncture. She has always felt the energies of nature, works closely with spirit guides and began developing her spiritually based healing skills following a diagnosis with cancer in 1995. Her encounters with spiritual energies demonstrate that spirit is also understood to touch in ways which are less immediately visible. Yet specific material consequences following her spiritual-material enactments are interpreted by Penny to be the direct result of, and further evidence of, spirit's ability to touch our world.

### ***Mark: Recognising spiritual-material touch***

'I opened up my tarot box and on top of my cards was a small white feather. It couldn't have blown in or been put there by anyone' (Mark).

The idea of imbuing particular objects with otherworldly powers, or using ritual objects in establishing a link to spirit is commonplace amongst practitioners. For many spiritual seekers Tarot cards are one material proxy that might be used to open a channel and establish tactile contact with spirit. Individual cards may be held and meditated over or placed on a personal altar to

invoke particular energies in the person's life. Or the cards may be carefully shuffled and laid out in a spread to bring a message to another person in a reading. The importance of touch in achieving the spiritual connection is reflected in the practice common to many card readers of never allowing others to touch their cards, for fear of the 'wrong' energies being transferred. Alternatively, other readers may insist the sitter holds the cards to impart 'their energies' onto them. Whilst these two practices may seem contradictory, they are nonetheless both based on the same principle that touch – understood as moments of contact (either physical or as a less tangible feeling of communication) – initiates and maintains the relationship and link with spirit. Tarot cards, in essence, are routine agents in the coproduction of spiritual-material spaces between the reader and the sitter. However, the appearance of the white feather in Mark's tarot box suggests we may need to reconceptualise the processes and agencies through which spiritual-material spaces might be coproduced around particular (im)material objects.

For Mark, the gift of a feather in his box of cards did not come from another person, neither was it put there purposively by another human hand. It was not part of *his* construction of material channels or proxies designed to reach out to spirit. It could only be a gift from spirit. In this example, the material was not knowingly placed by earthly forces, but apparently by the immaterial itself. Mark was not the one reaching out using ritual objects - as he might when doing a tarot reading – *spirit* was the active agent here. What was significant for Mark was that spirit alone could have touched his carefully guarded box. Through allowing spirit agency, we see the material feather becoming immaterial, the immaterial spirit becoming material as symbolic of spirit's presence and agency in the earthly world. Evidence that spirit can touch the worlds of believers in material ways.

Mark had repeatedly asked for a feather from spirit as proof that his connection was 'real'. The appearance of feathers is a frequently mentioned everyday example of being 'touched by spirit' or 'knowing spirit is there', because they are interpreted as a physical representation of the presence of angels. Such interpretation requires the blurring of the boundary between apparently distinct conceptual categories – the tangible 'earthly' and the

ethereal 'otherworldly'. A practitioner might acknowledge the feather fell from a bird, but will also say it did so to show them spirit was there. This suggests there is in fact no distinction, but instead mutable landscapes of touching and being touched at the interface between the earthly and the otherworldly. It is this very process which makes spirit more tangible, and such moments of contact so profound.

Spirit thereby erupts into the earthly world if individuals recognise it as such, and this requires new conceptualizations of the 'real'. For those attuned to the possibility of contact with spirit, they expect to see, and do see, material signs of this, such as Mark's feather in the tarot box . But whilst materiality might represent temporary touchstones of the intangible immaterial in tactile, knowable ways, as we will see in Penny's example below, there are also other moments of contact which do not rely so directly on the materiality of things. In either case, the meaning for the practitioner of such pathways opening up is that they are literally being 'helped' by spirit (Bennett and Bennett, 2000). They are interpreted by those experiencing them as empowering signs that spirit is supporting them and recognising the struggles in their daily lives. In these cases whether or not these are 'really' spirit objects and manifestations is less important than the *belief* that they are – and the consequences that follow. Because people see these spiritual-material moments as signs of spirit effecting a material change in this world it offers for them the possibility of working *with* spirit to produce further changes in the material world around them, as the following example from Penny demonstrates.

**Penny: Working with spiritual-material energies**

'If I am out walking on my own I can go into a semi meditative state and get my spirit guides to touch me... To walk through beautiful countryside with my spirit guides holding my hands fills me with contentment. To hear the chatter of flowers, feel the power of the trees, catch a glimpse of something small and bright darting through the undergrowth on the edge of my vision reminds me that there is a lot more to this world than just what my five senses tell me' (Penny).

The relationship between spirit and the individual once established is an active one, with the individual being able to work with spirit and channel its 'energies' in various ways. Whilst practices such as Reiki or hands on spiritual healing might be the most obvious tactile ways in which this might occur, there are other less obvious ways in which practitioners experience and utilise spirit's touch.

As the quote from Penny above shows, she had various connections with spirit, through her personal guides and a range of nature spirits. She used a combination of obvious material proxies and less visible means of getting in touch with these spiritual energies in her work as an Australian Bush Flower essence therapist. Material props included a pendulum, divination cards, hands-on massage and the essences themselves. However she also had other ways of channelling spiritual energies outside the consultations themselves, including a number of strategies to bring the touch of the otherworldly to bear on her earthly plans:

'If things are a bit slow business wise I will imagine people picking up their phone and dialling our number. Within a couple of hours one or two people will ring in... If we are doing promotional work and people are walking by instead of stopping, drawing on spirit to project a pink glow all around the promotional stand can really make people look and take notice' (Penny).

Whilst Penny's tactics may sound rather mercenary and based on personal gain, she was keen to point out that through these techniques spirit would be directing people to her who *needed* help. It was a win-win situation: her business would flourish, and many more individuals would be helped towards the healing they felt in need of. Penny was able to channel spiritual energy in this way because she experienced her daily life through numerous overlapping layers of connection between the otherworldly and the earthly. She had an almost constant awareness of nature communicating to her, as well as a strong relationship with a number of spirit guides. Penny's everyday reality was therefore a complex mix of very earthly phenomena – such as consultations, telephone conversations and walks in nature; and inherently otherworldly phenomena, including her spirit guides, nature spirits and the use

of spiritual energies to bring about change in her material circumstances. The way she experienced her world constantly served to reinforce and demonstrate to her the power of spirit's touch. Although I have used the example of her business to illustrate this, there were other ways in which she drew on such energies outside that setting, such as providing readings and healings in a voluntary capacity; spirit's touch was not exclusively linked to the bottom line.

### **Reflections on spiritual-material encounters**

Mark's world was touched by spirit in a literally tangible way, with the appearance of the white feather. For Penny, the power of spiritual energies over her business strategies may appear more subtle and less immediately tangible, but the results for her are just as consequential. Both types of spiritual-material encounter are illustrative of the way in which spirit's touch in our modern world is both felt and seen by those who seek a relationship with it. I now reflect on how these moments of contact and emerging relationships of touch ensure spirit becomes a tangible part of the 'realities' practitioners live within.

#### ***Part 1: feeling touch***

'There are forces that surround us and who are a resource and help in all aspects of our lives' (Princess Märtha Louise, quoted in Duffy, 2007).

Bingham (2006) argues that the co-production of social life is not simply about relations between people; this co-production is also often between people and 'things'. Although Bingham was writing about bees, butterflies and bacteria, spirit in the form of the feather for example, could quite reasonably represent just another such 'thing'. Just like Penny calling on the energy of spirit around her marketing stall, the spiritual for these practitioners is 'everywhere and immanent in every moment of experience' (Holloway, 2003. 1972) and is part of the co-produced ways they sense, experience and interpret the world. To feel this co-production is therefore to acknowledge the

persuasive 'reality' of the agency of spirit, and once the individual *feels* this touch it can have profoundly therapeutic and empowering effects.

Yet to experience such encounters and feel that touch requires the telling of a 'dramatically different story' to the one of Western disenchantment which dominates the literature on contemporary spirituality (Johnson and Murton, 2007). Contemporary alternative spirituality is often dismissed as ineffectual, because, it is claimed, it tackles the symptoms of society's malaise rather than the underlying causes (see for example Bruce, 2002; Carrette and King, 2005;). The argument is that it facilitates temporary, individualised moments of euphoric happiness whilst leaving the essentially isolating weakness of modern society unchallenged. However, for those reporting a connection with spirit through their spiritual practices, the profound impact of such experiences offers a new possibility for reading the world in a different way. As a result of really 'feeling' a connection with spirit, individuals find alternative relationships with the world around them which becomes empowering for them, but is also perceived as having potential ramifications for the wider social condition.

'It has to start with the individual... Now on a bigger scale instead of one person lets take 100,000 people who are like minded in the way I love life, I love people, I am safe, I am protected and all of these people send out positive thought... not one bad thought, not one bad word. Now lets take that one step further the UK has what 55 million people on it, what if everyone of those sent out the same thoughts, within 80 to 100 years you would have a UK with no anger, greed, war, jealousy' (Kevin).

Or put in academic terms:

'the concept of personal responsibility can also include responsibility to others, and thus, has social consequences. Inner awareness may produce awareness of the interconnections of personal conditions with larger social conditions... enlightened self-interest can transform into concern for others... under some conditions, "transformation of self" may be a catalyst for political action' (Finley, 1991: 35).

Exploring the potential impact of this is beyond the scope of this chapter (see MacKian 2012 for more exploration of the 'infrapolitics' of contemporary spiritual experience and practice); suffice to say, that the material impacts of feeling spirit's touch demand closer attention than hitherto applied.

## **Part 2: seeing touch**

'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes' (Marcel Proust 2000: 291).

Each small-scale example of individuals or groups effecting material change in the world around them as a result of their relationship with spirit begins to map new topographies onto the landscapes we thought we knew. New topographies which are unlikely to overthrow the disenchanted world we believe we live, but certainly contribute towards an unsettling of the firm foundations of the material world we thought we knew. Lee (2001: 155) warns that contemporary notions of spirituality must not be romanticized as 'ideal', or 'accepted unquestionably as the way forward in the twenty-first century' . Neither should they, however, be simplistically dismissed – as for example Carrette and King (2005) do - as failing to provide any answers at all. These practitioners, and many millions like them across the Western world (Ivakhiv, 1996), feel and see the touch of spirit in myriad ways around them, and therefore sense the world in a way social science currently struggles to engage with adequately.

Seeing the impact of encounters with the otherworldly is part of the everyday landscape for these spiritual practitioners, ensuring the continued material and sensed presence of the otherwise intangible. For these practitioners spirit therefore touches the modern world in many more ways than the disenchantment thesis acknowledges, not only through specific spiritual sites and buildings, but more broadly across 'spaces for work, play, learning, socialising, intimacy, movement and rest' (Ivakhiv, 2001: 232). There is no doubt that the illusion of what might be considered to be 'reality' shifts as a result of seeing these spiritual-material encounters, and this has important implications for how we imagine the world and the way that world works (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009). We need therefore to suspend judgement over

the veracity of claims made by these spiritually inspired individuals, and to reflect instead critically upon the impact of seeing their particular reality on their lives and the lives of others around them. It is therefore time we started to look at these experiences of spiritual touch with new eyes.

### **Concluding thoughts on the spiritual-material spaces of touch**

'However other-worldly the esoteric and the occult may seem, they gain their credibility from their relationship with the real world, whether through their ability to manipulate it or to live better within it or simply to understand it' (Chris and Bartolini, 2010. 14).

Spirit's touch – whether we believe in it or not - is embedded in our physical, social and personal worlds. It was undeniably 'real' in the perception and phenomenal world of my research participants, it had social significance and altered their behaviour in this world. Without contact from spirit, Mark would not have established his Tarot business; and without spirit's guidance, Penny would not have trained as an essence therapist. Yet much of the academic commentary around contemporary alternative spirituality has been produced with very little space given to how such spiritual encounters manipulate the contours of our material worlds. In this chapter I have suggested that by seeing and feeling spirit's touch in their everyday worlds practitioners encounter the emergence of new landscapes of experience, 'heterotopic' sacred spaces, constructed and touched by many actors, including the other-than-human (Ivakhiv, 2001).

Whilst Mark's experience with the feather and Penny's spiritually enhanced marketing techniques may appear to the uninitiated to be simply too otherworldly to countenance, they are far from unique and certainly not alone. Indeed, Partridge (2004) suggests there has been a general 'occulturation' of Western popular culture, reflecting a more widespread interest in the esoteric, the occult and the otherworldly. Magic and spirits have been brought into the mainstream through the mass media (Chris and

Bartolini, 2010), leading to the supernatural - in the form of Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Percy Jackson the demi-god - to be seen as 'cool'. But enchantment is not simply about being enchanted by mystical stories or mythical creatures; it can also have very real impacts on the personal morals, values and actions of those it touches (Chris and Bartolini, 2010). As Chris and Bartolini say, the otherworldly has a very tangible relationship with our world, because it can, and does, manipulate it, and can help people to live in it and understand it better. I suggest it is time then to re-evaluate the way in which spirit touches our everyday world.

'I would now say I have as much faith in the spirit world and the source as I do in any living human, if not more, because spirit have never let me down' (Kevin).

As Kevin's quote suggests, the touch of spirit in everyday life is something that can cultivate a sense of connection in a way that our individualised, demarcated and increasingly privatised lives often appear to deny us. There is 'a widespread experience of insecurity in late modern society' (de Groot, 2006: 97), and we must therefore take seriously any opportunity for satisfying the desire for ontological security (Bauman, 2000). An ontologically secure person 'will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity' (Laing, 1969: 39). The spiritual stories told by my research participants suggest strongly that these individuals believe themselves to have reached such a position of security directly as a result of contact with spirit and of feeling and seeing evidence of that in their world. Highlighting the importance of touch allows us to see how these relations are solidified in the materiality of everyday realities.

I must acknowledge however that I am focusing here on the positive effects of being touched by spirit; and I recognise that such encounters can also manifest in more disturbing or frightening ways. Nonetheless, my participants focused on the positive, liberating and empowering aspects, and that is why the possibly darker side to otherworldly encounters is absent from this particular analysis. Of course some experiences - such as visits from angels - may be the result of psychotic episodes or other physical, neurological or

mental conditions (see for example d'Orsi and Tinuper, 2006; Bisulli et al., 2004), and might under clinical scrutiny be interpreted as having pathological origins. However, it has been suggested that even events which might appear to be psychotic episodes may in fact occasionally be manifestations of non-pathological spiritual experiences (Menezes and Moreira-Almeida, 2010). The relationship between spiritual experiences and psychosis is therefore a complex and currently poorly understood one, and not one I have room to explore here. From a social science perspective (rather than a psychiatric or clinical one), I am willing to accept these experiences of being touched by spirit as inherently positive *for these particular individuals*.

I am calling therefore, for a re-enchantment of the spiritual discourse which allows us to explore the way in which enchanted moments of contact with spirit manifest in everyday encounters. In this chapter I have therefore argued for the consideration of touch in our understandings of spiritual relationships and practice, for it is only when we acknowledge how profoundly spirit touches people's lives that we understand from a social science perspective the full impact it has on those lives. For the modern world is still touched by spirit and layered with the magical intangibility of other worlds; but social science needs to look with new eyes to see this, and to understand the sociological implications of the presence of such enchanted realities.

## **References**

- Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. 1994. The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization, in *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, edited by U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1-55.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. 2002. *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage.
- Bennett, J. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

- Bennett, G. and Bennett, KM. 2000. The presence of the dead: an empirical study *Mortality*, 5(2), 139-157.
- Berger, P.L. 1970. *A Rumour of Angels: modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural*, Anchor Books
- Bingham, N. 2006. Bees, butterflies, and bacteria: biotechnology and the politics of nonhuman friendship. *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 483-498.
- Bisulli, F., Tinuper, P., Avoni, P., et al. 2004. Idiopathic partial epilepsy with auditory features (IPEAF): a clinical and genetic study of 53 sporadic cases *Brain*, 127, 1343-52.
- Bruce, S. 2002. *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Buggeln, G. 2009. A word on behalf of the object *Material Religion*, 5(3), 357-358.
- Carrette, J. and King, R. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: the silent takeover of religion*. London: Routledge.
- Chris, R. and Bartolini, N. 2010. *Esoteric Economies: Final Report*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- Coakley, A.B. and Duffy, M.E. 2010. The effect of therapeutic touch on postoperative patients *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 28(3), 193-200.
- De Groot, C.N. 2006. The Church in Liquid Modernity: a sociological and theological exploration of a liquid church *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, 91-103.
- Dewsbury, J.D. and Cloke, P. 2009. Spiritual landscapes: existence, performance and immanence *Social and Cultural Geography*, 10(6), 695-711.
- D'Orsi, G. and Tinuper, P. 2006 'I hear voices...': from semiology, a historical review, and a new hypothesis on the presumed epilepsy of Joan of Arc *Epilepsy and Behavior*, 9, 152-157.
- Duffy, M. 2007. Princess Martha tells us why she has set up business with Angels  
Digital Journal Available at

<http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/210452> [accessed: 19 October 2010].

- Eipper, C. 2007. Moving statues and moving images: religious artefacts and the spiritualisation of materiality *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 18(3), 253-263.
- Espirito Santo, D. 2010. Spiritist boundary-work and the morality of materiality in Afro-Cuban religion *Journal of Material Culture*, 15(1), 64-82.
- Finley, N.J. 1991. Political activism and feminist spirituality *Sociological Analysis*, 52(4), 349-362.
- Flanagan, K. 2010 Introduction, in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, edited by K. Flanagan and P.C. Jupp. Farnham: Ashgate, 1-21.
- Foltz, T.G. 2000. Women's spirituality research: doing feminism *Sociology of Religion*, 61(4), 409-418.
- Giddens, A. 1994. Living in post-traditional society, in *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, edited by U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash. Cambridge: Polity Press, 56-109.
- Graves-Brown, P.M. 2000. Introduction, in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, edited by P.M. Graves-Brown. London: Routledge, 1-9.
- Griffin, D.R. 1988. *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hart Wright, S. 2002. *When Spirits Come Calling: the open-minded sceptic's guide to after-death contacts*. Nevada: Blue Dolphin Publishing.
- Hay, D. and Nye, R. 2006. *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Heelas, P. 2008. *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L. 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Hetherington, K. 2003. Spatial textures: place, touch, and praesentia  
*Environment and Planning A*, 35, 1933-1944.
- Holloway, J. 2003. Make-believe: spiritual practice, embodiment, and sacred  
space *Environment and Planning A*, 35, 1961-1974,
- Hoyez, A.C. 2007. The 'world of yoga': the production and reproduction of  
therapeutic landscapes *Social Science and Medicine*, 65, 112-124.
- Ipsos Reid (2006) Canada Speaks Survey Sympatico/MSN. Available at  
<http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Ipsos-Reid-618230.html>  
[accessed: 09 March 2009].
- Ivakhiv, A. 1996. The resurgence of magical religion as a response to the crisis  
of modernity: a postmodern depth psychological perspective, in  
*Magical religion and modern witchcraft*, edited by J.R. Lewis. Albany:  
New York Press, 237-267.
- Ivakhiv, A.J. 2001. *Claiming Sacred Ground: pilgrims and politics at  
Glastonbury and Sedona*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Jenkins, R. 2000. Disenchantment, enchantment and re-enchantment: Max  
Weber at the Millennium *Max Weber Studies*, 1, 11-32.
- Johnson, J.T. and Murton, B. 2007. Re/placing native science: indigenous  
voices in contemporary constructions of nature *Geographical  
Research*, 45, 121-129.
- Kaiser, L.R. 2000. Spirituality and the Physician Executive *The Physician  
Executive*, March-April, 6-13.
- Knibbe, K. and Versteeg, P. 2008. Assessing phenomenology in anthropology:  
lessons from the study of religion and experience *Critique of  
Anthropology*, 28(1), 47-62.
- Krieger, D. 1981. *Foundations for Holistic Health Nursing Practices*.  
Philadelphia: JB Lippincott Company.
- Laing, R.D. 1969. *The Divided Self*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lee, H. 2001. Towards a critical politics of spirituality *Critical Psychology*, 1, 153-  
157.

- Levin, J. 2003 Spiritual determinants of health and healing: an epidemiological perspective on salutogenic mechanisms *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, 9(6), 48-57.
- Mackian, S. 2010 In possession of my senses? Reflections from social science on engaging with the otherworldly *Paranathropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal*, 2(1), 27-29.
- Mackian, S. 2012. *Everyday Spirituality: social and spatial worlds of enchantment*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marta, I.E.R., Baldan, S.S., Berton, A.F., Pavam, M. and da Silva, M.J.P. 2010. The effectiveness of Therapeutic Touch on pain, depression and sleep in patients with chronic pain: clinical trial *Revista Da Escola De Enfermagem Da USP*, 44(4), 1094-1100.
- Miller, W.R. and Thoresen, C.E. 2003 Spirituality, religion, and health: an emerging research field *American Psychologist*, January 58(1), 24-35.
- Monzillo, E. and Gronowicz, G. 2011 New insights on therapeutic touch: a discussion of experimental methodology and design that resulted in significant effects on normal human cells and osteosarcoma *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 7(1), 44-51.
- Moore, D.W. 2005. *Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal: little change from similar results in 2001*, Gallup.
- Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. 2004. *Sacred and Secular: religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press.
- Partridge, C. 2002. The disenchantment and re-enchantment of the West: the religio-cultural context of contemporary Western Christianity *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 74(3), 235-256.
- Partridge, C. 2004. *The Re-enchantment of the West, Volume 1: Alternative spiritualities, sacralization, popular culture, and occulture*, London: T&T Clark.
- Paterson, M. 2009a. Introduction: Re-mediating Touch *Senses and Society*, 4(2), 129-140.

- Paterson, M. 2009b. Haptic geographies: ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions *Progress in Human Geography*, 33(6), 766-788.
- Proust, M. 2000. *In Search of Lost Time Volume 5: The Captive and the Fugitive*, Translated by C.K. Scott Moncreiff and T. Kilmartin. London: Vintage Books.
- Roof, W.C. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Ruickbie, L. 2006. Weber and the witches: sociological theory and modern witchcraft *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*, 2, 116-130.
- Schneider, M.A. 1993. *Culture and Enchantment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shearer, A. 2007. Book Review: Warner, Marina *Phantasmagoria: Spirit visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century*, 2006 *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, November 1, 683-685.
- Spencer, N. and Alexander, D. 2009. *Rescuing Darwin: God and evolution in Britain today*. London: Theos.
- Thrift, N. 2004. Movement-space: the changing domain of thinking resulting from the development of new kinds of spatial awareness *Economy and Society*, 334, 582-604.
- Tyler, L.C. 2009. *A Very Persistent Illusion*. London: Pan Books.
- Vickers, C.R. 2008. Healing touch and therapeutic touch in the psychiatric setting: implications for the advanced practice nurse *Visions: The Journal of Rogerian Nursing Science*, 15(1), 46-52.
- Voas, D. and Bruce, S. 2007. The spiritual revolution. Another false dawn for the sacred, in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, edited by K. Flanagan and P. Jupp. Aldershot: Ashgate, 43-61.
- Walter, T. 2004. Body Worlds: clinical detachment and anatomical awe *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 26(4), 464-488.

Warner, M. 2006. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wirzba, N. 2003. *The Paradise of God: renewing religion in an ecological age*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wylie, J.W. 2009. Landscape, absence and the geographies of love *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34(3), 275-289.