

# ***How is contemporary English spiritual and religious identity constructed and reconstructed by performance?***

Submitted by Sarah Joanne Goldingay, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* in Drama, April 2010.

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## ***Abstract***

The relationship between theatrical performance and religion in Western culture has always been complex and often troubled; and yet at points of encounter each provides fertile ground for exploring questions about how our religious and spiritual identity is constructed through society. This is particularly true of England today. The arrival of the 21st century seems to have heralded a renewed interest in questions surrounding religious practice and spiritual seeking.

When debates about the nature and implications of religious belief are so high on the cultural agenda, performance inevitably becomes a public site of these debates. This is reflected in the academy, and while sociologists of religion have become increasingly aware of the 'performative' aspects of religious practices, contemporary performance practitioners and theorists have become more concerned with questions of religion, spirituality and the sacred. This thesis acknowledges both aspects of this nexus. It contextualises these manifestations in popular culture through recent scholarship from the sociology of religion, and uses frameworks and discourse from performance scholarship to consider the implications of psychophysical practice on performative identity construction. To do this it critiques performance culture's use of religion and spirituality to describe both positive and negative aspects of performance and its genealogies, which at its most extreme, asserts the 'failure' of mainstream religion and moves to assume the mantle of religion itself.

This thesis, through textual and performance analysis, literature reviews, archival research and fieldwork argues that performance optics offer significant mechanisms for examining the efficacy of embodied practices that construct the infinite variety of religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs. It includes a series of case studies which explore how notions of 'Englishness' as civic-identity are interwoven with concepts of religiosity and responsibility. They are informed by my fieldwork as a participant and observer in acts of Christian and Spiritualist worship, in addition to my pilgrimage to Lourdes and Glastonbury with Goddess worshippers and Catholics.

This thesis asks how is contemporary English religious and spiritual identity constructed and reconstructed by performance?

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