



Marion Goldman  
and Steven Pfaff

# The Spiritual Virtuoso

Personal Faith  
and Social  
Transformation

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# **The Spiritual Virtuoso**

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# The Spiritual Virtuoso

## Personal Faith and Social Transformation

Marion Goldman and Steven Pfaff

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*For Paul and Karen*



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# 1 Introduction: The Spiritual Virtuoso

Different as they were in time and place, two men who searched for personal purification and connection to a Higher Power, Martin Luther and Steve Jobs, helped change the world because of their conviction that everyone could reach toward sacred truths and transcendent moments. Luther and Jobs may appear to be an implausible pair but their personal histories, one of sustained religious virtuosity and the other of its lifelong pursuit, can enhance understandings of spiritual virtuosity and how virtuosos can unleash personal and social transformations.

Spiritual virtuosos are absolutely dedicated to expanding their own religious talents and pursuing complete connection with a Higher Power. Their intense personal commitment to spiritual perfection resembles the perseverance of virtuosos in fields like athletics or the arts.

An enduring image of isolated self-denial and intense commitment to holiness stimulated German sociologist Max Weber to coin the term “religious virtuoso” almost a century ago.<sup>1</sup> Like other types of virtuosos, religious virtuosos’s paths tend to be highly individualistic, unless they become convinced that they must share their religious innovations and join together to develop and spread new spiritual possibilities beyond their own circles.

In a handful of asides, Weber noted that virtuosos could occasionally join together to try to change the world in terms of their deeply held religious beliefs. When personal virtuosity unites with collective action to widen everyone’s paths to salvation and shared spiritual privilege, there can be dramatic religious and social transformations. Contemporary Western culture reflects five centuries of religious creativity that is associated with spiritual virtuosity. Since the beginning of the modern era, spiritual virtuosos and those who aspire to virtuosity have spearheaded a handful of major cultural transformations. Virtuoso religious movements developed during the Reformation and continue to gather momentum in the twenty-first century.

Throughout much of his life, a profound commitment to personal sanctification shaped Martin Luther’s thoughts and actions. He was a spiritual virtuoso who wanted to dedicate himself to intense religious practice, striving for spiritual justification and sanctification through rigorous devotions, prayer, and study. Nevertheless, he reluctantly abandoned his cloistered existence to lead the Reformation. Luther introduced essential spiritual innovations that offered everyone opportunities to find God without relying on priests as intermediaries or adhering to the Roman Catholic Church’s rigid procedures.

Almost five centuries after Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg and changed Western spirituality forever, Steve Jobs sought spiritual virtuosity by sampling different approaches to sanctification from the Human Potential Movement, a loose configuration of groups that came together in the mid-twentieth century to try to implement spiritual, psychological, and social transformations.

Jobs pursued his inner divinity and connections to a Higher Power through LSD trips, primal screams, and spiritual tourism in India.<sup>2</sup> He even toyed with entering Eihei-ji Soto Zen Monastery in Japan and becoming a full-time spiritual virtuoso, but his *sensi* (teacher) at the Los Altos Zen Center urged him to remain in Silicon Valley and develop Buddhist approaches in his work and relationships.

The religious innovations that began during the Reformation were essential to Jobs's lifelong quest for sanctification, because Luther irrevocably altered Western civilization by unleashing a direct relationship to God. The virtuoso ethic that everyone could and should cultivate their own spirituality in order to attain sanctification on earth and ultimate salvation in heaven is grounded in deep faith that God wants people to nurture and enact their religious capacities.

Throughout modern history, both those who have attained spiritual virtuosity and constant seekers like Jobs have individually and collectively pursued sanctification, a sense of holiness and purification on earth. However, because they are most committed to their own sanctification, even virtuosi activists who stand at the forefront of consequential movements that enact their religious ideals are seldom politically or socially engaged throughout their lives. Moreover, most social movements led by spiritual virtuosi are temporary, local, and limited. Nevertheless, a few virtuosi-led movements have dramatically transformed the ways that people worship and live.

In this book, we explore three consequential movements and some of their virtuosi leaders, because they allow us to understand how spiritual virtuosity in the West has unfolded over the past six centuries. The Reformation, the Antislavery Movement, and the Human Potential Movement successively increased spiritual equality and merged religion and social activism. These successful movements contributed to the relatively recent decline of formal religious affiliation and the growth of personalized spirituality, because they progressively expanded access to spiritual knowledge and experience in many contexts. In the twenty-first century, what is often misconstrued as isolating and self-indulgent seekership is actually the legacy of generations of activist spiritual virtuosi who reshaped the world and shared new possibilities to come to terms with some Higher Power.

Spiritual virtuosity is by no means limited to Christian faiths, but the Protestant Reformation represents the first significant social movement in modern history that activist spiritual virtuosi led. It paved the way for five centuries of other virtuoso movements that attacked religious corruption, progressively diffused spiritual privilege, and advocated for religious equality. It is important to acknowledge Martin Luther's implicit centrality to both the large and small virtuosi-led movements that have affirmed religious and social equality in different ways.

## **2 The Spiritual Virtuoso**

There are no explicit historical or theological connections between the sixteenth-century German reformers, who risked everything in order to challenge the Catholic Church, and the contemporary “Nones,” who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious and sidestep established religious institutions in order to pursue sanctification elsewhere. But the impact of spiritual virtuosity continues to spread and the Western world has by no means moved inexorably away from spiritual concerns to vapid secularization.<sup>3</sup> There is vibrant spiritual engagement throughout contemporary life and possibilities for sanctification continue to multiply.

Although the shape of religious culture has changed dramatically since the Reformation, the pursuit of spiritual virtuosity is unabated. Eckhart Tolle, a twenty-first-century spiritual teacher and best-selling writer, captured the current moment when he observed, “The new spirituality, the transformation of consciousness, is arising to a large extent outside of the structures of existing institutionalized religion.”<sup>4</sup>

For Tolle, today’s seekers are fortified by their personal autonomy and informed by ancient Eastern wisdom teachings. They “realize that how ‘spiritual’ you are has nothing to do with what you believe, but everything to do with your state of consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> Searches for inner purpose have eclipsed traditional religious organizations that had once been favored paths to spiritually meaningful lives, but the pursuit of spiritual virtuosity is unabated.

As autonomous quests for sanctification and spiritual virtuosity continue to expand, established faiths continue to cede their cultural and political influence. This ongoing erosion of their impact reflects incremental changes that can be traced back to the Protestant reformers’ enthusiastic support for personal religious practice outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church. Luther affirmed the importance of individual relationships to God and foreshadowed the ways that both the Antislavery Movement and the Human Potential Movement emphasized the need for developing personal authenticity that was shaped by spiritual ideals.

In spite of contemporary religious authorities’ repeated efforts to reign in spiritual originality, virtuosi continue to work for more flexibility within their faiths, and they sometimes step outside of institutionalized religion to become leaders and advocates for expanded equality throughout society. These activist virtuosi implicitly extend the ideals of freedom and critical inquiry that were part of Luther’s Reformation, because they focus on direct relationships with a Higher Power and personal spiritual practice. Although some activist virtuosi support conservative movements within their denominations and sometimes within the larger society, when spiritual virtuosi disrupt official boundaries and challenge institutional authority, they *always* work for more access to spiritual possibilities and a greater range of religious choices by democratizing spiritual privilege.

Luther and the virtuoso followers that succeeded him in Central Europe unleashed a vital new spirituality that sparked centuries of dramatic religious and social change grounded in ever-widening spiritual options. In order to allow everyone access to new spiritual ideas and techniques, insurgent virtuosi advanced their religious and social agendas by adopting recent technological innovations, such as the sixteenth-century





**Photo 1.1 Martin Luther and the Book.**

printing press, nineteenth-century steam-powered locomotives and ships, twentieth-century television, and twenty-first-century digital communications.

When the Protestant reformers envisioned possibilities that everyone might read the redeeming Word at any time, in any place, they opened the door to an explosion of religious choices. Reinterpreting those possibilities, Steve Jobs fueled a digital revolution because he believed that people could discover their authentic selves and their higher purpose through personal technology. New ideas, new technologies, and deep commitments to spiritual equality link the three consequential virtuosi-led movements which we will describe in subsequent chapters.

Spiritual virtuosi stood at the forefront of the transatlantic movements for abolition, temperance, and suffrage because they believed that shared sins of slavery, inebriation, and political inequality corrupted every soul regardless of any direct participation in those sins. During the nineteenth century, some spiritual virtuosi temporarily made political activism their highest religious priority, since they fervently believed that no one could be purified and experience a full connection to God unless everyone were liberated from oppression.<sup>6</sup> The activist virtuosi assumed that their own sanctification required a synthesis of intense private spirituality and urgent public advocacy.<sup>7</sup> Their sweeping moral engagement reflected deep concerns that the rise of industrial capitalism had generated crass, narrow, and materialistic self-interest that dangerously obstructed everyone's paths to earthly holiness and ultimate salvation.

## **4 The Spiritual Virtuoso**

In the mid-twentieth century, the Human Potential Movement's spiritual virtuosi also feared that rising American affluence would stimulate even more materialism, aggression, and emotional alienation.<sup>8</sup> They wanted to extend everyone's access to sanctification by advocating for individualized spiritual practices that embraced varied techniques such as encounter groups, prayer, antiwar activism, yoga, environmentalism, simple living, and meditation. These all came to be publicly identified with the movement, because its loose coalition of virtuoso activists embraced innumerable possibilities for everyone to improve themselves, their relationships with one another, and their connections to the cosmos.

Although the Human Potential Movement was visible for little more than a decade, it sparked Americans' lasting interest in personal expansion and healing of their minds, bodies, psyches, and souls. And it laid the foundation for the thriving contemporary marketplace that offers products and services that promote new options for everyone to reach their full spiritual potentials and embark on individualized virtuoso paths. The movement radically democratized spiritual privilege: the combination of material resources, access to social networks of like-minded seekers, cultural knowledge, religious affinities, and desires to experience a sense of holiness and purification.

Steve Jobs chased virtuosity through varied Human Potential Movement groups, where he learned about ideas and techniques that influenced his technological innovations and his public activities as a charismatic multibillionaire spokesman for products that could transform private and public life. He did not dedicate himself fully to religious study, practice, and action, but without Luther's and his followers' religious insurgency, Jobs might never have experienced the varied approaches that changed his perspectives and fueled his visions of universal, unmediated technological breakthroughs that might expand everyone's spiritual growth.

Religious meanings, rituals, and relationships have changed since the Reformation, but while they were extraordinarily different, the first Reformed Easter Mass in Zurich in 1525 paved the way for the Sunday Assembly's Easter gathering in London in 2015. Common threads of full participation and spiritual equality link the two Easters and other increasingly inclusive religious celebrations and rituals.

## Two Easters

### Zurich, 1525

The Reformation was by no means limited to Luther's work. His teachings and his rebellion against Rome stirred a generation of virtuoso followers who continued to remake religion in his wake. One of the most dramatic offshoots of the Protestant movement coalesced around the radical Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli. In his city, Zurich, Zwingli reshaped citizens' religious loyalties, so after years of bitter disputes between defenders of the Roman Catholic Church and different Protestant factions, they were eager to break with old religious tradition and implement his teachings.

Inspired by the hope of redeeming themselves and executing God's wishes through the Word, Zurich's activist virtuosi had attacked the elaborate system of Catholic sanctification on many different fronts. In 1522, some of Zwingli's associates had openly feasted on sausages during the Lenten fast. Zwingli defended them, claiming that fasting was not Biblically mandated, so it was a matter of individual conscience rather than God's law.

As the reformers gathered popular support in Zurich, they challenged the entire elaborate Catholic system of sanctification. They defaced their city's sacred art and statuary and stripped the altars of elaborate adornments. In 1524, they profaned the tombs of Zurich's patron saints, Felix and Regula, whose relics, according to different accounts, were buried in plain graves, thrown into the river, or rescued by a pious Catholic.

As the town council increasingly turned toward the Protestant movement, the reformers shut down monasteries and enabled priests to marry. However, Zwingli and his followers allowed the grand cathedrals to stand after they had destroyed their adornments. Within the old cathedral, they offered a new, simplified, austere style of worship designed to open the Gospels to everyone—poor and rich, women and men.

In April 1525, a fresh liturgy replaced the elaborate Catholic Mass in Zurich, and on Easter Day the service sealed the local Protestant triumph. Worshippers, inspired by the Protestant ideal of spiritual virtuosity, gathered in a resanctified, simply appointed *Grossmünster* to celebrate Easter according to their new model. Free from the old Church hierarchy and ceremonialism of Rome, the soberly dressed men and women affirmed their relationships with God, celebrating a “pure” mass in German rather than in Latin.



Photo 1.2 Grossmünster Cathedral in Zurich.

## 6 The Spiritual Virtuoso

They worshipped in a sanctuary bathed in light and naked of its former ornaments, reliquaries, and opulently bound holy books.<sup>9</sup> Zwingli, no longer a Catholic priest but instead a pastor, dressed simply in black in order to communicate his role as the congregation's "servant." The service conveyed an implicit message of unpretentious holiness. Descriptions of that first great Reformed Easter celebration emphasize its new modesty and restraint.<sup>10</sup>

Underscoring the equality of all believers before God and emphasizing the authority of the sacred Word over all, Zwingli faced the congregation, not the altar. He appealed to worshippers to reject hypocrisy and falsehood. He prayed that everyone in the congregation should live innocently before God and man. Reading and preaching from Corinthians I (26–31), the pastor spoke of the spiritual obligations and possibilities that were open to everyone who sought sanctification, and he appealed for unity in Christ as he led the Lord's Prayer.

After he described Jesus as the "Bread of Life" (Jn 6:47-63), Zwingli prepared the congregation for a Reformed Lord's Supper that replaced the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist. In a radical reinterpretation of the Catholic Mass, partaking in the Supper became an act of communion with God, not a miracle of transubstantiation (the priestly transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ). The pastor distributed bread and worshippers broke off pieces themselves.<sup>11</sup> Then they sipped wine from a common cup, in contrast to the Catholic Mass, in which only the priest drank the sacred wine. After communion and a hymn of praise, Zwingli closed the service with a benediction.

That simplified Easter liturgy captured the essence of the Reformation's renewed conception of God's spiritual community and equality for all in His eyes. For many, the event symbolized restoration of the true Gospel and the true church. What must have been dramatic for the worshippers was that in this service, laymen and women were participants—not mere spectators—in the act of spiritual communion with Christ. Their voices blended together in prayers, although women and men sung alternate lines of hymns of praise. Women could not preach, but they were active throughout the service, confirming the worst fear of Catholic traditionalists.

The entire Easter service reflected Protestantism's sweeping innovation: everyone could stand directly before the Word, responsible through faith and by grace for personal salvation. They approached the liturgy as spiritual equals, united in an ethic that required them to strive for sanctification and spiritual virtuosity throughout their lives. Ultimate salvation was God's freely given gift to everyone if they demonstrated unwavering faith in Jesus the Redeemer.

## London 2015

Almost five centuries later, hundreds of people crowded into the Sunday Assembly's oddly named "Atheist Easter" at Conway Hall in Central London. Secular humanism had never been more spiritual or more challenging to rigid definitions of religion. Throughout the lively service, everyone affirmed the Assembly's major tenets: "Live

Better, Help Often, Wonder More.” A small, energetic band played well-known pop songs and almost everyone in the auditorium belted out the choruses of the Proclaimers’ 1988 hit, “I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)”:

But I would walk five hundred miles  
And I would walk five hundred more  
Just to be the man who walked a thousand miles  
To fall down at your door<sup>12</sup>

Some enthusiastic singers raised their hands to catch the awesome, intangible power that touched them during the song, but their upstretched arms were not surprising, because the assembly is “radically inclusive” and welcomes both believers and atheists. On that Easter, however, the believers far outnumbered the skeptics. The Assemblers’ songs, discourses, and spontaneous shout-outs praised a life force that transcends isolated individualism. Both the master of ceremonies and the featured speaker described unlimited spiritual possibilities within everything from “mindful” environmentalism to meditative sexuality, but they never mentioned heaven, hell, God, or any all-powerful, interfering deities.

Assemblers came together to connect with an amorphous mystical force and build a supportive community for ethical guidance and material help during hard times. An elaborately carved phrase over the auditorium’s original proscenium arch, “To Thine Own Self Be True,” captured their personalized approach to spirituality.

A few hearty elders at the Easter Assembly might have gazed at the arch on the day that the South Place Ethical Society opened Conway Hall in 1929 or they might have listened to the famous philosopher Bertrand Russell lecture to the society in the 1930s and 1940s. Elders smiled indulgently at two-dozen children seated in a corner near the stage, where adults encouraged them to jump up and down during songs and quietly color when someone was speaking. Three girls wore ruffled pastel pinafores that would be welcomed at a High Anglican Easter Mass, while the others wore jeans and bright tops, just like the hundreds of twenty- and thirty-year-olds who packed the service. There was no communion, but generous souls brought foil-wrapped chocolate eggs, marshmallow treats, and granola bars that they quietly passed out during the service.

A rich smell wafted up from the main floor into the thronged gallery, but it was not incense or something else that was connected to a ritual. Scents from damp wool and down jackets, wet hair, and oils of oud and patchouli had blended together in the air, pleasantly engulfing the crowd and adding to the feeling of being part of an embracing community. The collective perfume was another sign that the Sunday Assembly was much younger and hipper than the usual Anglican congregation.<sup>13</sup> The hundreds of enthusiastic, ethnically and sexually diverse young adults that eagerly gathered at Conway Hall implicitly negated forecasts about the inevitable decline and disappearance of religion in the West.<sup>14</sup> And their joyous voices drowned out centuries of lamentations about secularization as a precursor to the absolute disappearance



**Photo 1.3 Sunday Assembly at Conway Hall.**

of spiritual engagement—predictions that began when the Reformation challenged the Church’s religious monopoly.<sup>15</sup>

It is no accident that the Sunday Assembly first emerged in London in 2013 and spread throughout England, since the substantial majority of English people, close to 80 percent, believe in some supernatural force. However, less than half of them belong to established faiths.<sup>16</sup> Some scholars argue that the decline of organized religion in Britain has left behind a nation of unattached believers, prone to personalized spirituality and religious seekership. Others dispute that claim, arguing that Britons have grown increasingly indifferent to religion of all kinds.

We see spirituality as remarkably persistent, even in societies like the United Kingdom, and the trajectory of virtuoso social movements suggests that contemporary desires for personal virtuosity are deeply informed by religious strivings. In the United States, a more religious country where the Assembly has grown and spread, 75 percent of Americans report a religious affiliation and less than 3 percent of the people are certain that there is no Higher Power.<sup>17</sup> They are believers and seekers, but not necessarily permanent believers.

Millions of believers on both sides of the Atlantic no longer affiliate with mainstream faiths, but they nonetheless acknowledge some Higher Power or divine force, and they want to explore and understand their relationship to something beyond themselves. Although their religious activities may ebb and flow, they still search for a sense of purpose, purification, and holiness as they create their own mosaics of personal practices and public actions. As they seek sanctification, the Sunday Assembly’s collective rituals and shared language of faith draw them together in temporary intimacy.

The Assembly requires neither formal membership nor rites of passage like baptism or confirmation, but dedicated Assemblers attend its large gatherings twice a month and join group activities that they promote on Facebook and on local Assemblies’