The idea of enlightenment is central to modern spirituality. I argue that the idea is fundamentally unclear and that "spirituality without religion" is really just privatized, experience-oriented religion. Enlightenment is an ambiguous concept, not a singular state, and its many meanings are often incompatible. I focus on “Buddhist modernism,” which downplays the metaphysical and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism, while emphasizing mindfulness and scientific rationality. Buddhist modernists try to demythologize enlightenment by turning it into a scientifically comprehensible psychological state, while they also romanticize enlightenment as an intuitive and non-conceptual epiphany. “Neural Buddhists” maintain that enlightenment is a scientifically identifiable brain state. I argue that these ideas are all unworkable and that the modern spiritual concept of enlightenment is incoherent. The larger moral is that religion and science may be able to coexist, depending on the attitude they take toward each other, but science can’t legitimize (or delegitimize) religion, and they can’t be merged into one.

Evan Thompson is a professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia. He writes about the mind, life, consciousness, and the self, from the perspectives of cognitive science, philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and cross-cultural philosophy. This talk -on the transformation of enlightenment or awakening experiences- is taken from his forthcoming book “Why I am Not a Buddhist” (Yale University press, January 2020). Evan has (co)-authored several other best selling books. He was elected as the 2020-21 president of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association.