

ISRS

Religions of Modernity

**Relocating the Sacred
to the Self
and the Digital**

Edited by

**Stef Aupers
& Dick Houtman**

BRILL

Religions of Modernity

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Rotterdam, December 2009
SA/DH

CONTRIBUTORS – RELIGIONS OF MODERNITY

Stef Aupers

Stef Aupers (1969) is a sociologist of culture and works as an Associate Professor at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Sociology. Much of his research deals with modern meaning in a supposedly secularized and 'disenchanted' world. He has published in Dutch and international journals like *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* on New Age spirituality, conspiracy culture and internet culture. He is currently working on a monograph on online computer gaming and on a translation/revision of his dissertation *Under the Spell of Modernity: Sacralizing the Self and Computer Technology* (forthcoming with Ashgate, 2010).

Kelly Besecke

Kelly Besecke's work addresses the classical Weberian problem of meaning in a rationalized society. The ideas she discusses in this volume emerged from research for her Ph.D. dissertation *Rational Enchantment: Transcendent Meaning in the Modern World* currently under revision for publication as a book. Her other published work on this topic includes "Speaking of Meaning in Modernity: Reflexive Spirituality as a Cultural Resource" (*Sociology of Religion* 2001, 62:3) and "Beyond Literalism: Reflexive Spirituality and Religious Meaning" (Edited by Nancy Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* Oxford, 2007). Formerly a professor of sociology at Kenyon College and at Colorado College, she now lives in Austin Texas, where she writes and works as a freelance academic editor (www.bookmarkediting.com).

Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg

Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg is Associate Professor in Educational Anthropology at the School of Education, University of Aarhus. Her dissertation *Ethics of sensibility: Personality adjustment in New Age and modern management* (*Følsomhedens etik. Tilpasning af personligheden i New Age og moderne management*. Forlaget Hovedland, 2001) explores the parallels in New Age and modern management, and how a new work-ethic evolves from ideas of personal growth and courses in personal

development. She is now doing research on stress-intervention-methods and on stress in public organizations.

Siobhan Chandler

Siobhan Chandler is a doctoral candidate/lecturer in the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. She specializes in the study of contemporary religiously unaffiliated spirituality. Her research investigates the social and ethical significance of non-institutional religiosity in the context of late capitalism.

Olav Hammer

Olav Hammer is Professor of History of Religions at the University of Southern Denmark. He has published extensively, in particular on Western esotericism and on New Religious Movements. Recent publications include *Alternative Christs* (edited volume, Cambridge UP, 2009). He is at present executive editor of the journal *Numen*.

Dick Houtman

Dick Houtman (1963) is Professor of Cultural Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and a member of the editorial boards of *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Politics and Religion*. Cultural, religious and political changes in contemporary western society constitute his principal research interest and with others he has recently published in journals like *Social Forces* (2009), *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2007, 2009), *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2009), *American Behavioral Scientist* (2010), *British Journal of Criminology* (2008), *Politics and Society* (2007), and *European Journal of Political Research* (2006). His latest books are *Class and Politics in Contemporary Social Science* (New York, 2003) and *Farewell to the Leftist Working Class* (with Achterberg and Derks, New York, 2008).

Murray Lee

Murray Lee is a Director of the Sydney institute of Criminology and a Senior Lecturer in Criminology. He is the author of *Inventing Fear of Crime: Criminology and the Politics of Anxiety* (Devon, 2007) and co-author of *Fear of Crime: Critical Voices in an Age of Anxiety* (Milton Park, New York, 2008). His current research interests involve the spatial distribution and dynamics of crime and criminalization in South Western Sydney, crime and social isolation, and fear of crime.

Carly Machado

Carly Machado (Faculty of Social Science, University of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) conducts research in the field of religion and media, with a particular focus on new technologies, cyberculture and the contemporary religious imaginary. Her dissertation (2006), *Imagine If It All Were True: The Raelian Movement among Truths, Fictions and Religions of Modernity*, deals with the Raelian Movement, a controversial new religious movement concerned with human cloning, bioethics and the existence of extraterrestrials. Machado teaches at 'A Vez do Mestre Institute' in Rio de Janeiro and coordinates programs on Distance Education in Brazil since 2008. In 2007, she was a visiting postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition, McMaster University.

Karen Pärna

Karen Pärna (1977) is junior lecturer at the University College of Maastricht University in the Netherlands, where she teaches BA courses in sociology and sociology of religion. She has defended her PhD thesis entitled *Believing in the Net: Implicit Religion and the Internet Hype, 1994-2001* in January 2010 at the Faculty of Religious Studies of Leiden University.

Adam Possamai

Adam Possamai is Associate Professor in Sociology and Acting Director of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies at the University of Western Sydney. He is former President of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. He is the author of *In Search of New Age* (2005, Ashgate), *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (2005, Peter Lang), *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y* (2009), and a book of short stories, *Perles Noires* (2005, Nuit D'Avril).

Linda Woodhead

Linda Woodhead was educated at Cambridge, taught at Oxford, and is now Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University, and Visiting Professor at Aarhus University. Her interest is religion and change in contemporary societies. She currently directs the £12m research programme 'Religion and Society', consisting of 75 separate projects. Her publications include *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (with Ole Riis, Oxford, 2010), *The Spiritual Revolution* (with Paul Heelas, Blackwell, 2005), *A Very Short Introduction to Christianity* and *Religions in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2005).

Dorien Zandbergen

Dorien Zandbergen (1977) studied Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and is currently a junior lecturer and PhD student at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of the University of Leiden and at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research. Her Master thesis *Computers in Actie* (*Computers in Action*) described the role of computers in the ideals of international political activists in Amsterdam. Her current research is titled 'Silicon Valley New Age' and addresses the elective affinity between New Age spirituality and information technologies as it developed in the recent history of the San Francisco Bay Area. To conduct fieldwork in this area, she received a Fulbright Scholarship from the Netherlands America Commission for Educational Exchange. The chapter in this book has been written right after the first period of fieldwork in 2005.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGIONS OF MODERNITY

RELOCATING THE SACRED TO THE SELF AND THE DIGITAL

Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers

A reenchantment of the world?

No less than a century after its formulation, Max Weber's analysis of the progressive disenchantment of the modern world continues to evoke debate and arouse the intellectual imagination. Weber's narrative of the gradual disappearance of the metaphysical 'Hinterwelt' that once provided the Western world with solid meaning hardly needs to be introduced to sociologically informed readers. The process of disenchantment took off, Weber argued, with the emergence of Judaic anti-magical monotheism in ancient times and was pushed a decisive step further forward when the Protestant Reformation unleashed its attack on Catholic magic and superstition in the sixteenth century. Their further expulsion from the modern world has been firmly supported since by modern intellectualism's imperative of pursuing truth and nothing but truth, significantly contributing to a world increasingly devoid of meaning – a world in which “processes (...) simply ‘are’ and ‘happen’ but no longer signify anything”, as Weber (1978[1921]: 506) writes.

Modern science, because of its anti-metaphysical and empirical orientation, cannot help but further the disenchantment of the world. Potent though it is, it cannot provide answers to what are ultimately the most significant questions faced by mankind – the meaning of life, the purpose of the world, and the life plans to pursue or refrain from: “Only a prophet or a savior can give the answers” (Weber 1948[1919]: 153). As an essentially “irreligious power” (Ibid.: 142), all science can do is rob the world of its remaining mysteries by laying bare causal chains: “(T)he disenchantment of the world (...) means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation”, as Weber summarized his position in the probably most cited passage of his essay “Science as a

Vocation” (Ibid.: 139). Once embedded in technology, causality and calculation yield technology as the modern mode of controlling nature *par excellence*, resulting in a decline of magical practices: “(O)ne need no longer have recourse to magical means to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service” (Ibid.: 139). As a much more effective mode of control than magic, technology liberates human beings from natural circumstances our ancestors simply had to bear – it is meanwhile even deployed to transform our own bodies, emotional states and cognitive abilities (e.g., Fukuyama 2000).

Although the goals that can be set for the deployment of technology are virtually infinite – ranging from curing disease, increasing profit or countering global warming to exterminating ethnic or religious others –, science can only remain silent about the ends that are worth pursuing. It can only provide means to *given* ends, because it is unauthorized in the domain of moral values: “(...) it (cannot) be proved that the existence of the world which these sciences describe is worthwhile, that it has any ‘meaning’, or that it makes sense to live in such a world” (Ibid.: 144). Although Weber acknowledged that, much to his horror, there are “big children in the natural sciences” (Ibid.: 142) who believe they can bestow “objective” meaning upon the world, he firmly rejected such a position himself. Science, he insisted, simply cannot decide between competing value claims. More than that: it can only further the process of disenchantment by progressively destroying the metaphysical foundations on which the mutually conflicting religious doctrines and political ideologies rely. Science hence inevitably creates and aggravates modern problems of meaning. The fate of modern man, Weber held, is to face this stern reality as it is, without illusions – to heroically bear the modern fate of meaninglessness without taking refuge in utopian dreams or promises of religious salvation, because there simply is no way back. Although he took great efforts to take this imperative seriously in his own life as a man of science, his struggle with his ‘inner demons’ that resulted in his mental breakdown in the period 1897–1902 demonstrates just how difficult a task this actually was.

There is much to commend this analysis of the progressive dissolution of solidly grounded meaning in the modern world. Perhaps more than anything else, the emergence of postmodernism since the 1960s confirms the position of Max Weber. Contemporary culture, postmodern thinkers have argued, has after all lost much of its metaphysical foundation. Most of us no longer feel that we live in ‘natural’ or ‘solidly

grounded' social worlds. We now inhabit worlds ruled by insidiously rhizooming simulations that have resulted in a virtual disappearance of 'real' reality and authenticity (Baudrillard 1993[1976]; Houtman 2008), a world in which depth has been superseded by 'surface' (Jameson 1991), and in which even science's authority to legislate truth has progressively dissolved (Bauman 1987; Rorty 1980). Hardly surprising, the Christian churches have lost much of their former appeal in this cultural climate (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2004; Brown 2001; Houtman and Mascini 2002). The progressive disenchantment of the world, predicted by Weber a century ago, seems a mere truism.

Or is it? Interestingly enough, in Weber's own intellectual circles in the German city of Heidelberg at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, many a philosopher, psychologist, or artist took refuge in utopian experiments, alternative religions, and esoteric movements, such as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and the philosophy of life of Henri Bergson and the like. There is no doubt that Weber was well aware of these attempts to infuse the modern world with new meaning. Even his brother Alfred, the sociologist of culture, attempted to convert him to philosophy of life. And during the springs of 1913 and 1914, Weber paid visits to Monte Verita in Ascona in the Alps, where his contemporaries indulged in free sexuality and alternative forms of religion. While acutely aware of these attempts by many of his fellow-intellectuals to re-enchant a progressively disenchanted world, Weber himself adopted a rationalist stance and firmly dismissed spiritual tendencies such as these as "weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times" (1948[1919]: 149). And more bluntly: "this is plain humbug or self-deception" and one should "bear the fate of the times like a man" (Ibid.: 154–155). Unfortunately, this personal moral aversion seems to have withheld Weber from a detailed and systematic analysis of these tendencies.

Weber's hesitation in this matter is all the more unfortunate, because the desire to re-enchant the modern world has certainly not waned since. To the contrary: remarkably similar tendencies towards re-enchantment have become only more widespread a century later (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Herrick 2003; Houtman and Mascini 2002; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Indeed, theoretically oriented sociologists such as Michel Maffesoli (1996) and Zygmunt Bauman (1993) observe a re-enchantment of the world, with the latter (Ibid.: 33) commenting that "postmodernity (...) brings 're-enchantment' of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to

dis-enchant it". Many commentators conceive especially of the increased popularity of New Age, Paganism, Wicca, and the like, as indicating a present-day re-enchantment of the world. Thus Philip Wexler (2000) writes about the emergence of a "mystical society" and David Lyon (2000: 34) observes "widespread re-enchantment" in the late-twentieth century: "(F)ar from the secularization of consciousness producing a situation in which technoscience offers satisfactory solutions to the recurring riddles of life, plenty of evidence exists for interest and involvement in many kinds of unconventional beliefs, practices, and spiritualities. Globalizing Eastern influences, along with some thoroughly modern emphases on technique, have encouraged movements such as New Age; the (re)feminization of religion has prompted quests for women-friendly religiosities such as Wicca".

These claims by theoretically oriented sociologists have unfortunately remained largely isolated from empirical work on contemporary New Age spirituality and are therefore inadmissibly sweeping and impressionistic. On the other hand, empirical ethnographic work of what actually goes on in contemporary spiritual milieus tends to be rich in description, yet theoretically poor and underdeveloped. Paul Heelas' (1996: 8) observation that "the New Age remains under-theorised", made about fifteen years ago, thus still applies very much today. The ambition of the present volume, then, is to connect theoretical speculations about a contemporary re-enchantment of the Western world to systematic empirical research about this process. Our aim is in particular to demonstrate that the classical theoretical positions developed by sociology of religion's founding fathers, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, have much to offer to the analysis of contemporary processes of re-enchantment. This introductory chapter has accomplished its mission if it succeeds in convincing the reader of the contemporary relevance of these classical theories. The rest of this volume contains a range of empirically informed contributions by international experts, which underlie the theory of religions of modernity that we outline in this chapter.

New Age: no real religion?

A spiritual supermarket?

In most of the social-scientific literature, New Age – or 'spirituality', as increasingly seems the preferred term – is used to refer to an apparently

incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices. Most participants in the spiritual milieu, it is generally argued, draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. New Age is thus referred to as “do-it-yourself-religion” (Baerveldt 1996), “pick-and-mix religion” (Hamilton 2000), “religious consumption à la carte” (Possamai 2003) or a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon 2000). Sutcliffe (2003: 9) maintains that “New Age” is “a false etic category”, arguing that it is merely “a particular code word in a larger field of modern religious experimentation” (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000: 1), while Possamai (2003: 40) even goes so far as to claim that we are dealing with an “eclectic – if not kleptomaniac – process (...) with no clear reference to an external or ‘deeper’ reality”.

This dominant discourse about New Age basically reiterates sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann’s influential analysis, published about forty years ago in “The Invisible Religion” (1967). Structural differentiation in modern society, or so Luckmann argues, results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a ‘market of ultimate significance.’ On such a market, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences. Indeed, in a more recent publication, Luckmann (1996: 75) notes that New Age exemplifies this tendency of individual ‘bricolage’: “It collects abundant psychological, therapeutic, magic, marginally scientific, and older esoteric material, repackages them, and offers them for individual consumption and further private syncretism”.

Luckmann emphasizes that those personal meaning systems remain strictly private affairs. By their very nature, and unlike the traditional church-based Christian religion of the past, they are held to lack a wider social significance and to play no public role whatsoever. Writing thirty years ago, the late Bryan Wilson has made a similar claim about the post-Christian cults, stating that those “represent, in the American phrase, ‘the religion of your choice,’ the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns” (1976: 96). And more recently, Steve Bruce (2002: 99) has characterized New Age as a “diffuse religion”, noting “There is no (...) power in the cultic milieu to override individual preferences”. Accounts such as these are found over and over again in the sociological literature, as Kelly Besecke observes in Chapter 5 of this volume: “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged

by almost no one” (This volume, page 98). This new orthodoxy in contemporary sociology of religion is nevertheless deeply problematic.

The imperative of self-spirituality

New Age’s alleged fragmentation and incoherence is not much more than a carefully preserved myth. The sustenance of this myth seems largely due to two unfortunate tendencies in the academic literature about contemporary spirituality. On the one hand, spiritually undetached academic observers tend to confine themselves to a superficial glance of the spiritual supermarket’s fragmented surface, failing to note how this diversity is paradoxically produced by its unifying underlying doctrine. On the other hand, all-too-involved spiritually engaged academic observers tend to neglect this unifying doctrine, too, and emphasize the richness and diversity of the spiritual milieu so as to underscore the authenticity of the spirituality in question (e.g., Rose 2005).

More analytical empirically informed academic work about New Age and contemporary spirituality has made abundantly clear that a doctrine of ‘self-spirituality’ constitutes the common denominator of the wide range of beliefs, rituals, and practices found in the contemporary spiritual milieu. This doctrine postulates that the sacred cannot be found ‘out there’, like the transcendent personal God of Christianity, but rather ‘in here’: “(...) the most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God’, ‘the Goddess’, the ‘Source’, ‘Christ Consciousness’, the ‘inner child’, the ‘way of the heart’, or, most simply and (...) most frequently, ‘inner spirituality’” (Heelas 1996: 19, emphasis in original). Put crudely, New Agers, believe that people have not one, but two selves: they contrast a ‘mundane’, ‘conventional’, ‘unnatural’ or ‘socialized’ self, demonized as the ‘false’ or ‘unreal’ product of society and its institutions, with a ‘higher’, ‘deeper’, ‘true’, ‘natural’, ‘authentic’ or ‘spiritual’ self.

The spiritual self is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self. Residing in the deeper emotional layers of consciousness, it is sacralized as representing the person one ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ is. This spiritual self is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy (mostly referred to as ‘ki’ or ‘chi’) that holistically pervades and connects ‘all’, that is, nature, society, and the cosmos. This whole is seen as subject to a natural process of spiritual

evolution, which inevitably leads it to increasingly higher levels of perfection. Strengthening the connection with their deeper spiritual selves thus enables people to experience spiritual growth, a process that does not stop with death, but extends beyond this life (re-incarnation). Residing in the deeper emotional layers of the self, the spiritual self reveals itself through one's feelings, intuitions, and experiences. One should hence 'follow one's heart': do what 'feels good' and refrain from what 'feels bad'. "The basic idea", in Paul Heelas' words (1996: 23), "is that what lies within – experienced by way of 'intuition', 'alignment' or an 'inner voice' – serves to inform the judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life". In New Age spirituality, in short, taking one's personal feelings and intuitions seriously is conceived as being true to one's spiritual self and bringing life into line with who one 'essentially' or 'at deepest' is.

Although its market structure and the sovereignty of the individual spiritual consumer are central and uncontested features of the contemporary spiritual milieu, these thus cannot be taken to prove the absence of a coherent spiritual doctrine. More than that: it is precisely this unifying doctrine of self-spirituality that accounts for its fragmented market structure without clear centre of authority. As it happens, this doctrine informs 'perennialism' and 'bricolage' as two central features of the way the spiritual milieu deals with religious traditions. According to perennialism, all religious traditions refer to one and the same esoteric truth, i.e., the presence of a sacred kernel in the deeper layers of the self, through which one can 'connect with all that exists'. This perennialism firmly rejects the idea that such a thing as a tradition superior to all others exists. It is instead held that, by their very nature, religious traditions have lost sight of this common source because of their dogmatic clutching to sacred texts, elaborating and systematizing religious doctrines, establishing priesthoods, etcetera – by engaging in the side issue of traditionalizing, routinizing and institutionalizing 'pure' spirituality. Eckhart Tolle, from this perspective, writes about religious tradition as "layers upon layers of deadening conceptualization and mental belief structures" (2006[2005]: 16). Rather than conforming to a particular religious tradition, then, New Agers opt for 'bricolage': combining elements from various traditions into packages of meaning that 'feel good' personally.

Most of the literature about New Age and spirituality, in short, misconstrues perennialism and bricolage as the overwhelming presence of a variety of strictly personal individual beliefs and practices in the

contemporary spiritual milieu. These features are in fact however dictated by the shared doctrine of self-spirituality that hence provides the milieu with its ideological coherence. Conformity to a religious tradition is rejected, because such assumes submission of one's inner wisdom to external authority – an unforgivable sin against the imperative of obeying the spiritual self and becoming 'who one really is'.

A contemporary offshoot of esotericism

The claim that contemporary spirituality is fragmented and incoherent is flawed for yet another reason. What we have come to call New Age since the 1960s' counter culture is in fact nothing more or less than a contemporary offshoot of the esoteric (or hermetic) tradition. This tradition has its origins in the Renaissance, when it started with the translation of the so-called "Corpus Hermeticum", which offered a synthesis of much older traditions like Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism (Hanegraaff 1996). In particular New Age's emphasis on the vital importance of feelings, intuitions, and experiences in guiding one on one's personal path to salvation stems from esotericism.

With this central role accorded to 'gnosis', esotericism entails an anti-nomian rejection of church and science (or faith and reason) as the two principal carriers of western culture: "According to (gnosis) truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or 'enlightenment'. Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of *reason* or *faith*, it is in principle not generally accessible. This 'inner knowing' cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of *faith* (...) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience" (Hanegraaff 1996: 519; emphasis in original). Before it became more clearly visible and influential as 'New Age' in the 1960s' counter culture, the esoteric tradition underwent a number of significant transformations. The most important of these are the incorporation of oriental thought and western psychology from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century onwards (Hanegraaff 1996).

Key figures in the adoption of oriental thought are Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), the founder of the famous Theosophical Society (1875), the so-called 'American transcendentalists' (of whom Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) is probably best known), and American 'beatniks' like Jack Kerouac, Alan Watts, and Allen Ginsberg in the 1950s and 1960s (Hanegraaff 1996; Wichmann 1991[1990]). As a consequence of

this profound influence from oriental traditions, it is simply impossible to imagine the contemporary spiritual milieu without a wide range of (unmistakably ‘Occidentalized’) ideas, practices, and concepts, especially taken from Buddhism and Hinduism (karma, reincarnation, meditation, yoga, aura, chakras, meridians, etcetera) (Puttick 2000). The influence of psychology can hardly be overestimated either. It runs from the ‘New Thought Movement’ of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), through William James’ (1842–1910) functionalist psychology, and the work of Carl Gustav Jung (1885–1961), who departed from his teacher Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) approach in 1912 in order to develop a more spiritually inclined psychology.

Especially Jung’s influence can hardly be overestimated. A number of his students and followers, such as Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, Roberto Assaglio, Wilhelm Reich, and Alexander Löwen, have later come to be known as the Human Potential Movement that deeply influenced the 1960s’ counter culture. Hanegraaff (1996: 513) therefore rightly notes that the work of Jung “enabled people to talk about god while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine”. Like influences from oriental thought, these from psychology are unlikely to be overlooked by observers of contemporary spirituality: “(...) New Age religion (tends) to blur the distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions”, basically because “(...) ‘personal growth’ can be understood as the shape ‘religious salvation’ takes in the New Age Movement” (Hanegraaff 1996: 183, 46).

Because of the vital role of self-spirituality as its unifying moral imperative and because of its rootedness in the esoteric tradition, New Age spirituality constitutes a religious tradition in itself, in short. This means that its easy dismissal as ‘no real religion’ in so much of the literature in sociology of religion is unwarranted, as Linda Woodhead also argues in Chapter 2 of this volume. Much worse, however, is that the misrepresentation of New Age as nothing more than individuals constructing private packages of meaning has prevented sociologists from doing their proper job. This, then, is precisely what most contributions to this book aim for: studying the social aspects of New Age spirituality by critically and systematically deconstructing the prevailing rhetoric of personal authenticity, documenting how spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced, and how, why, and with what consequences it enters the public domain. Before these issues are addressed in the chapters that follow, however, we need to make

sociological sense of the emergence and spread of New Age as a religion of modernity.

New Age: the sacralization of the self

Max Weber on religion and modernity

One of the cornerstones of Weber's analysis of modernity is the notion that the disenchantment of the world inescapably aggravates problems of meaning; the process "destines us to realize more clearly these struggles again, after our eyes have been blinded for a thousand years (...) by the allegedly or presumably exclusive orientation towards the grandiose moral fervor of Christian ethics" (1948[1919]: 149). Weber's hesitation to embark on a detailed and systematic analysis of his contemporaries' desires to re-enchant the modern world is all the more unfortunate, because this notion constitutes a most promising point of departure for precisely such an analysis. Assuming a universal human need to bestow the world with meaning, Weber after all understands culture as "the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings" (Schroeder quoted by Campbell 2007: 11).

The erosion of belief in a transcendent "other world" that gives meaning to "this world" causes great difficulties in answering existential questions about how one should live one's life or deal with illness and death. More in particular it makes it hard for moderns to accept their ensuing normatively expected reduction to mere functionally defined cogs in bureaucratic machines or industrial factories: "What is hard for modern man (...) is to measure up to *workaday* existence. The ubiquitous chase for experience stems from this weakness", as Weber observed (1948[1919]: 149, emphasis in original). In other words: modern institutional orders, driven by a relentless quest for efficiency and effectiveness, preclude strong moral identifications and are hence experienced as 'meaningless' and 'abstract' (Zijderveld 1970; Berger et al. 1973). Needless to say, this is also the major thrust of Marx's critique of capitalist-induced alienation (1964[1848]) and the principal complaint against modern technocratic society voiced by the 1960s' counter culture that gave birth to the New Age movement (Roszak 1968).

No longer provided with pre-given and solidly grounded meaning and subjected to rationalized modern institutions, modern selves find themselves plagued by nagging questions of the type "Do I really want

this?” and “What sort of person am I, really?”. With ‘external’ reality having lost much of its former capacity to endow life with meaning, the deeper emotional layers of the self are left as the straw to clutch at in seeking solace for these problems. Those concerned thus become convinced that they need to ‘take their feelings seriously’, ‘follow their hearts’, and ‘listen to their intuition’. This sacralization of the spiritual depth of the soul, already present in Weber’s own days and having become only more widespread since, can hence be understood as a psychological adaptation to a massively rationalized western world.

But New Age spirituality is not merely a psychological adaptation, it is also a cultural and religious transformation aimed at preventing loss of meaning. From a Weberian perspective, loss of plausibility of cultural and religious worldviews – due to disenchantment or otherwise –, after all sparks processes of “cultural rationalization” aimed at cultural reconstruction to prevent erosion of meaning (Weber 1956; see also Campbell 2007). The disenchantment of the world can hence hardly result in anything else than the construction of more “modernity-proof” worldviews that are as such less susceptible to disenchantment. Precisely because the world’s disenchantment has detracted significantly from the plausibility of theistic Christian doctrines and the legitimacy of religious authorities, religious and cultural specialists have constructed New Age spirituality as a more “modernity-proof” substitute (Campbell 2007). As a ‘religion of modernity’, it is less vulnerable to disenchantment than doctrinal and theistic Christianity, because it substitutes belief in a radically transcendent personal God, who has revealed what the world’s events and processes “really” mean, for the notion that the sacred lies hidden deep “within” each single person (Barker 2004; Heelas and Houtman 2009).

With its marked emphasis on personal experience rather than conformity to religious doctrines and propositional truths, New Age goes beyond the need to “believe” or “have faith”. Seen from the “emic” perspective of the experiencing person, experiences are after all “true” and “real” by definition. As Olav Hammer puts it (2001: 331): “There is no real need to believe in any particular doctrines, nor is one obliged to trust in their antiquity or their scientific basis. The ultimate litmus test is whether you can experience their veracity for yourself”. This is precisely what distinguishes personal experiences from, for instance, “errors” or “sinful deeds”, notions which both rely on external standards of legitimacy. More specifically, as we have seen, New Age understands emotions such as love, pain, pleasure, anger, or happiness as personal

reactions to events in the outer world that convey vital spiritual knowledge about one's inner world – about the sort of person one “really” or “at deepest” is. While traditional theistic types of religion give meaning to personal experiences through religious doctrines, in short, New Age constructs these as spiritual lessons about oneself and the sacred.

Despite Weber's personal moral aversion, we conclude, the spread of what has come to be known as New Age spirituality since Weber's days is perfectly compatible with his own classical analysis of modernity. From a Weberian perspective, it is not surprising at all that the problems of meaning created by rationalization and disenchantment have produced New Age as a modern religious attempt to overcome them.

Emile Durkheim on religion and modernity

Emile Durkheim's classical analysis of religion and modernity, equally influential as Weber's, does much to illuminate the collectively shared nature of New Age spirituality as a veritable ‘religion of modernity’. This is because his perspective is at odds with the typically nineteenth-century theories developed by, for instance, Comte and Tylor and – most notably – Weber and his thesis of the ‘disenchantment of the world’. As it happens, in his later work, Durkheim conceives of religion as an inevitable feature of all human societies, be they ‘primitive’ or modern. Because religion constitutes the sacralization of a society's most cherished values, Durkheim argued, modernity does not mean the end of religion, but rather entails its radical transformation. This analysis, brought forward in his last book, “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life” (published in 1912), differs strikingly from the one presented in his first book, “The Division of Labor in Society” (published in 1893). In the course of his career, Durkheim has thus radically revised his analysis of the relationship between religion and modernity (Seigel 1987).

“The Division of Labor in Society” (1964[1893]) essentially critiques Auguste Comte's position by rejecting the latter's notion that the social solidarity of modern industrial societies can be based on religion and shared moral norms and values (Gouldner 1958). Rather than on these cultural similarities between people (‘mechanical solidarity’), Durkheim argued, solidarity could in these societies only be based on differences pertaining to occupational activities, as manifest in the division of labor (‘organic solidarity’). Although he acknowledged that in modern society “the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion”, he nevertheless

underscored by then that “it is not to society that [the cult of individualism] attaches us; it is to ourselves” so that “it does not constitute a true social link” (1964[1893]: 172). In his first book, Durkheim thus rejected the notion that religion could constitute a source of solidarity in modern society. Consistent with this, his references to the ‘cult of individualism’ tended to be “decidedly negative” (Chandler 1984: 571).

Durkheim drastically revised this position during the Dreyfus affair that shook France in 1898. In his essay “Individualism and the Intellectuals” (1973[1898]), he responded to the anti-Dreyfusards’ charge that liberal intellectualism’s individualism paved the way for anarchy, disorder, and anti-social egoism. Quite to the contrary, Durkheim argued: in modern society, the individualism defended by Kant’s Enlightenment rationalism as well as Rousseau’s Romanticism constitutes “the only system of beliefs which can ensure (...) moral unity (...)” (Ibid.: 50). This typically modern individualism does not value that which separates people from one another, but rather sacralizes their shared humanity, producing a “religion in which man is at once the worshipper and the God” (Ibid.: 46). In stark contrast to “The Division of Labor in Society”, Durkheim here construes individualism as providing social solidarity and cohesion to modern societies – as the religion of modernity *par excellence*.

Indeed, in “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life”, Durkheim conceives of religion as a major source of solidarity and cohesion in any type of society, ‘primitive’ and modern alike. He defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community (...) all those who adhere to them” (1995[1912]: 44). Whereas Durkheim prefers to call this community a ‘church’ to convey “the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing” (Ibid.: 44), it seems preferable to retain this notion without evoking the ‘church’ concept with its narrow Christian connotations.

Durkheim’s brief discussion of speculations among his contemporaries about “whether a day will not come when the only cult will be the one that each person freely practices in his innermost self” (Ibid.: 43) is of particular interest. Such a religion “that would consist entirely of interior and subjective states and be freely constructed by each of us” (Ibid.: 44) does of course not fit his strictly sociological conception of religion. Acknowledging the widespread aspirations toward such a religion in his days, Durkheim comments that “if that radical individualism has remained in the state of unrealized theoretical aspiration up to now, that

is because it is unrealizable in fact” (Ibid.: 427). But as we have seen above, these aspirations – far more widespread today than in Durkheim’s days – do not produce strictly personal spiritualities that fall outside the scope of religion in the Durkheimian sense. They instead entail a collectively shared ‘religion of modernity’ that is as such perfectly consistent with Durkheim’s conception of religion as a pre-eminent social and hence collective phenomenon.

It is, first of all, clear that a shared system of beliefs is present in the spiritual milieu that sets the sacred apart from the profane and that sacralizes a society’s most cherished values. New Age spirituality after all endows the deeper layers of the self with sacrality, while construing the socialized self and the society from which it springs as its profane counterpart. The sacralization of the deeper self is moreover perfectly consistent with Durkheim’s argument that by means of religion human societies endow their most cherished values with sacredness. Given its strong emphasis on personal authenticity and individual liberty, it is quite clear that individualism is modernity’s quintessential value, as Durkheim himself has also pointed out extensively in his essay “Individualism and the Intellectuals” (1973[1898]; see about individualism and modernity also Taylor 1991). Needless to say, if, as Durkheim argues, *anything* can be sacred – “a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything” (Ibid.: 35) – this applies to this deeper self as well.

The other feature of religion emphasized by Durkheim, i.e., public ritual practices aimed at celebrating the sacred and uniting those who believe in it, is also present in the case of New Age spirituality. While, as Frank Furedi (2004: 38) notes in his book “Therapy Culture”, the “celebration of public feeling seems to have acquired the status of a religious doctrine and is now promoted in all walks of life”, we are more specifically witnessing a newly emerged “confessional ethic” (Pels 2002) that encourages individuals to express their inner anxieties, desires and longings in public. TV-shows like “Geraldo”, “Oprah” and the “Dr. Phil Show”, for instance, promote individual conversions from alienating existences and psychological crises to authentic selves by means of testimonials and public confessions (Egan and Papson 2005). At a closer look, then, TV-shows such as these constitute public and collective rituals in which individuals are expected to be true to themselves so as to reconfirm the modern value of personal authenticity through the collective effervescence this generates.

The spiritual milieu proper of course also celebrates the higher or deeper self in collective rituals. The singing of mantras and the performance of Yoga, breathing techniques or rebirthing, does after all not merely generate private experiences of personal authenticity, but also shared feelings of unity and togetherness (e.g., Rose 2005). These collective sacralizations of the self are not only found at spiritual festivals and seminars (Hamilton 2000), pagan covens (Berger 1999) or long-standing New Age communities like Glastonbury (Prince and Riches 2000), but even in contemporary business corporations, as the contributions by Bovbjerg (Chapter 6) and Aupers and Houtman (Chapter 7) demonstrate. New Age can be understood as a veritable religion of modernity because its participants collectively sacralize the long-standing modern value of individual liberty, and especially the ideal of an authentic self that distances itself from allegedly alienating institutions and traditions. Paradoxically and ironically, this value of individual freedom is nowadays collectively shared *and* socially reinforced in the spiritual milieu, as Olav Hammer and Aupers and Houtman demonstrate in this volume (Chapter 3 and Chapter 7). On the basis of such considerations, Chandler (Chapter 4) and Besecke (chapter 5) argue that New Age spirituality is not socially insignificant, as critics argue. New Age boasts a networked form of sociality that celebrates the modern value of individual freedom in a collective fashion.

The sacralization of digital technology

Although Weber left open the possibility of “a rebirth of old ideas and ideals” (1996[1930]: 182), his prediction of an increasingly mechanical and suffocating iron cage nonetheless breathes a tragical understanding of history (Dassen 1999: 277). He understood rationalization as a Faustian bargain: although effectiveness and efficiency are greatly enhanced, these come at the price of widespread problems of meaning. This is so, because from the application of steam-driven technology in modern factories from the nineteenth century onwards, technology increasingly became an autonomous force beyond human control. Intrinsically connected to the industrial mode of production, Weber (1996[1930]: 181) maintains, modern technology “determine(s) the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism”. This analysis has influenced most later theorizing in the social sciences. A few decades later, in an even more pessimistic and certainly more moralistic

vein, Jacques Ellul echoed Weber when he argued that “The mysterious is merely that which has not yet been technicized” (1967[1954]: 142) and that technique had become an autonomous power that increasingly pervades every aspect of human life and is therefore experienced as meaningless and alienating (Ibid.: 4–5):

The machine, so characteristic of the nineteenth century, made an abrupt entrance into society which, from the political, institutional and human points of view, was not made to receive it; and man has to put up with it the best he can. Men now live in conditions that are less than human. (...) Think of our dehumanized factories, our unsatisfied senses (...) our estrangement from nature. Life in such an environment has no meaning.

To give another example, Bryan Wilson (1976: 88), just like many of his colleagues in sociology of religion, relied on the dichotomy of technology and religion in arguing that “Secularization is in large part intimately involved with the development of technology, since technology is itself the encapsulation of human rationality. (...) The instrumentalism of rational thinking is powerfully embodied in machines”. Postmodern authors like Jean Baudrillard (2000[1981]: 160–162) are even less cautious in their theoretical speculations and bluntly equate the omnipresence of technology with the end of history: “All that remains, is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us. (...) Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning (...). And we are all melancholic”.

Many a social scientist has hence echoed Weber’s analysis of modern technology as a large, supra-individual system, intrinsically connected to the industrial mode of production, and generating widespread feelings of alienation. As we have seen, however, this very alienation triggers the turn towards New Age spirituality, which constitutes an important argument against the assumption that rationalization undermines religion, spirituality and meaning. We now take this critique a step further by arguing that these same experiences of alienation evoke a sacralization of digital technology as well.

Computer technology: from alienation to spiritual salvation

During the 1950s and 1960s, rationalized institutional orders were strengthened significantly by the use of giant mainframe computers, owned and deployed by (military branches of) the government and large

corporations such as IBM. Back then, computers were central to the so-called military-industrial complex and as such exemplified the status of technology as a supra-individual system as theorized by the social scientists mentioned above.

In those days, however, experiences of alienation became the impetus for social change. Precisely because many a computer specialist was deeply dissatisfied with the embeddedness of computers in impersonal bureaucratic systems, the monopolization of computers by the government and a handful of major corporations, and the mis-use of computer technology in the Vietnam war, the counter-cultural 'hacker ethic' of the 1960s came into existence. Central to this ethic were the imperative to 'mistrust authorities', the goal that 'all information should be free' and the belief that 'computers can change your life for the better' (Levy 2001[1984]). The counter-cultural hackers saw themselves, as Ken Goffman has phrased it, as the 'new Prometheans' – individuals who, like the Greek god Prometheus, aimed to steal the 'technological fire' from the authorities (2005: 9). Aiming to bring 'computing power to the people', their dreams of small-scale and privatized computer systems that could be put to more democratic and humanized use provided a major impetus for the development of the personal computer. Inspired by this counter-cultural hacker ethic, hacker Steve Wozniak, founder of 'Apple', eventually imagined and built the first personal computer in Silicon Valley, California, in 1976. At around the same time, Bill Gates founded Microsoft and developed, in collaboration with IBM, the personal computer that has conquered the world market since its launch in 1981 (e.g., Aupers 2004; Castells 2000[1996]; Himanen 2001; Levy 2001[1984]; Pels 2002; Roszak 2000).

It can of course be doubted whether the popularization and commercialization of the personal computer since the 1980s has really given 'computing power to the people' in the way envisioned by the hackers. But there is no doubt that the computer's radical privatization contradicts the classical social-scientific image of technology as a supra-individual system, dominated by powerful political and economic elites. More than that: precisely the feelings of alienation generated by such large-scale systems provided the impetus for the development of privatized computer systems that could be tailored to user preferences. Nowadays, this same ethic drives innovations in computer technology, as evidenced by Web 2.0 applications that have recently become popular – online computer games, virtual worlds, web logs, Hyves, MSN, MySpace, YouTube, etcetera. These privatized applications provide

individuals with opportunities to actively resist multinationals (think of the music industry) and to fully express their identities in artistic – or not so artistic – fashions (e.g., Markham 1998; Turkle 1995). The radically democratic and permissive goals of these new digital environments are perfectly illustrated by YouTube's motto: "Broadcast yourself!"

The privatization of computer technology since the 1960s, moreover, opened the way for an affinity between high-tech and spiritual empowerment. Although counter-cultural critics of the "technocratic system" like Theodore Roszak (1968) referred to authors like Weber, Ellul, and Marcuse in making the point that technology and spirituality were mutually incompatible, recent studies have pointed out that even the counter culture's spiritual branch was in fact less uniformly anti-technology than it is often taken to be. Besides 'luddites' like Roszak, it also featured many 'technophiles' – young computer experts and hackers who were simultaneously deeply involved in spirituality (e.g., Aupers 2004; Bey 2001[1996]; Goffman 2005; Ziguas 1997). Even Roszak (2000: 6) himself has meanwhile come to acknowledge that "it is within this same population of rebels and drop-outs that we can find the inventors and entrepreneurs who helped lay the foundations of the California computer industry".

Many of those who initially belonged to the counter culture's Luddite branch came to understand computer technology as a mean towards spiritual salvation later on. Key figures of the early Californian New Age milieu, like Ken Kesey, Terrence McKenna and, most notably, Timothy Leary, fall within this category. Leary argued that 'hard technology' may in fact promise a more effective avenue towards the goal of personal salvation than 'soft techniques' like yoga, t'ai chi, or chakra healing. He compared the personal computer to LSD (e.g., Dery 1996) and suggested in the 1990s that one can escape an "alienating" and "repressive" society by immersing oneself in the new otherworldly realm of cyberspace that was opened up by computer networks. And Leary was no exception. He was but the *eminence grise* of a much broader 'technophile' wing of the New Age movement that, especially in the early 1990s, gathered around hackers, Internet gurus and cyberpunk writers like William Gibson, Rudy Rucker and others – a group of people that constituted "counter culture 2.0" (Dery 1996) in and around Silicon Valley and dreamed of spiritual liberation in cyberspace. About this notable counter-cultural convergence of digital technology and spirituality, Rushkoff (1994: 6–7) has remarked that "The mission of the cyberian counter culture of the 1990s, armed with new technologies, familiar with cyberspace and

daring enough to explore unmapped realms of consciousness, is to rechoose reality consciously and purposefully. Cyberians are not just exploring the next dimension; they are working to create it”.

These developments in the spiritual milieu in the early 1990s were closely related to a broader (pseudo) religious discourse about modern technology, cyberspace and spiritual salvation. Back then, renowned technicians and academics also heralded the newly emerging realm of cyberspace as a spiritual space with an immaterial and ephemeral ontology. It was described as “Platonism as a working product” (Heim 1993), a ‘paradise’ where we “(W)ill all be angels, and for eternity!” (Stenger 1992[1991]: 52), “new Jerusalem” (Benedikt 1992[1991]: 14) and a “technological substitute of the Christian space of heaven” (Wertheim 1999: 16). Renowned robotics experts and transhumanists like Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil promised eternal life in the nearby future by ‘getting rid of the meat’ and uploading human consciousness to computer networks. These and many other examples indicate that advanced computer technology spawns its own eschatological beliefs about spiritual liberation and attainment of an “immortal mind” (Noble 1999[1997]: 143). The privatization of computer technology through its disconnection from the powerful supra-individual systems that monopolized it in the post-war period, has in short stimulated its sacralization as enabling rather than preventing spiritual salvation.

These developments are clearly at odds with the nineteenth-century theories of Comte, Tylor, Weber and the like, and hence also with those of Ellul, Wilson, and Baudrillard. After all, these classical theories construct technology and religion as mutually exclusive realms and emphasize the role of science and technology in marginalizing and driving out magic and religion. The sacralization of digital technology discussed in this volume disturbs this carefully constructed ‘modern divide’ (Latour 1993[1991]): technology and religion do not merely prove in compatible, but the former even becomes a locus of religious salvation itself. This theme is further elaborated upon and discussed in the contributions by Dorien Zandbergen (Chapter 8) and Carly Machado (Chapter 9). Zandbergen provides a historical and ethnographic analysis of the cross-fertilization of New Age religion and privatized (computer) technologies in Silicon Valley. Taking a stance against the technological-deterministic accounts that are found among ‘believers’ and academics alike, she describes the ‘brokerage’ between the hacker culture and the New Age milieu since the 1960s – a brokerage that resulted in a remarkable co-evolution of the digital and the sacred.

Machado analyzes the so-called Raelian movement – representing one of the most radical and spectacular cases of the convergence between digital technology and religion. Informed by the *Elohim*, extra-terrestrial beings thought to have designed humankind, the prophet Raël promises his followers spiritual salvation through science and technology. Self-programming, genetical modification and the promise of a disembodied, god-like, eternal life in cyberspace are among the themes that form the heart of Raelian cosmology – beliefs that exemplify a transition from humanistic New Age accounts to a trans-humanistic or post-humanistic religion. These techno-religious beliefs, Machado holds, can moreover not easily be dismissed as ‘deviant’ or ‘exotic’; the Raelian movement rather provides a radical and sacralized rendition of modernity or, in her own words, it “turns its projects into a declaration of faith” (This volume, page 202). Science fiction, she demonstrates furthermore, forms an integral part of this Raelian religion of modernity. And Vice Versa: in Chapter 10 of this volume, Adam Possamai and Murray Lee show that the science fiction genre, once radical rationalistic, positivistic and secular, is increasingly opening up to religion and spirituality. Modern science and religion, in short, are not mutually exclusive but feed on one another in contemporary culture.

Computer technology: from alienation to technological animism and magic

The machines are restless tonight (Stone [1992], 1991: 81)

While due to its radical privatization, computer technology has come to be seen as a powerful tool towards spiritual salvation, Weber (1948[1919]: 139) is doubtlessly correct when he notes that “the savage knows incomparably more about his tools” than modern lay people do, so that “intellectualization and rationalization do not (...) indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time.” Disenchantment hence assumes division of labor and specialization of knowledge: while most moderns lack the expertise to fully understand how a streetcar, an elevator or a computer operates, they trust that the experts do. But do they?

Two related arguments can be made against this Weberian claim. First of all, various authors argue that we are witnessing a transition from relatively transparent modern technology to opaque post-modern technology (e.g., Turkle 1995; Haraway 1985). Bruno Latour (2000), for

instance, makes the point that every new generation of technology builds upon the former, resulting in a multiple “layering of technology”. Because of this, his argument continues, technology increasingly becomes understood as a “black box”, the operation of which is no longer completely comprehended – not even by the experts themselves. According to Sherry Turkle (1995), it is paradoxically the very desire to make computer technology more user friendly by means of graphical user interfaces, visual icons and simulations that tends to obscure its inner workings. Contrary to older generations of personal computers, for instance, Apple computers and machines running on Microsoft Windows no longer invite their users to look beyond the simulated interface – let alone to try and comprehend the workings of the bare machine itself. Referring to this as “the Macintosh mystique”, Turkle characterizes this development as a transition from a “modern culture of calculation to a post-modern culture of simulation” (Ibid.: 23). In addition, Erik Davis argues that this trend towards opacity easily engenders a new and unexpected process of re-enchantment. After all: “The logic of technology has become invisible – literally occult. Without the code you’re mystified. And no one has all the codes anymore” (1999[1998]: 181).

And indeed, computer technology’s new opacity generates new magical discourses about computer technology. Sociologist William Stahl, for instance, analyzed 175 articles on computer technology in “Time Magazine” and found that 36 percent of these displayed explicit magical language, concluding that “Magical discourse seems alive and well in industrialized North America” (1999: 80). Moreover, computer specialists themselves often rely on quasi-magical discourse (“nerd theology”) as well (Kelly 1999), while a group of renowned programmers and Internet specialists in Silicon Valley refer to themselves as ‘new magicians’, ‘cyberdruids’ or ‘technopagans’ (e.g., Davis 1999[1998]; Dery 1996). Stef Aupers’ contribution to this volume (Chapter 11) is based on an empirical study of this group. These technopagans explain that their work with highly complex computer technology, and with opaque software programs in particular, has brought them to the conclusion that programming can no longer easily be distinguished from performing magic. They moreover talk in mysterious, animistic terms about the global digital interconnections that have come into existence (Aupers 2002). Phenomena such as Artificial Intelligence, computer viruses and software bots make them think of digital technology as consisting of subjective entities or imbued with ‘life’. “The ghost in the machine has made itself evident again”, as one of them remarks. Aupers concludes that

Tylor's (1977[1889]) and Malinowski's (1954[1925]) classical anthropological theories of animism and magic are highly relevant for understanding this type of re-enchantment. Although these theories are based on (empirical) studies of 'primitive' societies, their emphasis on the vital roles of opacity and experiences of impotence in generating animism and magic applies to today's digital environments as well.

A second argument against the Weberian logic of disenchantment is that computer systems have become increasingly autonomous – a development that is, of course, closely related to the one just discussed. Computer technologies “acquire wildness”, Kelly (1994: 4) argues; they get “out of control” and “will soon look like the world of the born”. In a similar vein, Donna Haraway comments that “late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (2001[1985]: 29).

In Chapter 12, Karen Pärna addresses this notion that digital technology is increasingly understood as autonomous and escaping human control. Discussing the millennium bug ('Y2K') at the end of the 1990s, she demonstrates that technicians and the media understood Y2K as a transcendent force. It invoked religious emotions, bound people together, and provided implicit religious meaning in an allegedly secularized society. While Pärna's analysis draws mainly on Durkheim's work, the out-of-control features of computer technology and the religious feelings these invoke may also be understood from the classical work of anthropologist Robert Marett (1914[1909]). Marett explained the birth of 'nature religion' by the fact that 'primitives' found themselves confronted with a natural environment they could neither understand nor control; they therefore experienced it as an overpowering, mysterious force ('mana') that invoked the basic religious emotion of 'awe', a combination of fascination and fear: “(...) of all English words *awe* is, I think, the one that expresses the fundamental religious feeling most nearly” (Ibid.: 13). The contributions of Aupers and Pärna both demonstrate that these basic religious feelings are today projected onto digital technology. As Johnson (2000) wrote about the Internet in “Wired Magazine”:

Evolving so far beyond our comprehension, the Omninet would have to be studied as we now study nature: by probing and experimenting, trying to tease out its laws. Maybe it would defy rational analyses, becoming an

object of veneration. Faced with an artificial nature no longer of our own making, all we could do is stand back in *awe*.

Although “all things” can hence no longer be “mastered by calculation”, this paradoxical development can nevertheless be explained from Weber’s work on rationalization. His metaphor of an ‘iron cage’, after all, communicates that since instrumental rationality’s firm institutionalization from the seventeenth century onwards, the systems this produced increasingly came to follow their own logic and as such became experienced as external forces beyond human control. In a similar way, Karl Mannheim (1946[1935]: 59) has compared the anxieties aroused by these rationalized environments with those of premodern people facing nature: “Just as nature was unintelligible to primitive man, and his deepest feelings of anxiety arose from the incalculability of the forces of nature, so for modern industrialized man the incalculability of the forces at work in the social system under which he lives (...) has become a source of equally pervading fears.”

With its emphasis on the notion that rationalization manifests itself as a blind, autonomous force over which people have only limited control, the work of Weber and Mannheim thus suggests – albeit clearly unintentionally – an explanation for this type of re-enchantment. As soon as technology becomes detached from full human control and becomes opaque and autonomous, this stimulates feelings of alienation that – at odds with the notion that modernization undermines religion – trigger feelings of ‘awe’, animistic sentiments and magical beliefs. Rationalization is hence not simply the end result of the disenchantment of the world, but also does much to re-enchant it by stimulating magical-mythical imaginations about modern technological systems.

Religions of modernity

Modernity can be defined (...) by the increasing divorce between the objective world created by reason (...) and the world of subjectivity, which is primarily the world of individualism or, to be more accurate, of the call for personal freedom (...). It introduced a divorce between a subject which came down from heaven to earth and was humanized, and a world of objects manipulated by techniques” (Touraine 1995[1992]: 4).

Modernity, as Touraine points out, is typically defined as the combination of instrumental reason, embodied in (techno)science, and moral individualism, so that many social scientists from the nineteenth century onwards have understood the former as making magic redundant

and the latter as eroding conformity to religious Christian authorities. Since the 1960s and 1970s, processes of modernization have indeed spawned major cultural and religious reconfigurations in the West that have particularly affected the Christian church. The latter has declined substantially and lost much of its former legitimacy, particularly in the formerly Protestant North-Western European countries (e.g., Brown 2001; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Although it is as yet hard to tell what exactly this means for the longer-term viability of Christian religion in the West (e.g., Bruce 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005), much of what we are witnessing right now is an accommodation of churches to the modern culture it is confronted with. In Christian circles, media tools are increasingly adopted and personal experience of the divine is becoming more important, especially among the younger generations (Roeland 2009). In addition, a marked withdrawal from Christianity's traditional institutional strongholds takes place, spawning a "believing without belonging" (Davie 1994).

Indeed, most of the contemporary debate about the future of religion in the West still takes shape in the shadow of the Christian heritage, thus virtually equating the future of religion in general to the future of Christian religion. This Christian bias in the debate about religion in the west is of course not surprising in itself since it is the dominant religious tradition in this part of the world. Yet, it has seriously impeded efforts to theorize about the emergence and spread of strains of religion that reject Christian solutions to problems of meaning; religions that decidedly embrace the features of modernity that Christianity has always been hostile too – moral individualism and modern technology. The proliferation of such "religions of modernity" suggests that modernity is neither inimical to religion *tout court*, nor only undermines or reshapes Christian religion. From the moment modernity gained its secular powers, Peter Pels comments, it has been "haunted by ghosts of its own making" (2003: 18). This was already happening in the time and age of Max Weber – when the 'disenchantment of the world' and experiences of disillusion paradoxically sparked the interest in various post-Christian religions, spiritualities and enchantments. Such initiatives of religious renewal in the western world have only increased over the last decades.

We argue that the proliferation of such religions of modernity is intimately tied to modern problems of meaning, particularly anomie and alienation. While these "maladies of modernity" (Zijderveld 2000) have been discussed extensively by sociology of religion's founding fathers,

the hypothesis that merits full attention by contemporary sociologists is that precisely these modern problems of meaning have evoked new religious attempts to overcome them. Profound cultural changes since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century thus call for an extension and critical re-appropriation of Weber's and Durkheim's classical work on modernity, religion and meaning. Their theories provide a promising point of departure for shrugging off the Christian bias in the sociology of religion and its narrow emphasis on secularization and religious decline. More important: the theories of Weber and Durkheim make it possible to demarcate and understand rapidly emerging forms of religion and spirituality that have too often been trivialized as "fuzzy", "insignificant" or "weird". They are not: motivated by modern problems of meaning we are witnessing a relocation of the sacred to the subjective world of the individual and to the world of technological objects; a sacralization of the self and the digital in other words. Such new manifestations of the sacred, we argue, are neither fuzzy, trivial nor weird since they are part and parcel of the cultural logic of modernization.

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CHAPTER TWO

REAL RELIGION AND FUZZY SPIRITUALITY?

TAKING SIDES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Linda Woodhead

Introduction

This chapter investigates a puzzling disjuncture: between what recent empirical research is revealing about spirituality ‘on the ground’, and the way in which a number of influential sociological studies of religion have characterized such spirituality. The dissonance was brought home to me, first, in 2000–2002, when I was involved in a study of religious activities in the town of Kendal, UK, and then in the summer of 2005, when I carried out related pilot research in the town of Asheville, North Carolina.¹ On both occasions, and in both localities, ‘spirituality’ was found to be a significant part of the religious landscape, rapidly proliferating, but exhibiting enough common characteristics to make characterization and research relatively unproblematic. By contrast, a number of important texts in the sociology of religion characterized the same phenomenon as diffuse, confused, amorphous, lacking in salience and significance, transitory, and insubstantial.

In what follows I explore this tension between what can be called the ‘inadequacy approach’ to spirituality, and the picture which emerges from much recent research, including my own. I suggest that the divergence can be explained in terms of the enduring presence of a submerged norm of ‘real religion’ which continues to exercise a powerful influence within the sociology of religion. This norm, shaped around an implicit commitment to historically influential forms of church Christianity, is unable to accommodate spirituality as ‘real’ religion, and is forced to

¹ The first project, the ‘Kendal Project’, was funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and carried out with Paul Heelas, Ben Seel and Karin Tusting. Findings were published in Heelas and Woodhead (2005). The second project was funded by the British Academy, and carried out with Helen Berger.

conclude that it is a 'fuzzy' pretender to the title. Setting this in historical perspective, I draw attention to the mutually-constitutive opposition between 'religion' and 'spirituality' which lies at the origin of spirituality in the nineteenth century, and conclude that it remains influential within the sociology of religion. My overall aim is to critique misleading accounts of spirituality in order to draw attention away from them and towards the emerging contours of a more workable and 'un-fuzzy' characterization of spirituality.

The inadequacy approach

Spirituality as meaningless

In presenting research on spirituality at sociological conferences I have often been told that the term is inadequate as a tool of scholarly analysis. Some non-English speakers have suggested that it has no equivalent in a number of European languages, and argue that it is irrelevant to their societies.² Others cast doubt upon the meaningfulness or research-relevance of the word by making the assertion that no useful survey instruments have been, or perhaps could be, devised to investigate spirituality.³ Still others maintain that, although many people own and use the word, and although it has cognates in other languages or has been appropriated as an import word, it is so vague and fuzzy that even those who use it do not know what they mean by it. Although many of these claims remain unsubstantiated, the strongest evidence to support the claim of conceptual vagueness derives from surveys which ask people whether they would describe themselves as 'religious' or 'spiritual', and finds that the majority – 74 per cent in Zinnbauer's (1997) study and 64 per cent in Marler and Hadaway's (2002) – are happy to describe themselves as 'religious *and* spiritual'. We found the same in Kendal, where even conservative Christians were generally happy to describe themselves as 'spiritual'. It is easy to conclude that the word's range is so wide that it lacks any real scholarly purchase.

² I have heard these comments made at several conferences on the Sociology of Religion, including the conferences of the ISSR held in Turin in 2003 and Zagreb in 2005.

³ The comment about survey instruments was made at the conference of the ISSR (International Society for the Sociology of Religion) held in Zagreb in 2005.

Spirituality as socially precarious

Some also claim that spirituality is shallowly rooted, trivial, historically, insubstantial, ephemeral, and socially, intellectually and existentially precarious. As the following quotation by Steve Bruce (2002: 91, 105) indicates, such claims are often mixed up together:

[The New Age] elicits only slight commitment and little agreement about detail. It thus makes a shared life unlikely. It has little social impact. It has little effect even on its adherents. It does not drive its believers to evangelise. It is vulnerable to being diluted and trivialised... eclectic to an unprecedented degree and dominated by the principle that the sovereign consumer will decide what to believe (...) a low-salience world of pick-and-mix religion.

Bruce suggests that spirituality is precarious because it has no agreed body of doctrine, no clear sense of 'us' and 'them', no 'large organizations' or 'long history' (2000: 234). It has no shared rituals or agreed authority, and no means of policing its boundaries. It is not like a 'real' religious organization, and does not behave like one in terms of social and political action. Compared with the achievements of the Victorian Evangelicals, says Bruce (2002), the record of spirituality is meager: "Where", he asks, "are the New Age schools, nurseries, communes, colleges (...) anti-racism projects and urban renewal programmes?" (2002: 97). Summing up at the end of a chapter on New Age in "Religion in the Modern World", he comments: "New Age religion cannot aspire to promote radical and specific change because it does not have the discipline and cohesion of the sect. The New Age will not have the impact Methodism had" (1996: 225).

Bruce follows Bryan Wilson in characterizing spirituality as a 'cultic' form of religion – meaning that it is so close to the culture and society that it is likely to merge into it and disappear. As Wilson puts it, cults are incapable:

of recreating the dying religions of the past. In their style and in their specific appeal they represent an accommodation to new conditions, and they incorporate many of the assumptions and facilities encouraged in the increasingly rationalised secular sphere. Thus it is that many new movements are themselves testimonies to secularisation (1988: 207).

Bruce (1996), developing the argument of Wilson and Wallis (1976), presents an entropic account according to which 'real' religion runs down and eventually disappears as it moves 'from cathedral to cult' (the subtitle of Bruce's (1996) "Religion in the Modern World"). It lacks the

clarity, definition and institutional mechanisms to erect boundaries, police them, and transmit itself across generations. Here the inadequacy approach merges with a particular version of secularization theory, as do other accounts which dismiss spirituality as numerically insignificant, or fail to notice it at all.

Spirituality as morally inadequate

Many of the sociological approaches to spirituality slide into moral critique. One line of approach is to dismiss spirituality as trivial and irrational. As Roger Finke and Rodney Stark put it in their brief dismissal of 'New Age' in "The Churching of America": "We believe that most people who can in any way be said to have responded to the New Age movement regard it as more of an amusement than a religion. Most are no more than casual dabblers in the pseudo-scientific activities and techniques promoted as New Age" (1992: 245). Another is to judge spirituality as individualistic, atomistic, socially corrosive, selfish and narcissistic. Bryan Wilson, for example, speaks of its "ethos of permissive hedonism" (1990: 288), whilst David Martin comments that spirituality fosters "patently false beliefs", attracting devotees who prefer "scrounging, lounging, and utopia [to] work", and who worship "icons of consumption and PR while treating capitalism as a synonym for sin" (2007).

As the last quotation indicates, spirituality is also criticized for an unholy alliance with the worst excesses of capitalism and consumerism. Some criticisms draw in part on the work of social theorists like Nicholas Rose (1990), in turn influenced by Foucault, to characterize spirituality as a mode of internal regulation which renders the self a pliable consumer. In addition, spirituality is presented as part and parcel of a capitalist regime in which everything, including religion, is commodified. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) put this criticism most bluntly when they claim that what we are seeing is simply "the commodification of religion as spirituality" (2005: 15). For them, purveyors of spirituality are opportunists eager to make a quick buck, whilst clients are shoppers eager to add yet another product to their shopping basket. In striking contrast to 'real' religion, the consumer makes her own choices, in willful ignorance of guiding tradition, higher wisdom, or common good.

Robert Wuthnow on spirituality

None of the sociologists of religion mentioned so far have engaged in empirical study of spirituality. This makes the work of Robert Wuthnow

especially interesting, for Wuthnow *has* engaged in important research on spirituality throughout his long career. His interest, evident in early books like “The Consciousness Revolution” (1976), has kept pace with the times and inspired fresh research as spirituality has burgeoned since the late 1980s. Unlike the authors reviewed above, Wuthnow is in little doubt about the significance of spirituality in American society, and his research has played a significant role in deepening understanding of its social forms and influence. Yet even in Wuthnow’s work, the influence of a normative conception of ‘real’ religion is evident in revealing ways.

In “Sharing the Journey” (1996), Wuthnow draws attention to the significance of the small group movement in the USA, and to the central importance of religious and spiritual interests within that movement. His study is based on extensive research. But there is an undertow of disquiet, judgment and criticism of small groups from the very opening of the book. Wuthnow’s concern is that participants have strayed too far from traditional religion, abandoning the “God of judgement, wrath, justice, mystery and punishment” and an “interest in heaven and hell” for “the small heavens and hells that people experience in their daily lives” and “a safe, domesticated version of the sacred” (1996: 7). Whilst acknowledging that small groups offer interpersonal support, he suggests that “their weakness lies in their inability to forge the more enduring bonds that many of us would like” (1996: 16). In short, small-group spirituality offers “a kind of faith that focuses heavily on feelings and on getting along rather than encouraging worshipful obedience to or reverence toward a transcendent God” (1996: 19).

This judgment against spirituality becomes even clearer in Wuthnow’s later studies, including his study of religion and the arts, “All in Sync” (2003). Here the medium is the message, for the book opens with a chapter of cool sociological reflection on current trends in religion and American society, before changing tone abruptly in Chapter Two as it moves into a discussion of contemporary spirituality. Whereas religion is subjected to a much more objective form of analysis, spirituality is placed in the dock for cross-questioning. “There has been a persistent and, in my view, justified queasiness”, writes Wuthnow, “about the current interest in spirituality. For one thing, *spirituality* itself is seldom precisely defined (...) For another thing, contemporary spirituality often smacks of gullibility and irrationality – the kind of wishful thinking and self-indulgent fantasizing about miracles and wonders that makes more sober-minded folks blanch” (2003: 24). Quoting approvingly

Wade Clark Roof's observation that, "There is enough flakiness in contemporary spirituality that we should keep open the possibility that the long-term consequences for the religious landscape may be less than we might imagine or many might hope for. Much of what passes as spirituality is as thin as chicken soup and as transparent as celestine profits" (2003: 24 quoting Roof, 1999: 157), Wuthnow adds:

Interest in spirituality (...) may hold little promise for the larger vitality of American religion...[it] may even pose a threat to the nation's churches and synagogues, especially if the theological wisdom and service-orientated dedication that have been central to the Christian and Jewish traditions are being abandoned for a do-it-yourself faith oriented towards good feelings (2003: 25).

Thus Wuthnow's intention in devising and using the large-scale survey and interview work which lies behind the book is not so much to explore and taxonomise contemporary spirituality but to "determine empirically whether spirituality is superficial or profound" (2003: 25). In order to do so he judges it against five explicitly-stated criteria:

1. Is it so newly acquired as to be ungrounded, not rooted in any long-established religious tradition – or does it have links to church or synagogue?
2. Is it private, subjective, personally invented or is it pursued "in the context of a religious community that gives it depth and stability" (2003: 25)?
3. Is it eclectic or "is there some deeper commitment to a religious tradition" (2003: 26)?
4. Is it trivial and consumerist, or a serious spiritual discipline?
5. Is it "self-indulgent" and "self-interested" (2003: 47), or does it encourage people to 'serve others' (2003: 49)?

Wuthnow's answer is that those who are most serious about spirituality are also those who draw nearest to 'real' – mainstream, Judaeo-Christian – religion, and thus pose least threat to America's religious health. His project, in other words, is to compare spirituality to the religion of mainstream American churches and synagogues, and to ask whether it measures up to their standards. Where it can, it is viewed positively – much more positively than by the other sociologists of religion reviewed above. But where it diverges from 'real' religion, spirituality calls forth the same claims of inadequacy.

Alternative accounts

The inadequacy approach to spirituality is increasingly challenged by alternative accounts, many of which are informed by research

engagement with what they analyze. Such accounts arise from a number of disciplines, not only the sociology of religion, but also anthropology, religious studies and history. They offer a rather different portrait, and point towards some emerging areas of consensus in a new characterization of spirituality.

The meaning of spirituality

Although it is true that 'spirituality' is a term with a wide range of meanings in everyday language, the same can be said of many other key terms of social scientific analysis, such as 'state', 'race', 'class', 'identity', and even 'religion'. This does not in itself rule out their utility for scholarly analysis. What matters is whether the term 'spirituality' can be defined in a way that helps us identify and make sense of observable patterns in practices and discourses in the contemporary religious landscape.

We have already noted that Zinnbauer (1997) and Marler and Hadaway (2002) find that a majority of people identify as spiritual *and* religious, but they also find a significant number who identify as 'spiritual *but not* religious' – 19 per cent in the former study and 18.5 per cent in the latter. As Zinnbauer (1997: 561) notes, this "spiritual but not religious" group matches very closely the description provided by Roof (1993) of the "highly active seekers" in the baby boom generation who reject traditional institutionalized forms of religion for a more individualized and experiential spirituality. Even amongst those who identify as religious *and* spiritual, there is widespread recognition of the fact that the words have different meanings. As Zinnbauer (1997: 563) puts it, "currently *religiousness* is increasingly characterized as 'narrow and institutional', and *spirituality* is increasingly characterized as 'personal and subjective'".

These findings suggest that the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' have reasonably clear and distinct meanings even for those who are happy to accept both in self-identification.⁴ 'Religion' often refers to 'outward' and 'external' dimensions including buildings, institutions, religious professionals, sacred symbols and rituals, and a God 'out there'. 'Spirituality', by contrast, refers to the 'inner', 'subjective', 'experiential' and emotional

⁴ Both Marler and Hadaway, and Zinnbauer, note that this 'spiritual but not religious' group grows steadily, though modestly, from the oldest to the youngest age cohort, with 'baby busters' more likely to identify as spiritual but not religious than baby boomers.

dimensions, and a 'God within.'⁵ Many people, including most British and American Christians surveyed, accept both dimensions as part of a coherent whole (very few think that you can, or should, be religious without being spiritual). A smaller group – the 18–19 per cent who say that they are spiritual *not* religious – reject the outward dimensions in favor of the inner. In short, 'spirituality' is often used as a term which is constituted by relation to 'religion', and which is either viewed as complementary to religion, or as alternative to it, depending on the point of view of the person speaking (religious and spiritual, or spiritual but not religious).

This everyday distinction between religion and spirituality has purchase for the researcher as well. Our work in Kendal led us to conclude that what distinguishes contemporary forms of spirituality, and unites them despite their increasingly significant differences, is attribution of greater authority to inner, subjective life than to outer authorities – whether social or symbolic. This subjective concern is consistently articulated in terms of a 'holistic' concern with (a) body, mind and spirit *as a whole* and (b) the self in relation to greater wholes, ranging from intimate others to the *whole* universe. As a result, we came to use the terms 'subjective-life spirituality', and 'holistic spirituality' as synonyms for 'spirituality'. In practice we found that there was a difference between such spirituality and the religion of the 'congregational domain' in Kendal, although in principle there is no reason why the two cannot come into closer relation (in Asheville I found significant evidence of such convergence between religion and spirituality in a number of sites).

Of course attention to subjective-life and holism may also be features of more secular settings, from therapy and counseling to complementary and alternative medical practices. Holistic spirituality shares a great deal with such activities. What distinguishes it is its appeal to a sacred

⁵ This is not to say that these are the *only* meanings of the terms. People are much too sophisticated for that, and meanings vary in different linguistic and social contexts. See, for example, Rose (2001), who finds an interesting range of meanings being attached to the term 'spirituality' by a sample of religious professionals. In Kendal we found that the members of two of the most conservative evangelical Christian congregations in Kendal defined spirituality as 'obeying God's will' (92 per cent in one church, 100 per cent in another). By contrast, only 7 per cent of those involved in 'alternative spirituality' in Kendal defined spirituality as 'obeying God's will', with more defining it as 'being a decent and caring person' (21 per cent), 'love' (20 per cent), 'being in touch with subtle energies' (17 per cent), and 'healing oneself and others' (10 per cent) (closed questions, mutually exclusive options).

source which flows in and through the subjective life of the individual. Though different in other respects, most forms of spirituality maintain that there is a form of 'energy' or 'chi' which animates the whole universe and is manifest in every individual form. By going 'deeper' into the self a person is said to connect with this 'chi', and discovers a 'core self', 'soul' or 'spiritual dimension'. By the same token, the individual also comes into closer connection with other people and the universe as a whole, realizing a spiritual connection with them all.

I would argue that this characterization of spirituality in terms of (a) focus on the authority of inner, subjective life and (b) a commitment to holism remains a useful and workable definition despite increasing internal diversity and disagreement within the realm of spirituality. In Kendal we found that the majority of spirituality had to do with mind, body, spirit practices (such as Yoga and Reiki). In Asheville, which is more of a hub for spiritual seekers, and where the research took place five years later, such spirituality was clearly only one of a wider variety of types of spirituality. Three main categories could be clearly distinguished: (1) mind, body, spirit practices (2) New Age (3) Paganism (and other, less nature-based forms of Reconstructionism).⁶ These differed not only in terms of their teachings, practices and self-identity, but also in terms of their institutional forms, social location, and clientele. There was significant self-awareness of differences, and a good deal of mutual suspicion and criticism. Nevertheless, the subjective and holistic emphasis was common, as was a self-distinction from 'religion'.

Although different researchers may use different terms to identify what I am calling 'inner' or 'holistic' spirituality, there is significant agreement that spirituality can be defined by its emphasis on the sacred nature of the unique self's innermost, subjective depths. As Houtman and Aupers (2007: 307) put it, "reestablishing the contact with the divine self is held to enable one to reconnect to a sacred realm that holistically connects 'everything'", emphasizing that "essentially trivial differences" notwithstanding, "the underlying doctrine of self-spirituality is uncontested" with "unity and coherence [evident] at a deeper level" (Aupers and Houtman, Chapter 7, p. 141 in this volume). As Christopher Partridge (2004: 32) says, "the self is divine (...) true religion is located within, not without; one focuses on the good self *per se*, rather than on the self over against the Good". And as Charles Taylor (2000) puts it,

⁶ For an analysis of these different varieties see Vincett and Woodhead (2009).

“for many people today, to set aside their own path to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life. The injunction is, in the words of a speaker at a New Age festival: ‘Only accept what rings true to your inner Self’” (2000: 8). There is also a growing recognition of spirituality’s constitutive holistic commitment. Thus Meredith MacGuire (1988, 1997), who has been most prominent in emphasizing this dimension and its practical, bodily implications, writes that, “One theme that is prominent, almost to the extent of being definitive of contemporary spirituality is an emphasis upon ‘practice’ which is adamantly holistic” (1997: 3).

Numerical weight

Once this definition of spirituality is accepted, the claim that it is impossible to design survey instruments to measure it becomes implausible. Whilst it is true that existing surveys of religion have been designed largely with congregational and church commitment in mind, a number of recent surveys show that it is possible to devise new questions to capture spiritual commitment. Examples include the Soul of Britain survey (2001), the RAMP surveys in various European countries, the Enköping survey (2004), and our surveys in Kendal (2002). In the latter we used a mixture of existing and new survey questions, most of which proved perfectly serviceable.⁷ Useful scales for measuring affinity with spirituality have also been devised by Granqvist and Hagekull (2001), Houtman and Mascini (2002) and Farias (2004). To cite the fact that existing survey questions often fail to probe for commitment to spirituality as a reason for doubting the reality of spirituality is like Admiral Nelson putting his telescope to his blind eye and saying that he could not see the signal to cease fire. Even existing surveys, like the European Values Survey, can be used creatively to yield valuable information about spirituality, as the work of Hamberg (1990) and Houtman and Aupers (2007) illustrates.

The findings which emerge from such research undermine claims about the numerical insignificance of spirituality. Although more work remains to be done, a range of different sources indicate that the level of active, highly-committed, regular participation in spirituality stands at around 2–5 per cent in Europe and the USA (for USA see Roof 1999, for UK see Woodhead and Heelas 2005), the level of adherence (indicated by those claiming to be ‘spiritual but not religious’) stands at around

⁷ The questionnaires and results can be found at www.kendalproject.org.uk.

10–20 per cent (for Europe see Barker 2004, for USA see Marler and Hadaway 2002, Zinnbauer et al. 1997 and Hood 2005), and the level of belief in ‘some sort of a spirit or life force’ (World Values Survey) or ‘God as something within each person rather than something out there’ (RAMP) at between 20–40 per cent (Gill, Hadaway and Marler 1998, Barker 2004, World and European Values Surveys). Generally speaking levels are higher in USA and northern Europe than in southern Europe (Barker 2004, Houtman and Aupers 2007).

Historical substance

The inadequacy approach to spirituality implies that it is historically insubstantial: a new fad or fashion which represents the last gasp of western religious history. Often it is painted as a child of the 1960s and late modern consumer capitalism. But if we clarify spirituality as a term which is constituted over against religion, and which emphasizes the subjective and holistic, then it is clear we are actually dealing with a religious trajectory which became influential early in the nineteenth century. The word is being used in something like its current sense by that time; a plethora of writers, teachers and leaders are advocating the cause; there are networks and centers for spirituality in America and Europe; the influence of ‘the East’ is extensive within these circles; and controversy between spirituality and more conservative forms of religion, particularly Christianity, is central.

The World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 provides a wonderful illustration of these points, and a snapshot of what by that time is a developed and diverse movement (Woodhead 2001). Perusal of the Parliament’s proceedings also leaves little doubt about the way in which liberal Christianity – and liberal religion more generally – served as the critical influence in the rise of modern spirituality, even when it was eventually left behind. These observations have been amply demonstrated in relation to the American case by Schmidt (2005), who places spirituality’s origins in the 1830s, emphasizes its ‘progressive’ nature and commitment to a range of political causes including anti-slavery and feminism, and interprets it as an outgrowth of liberal Christianity which was, from the start, in conflict with more conservative forms of ‘traditional’ religion.

To illustrate the forcefulness of the opposition between conservative church Christianity and the ‘new’ spirituality, and the divergence between their wider political commitments, it is still worth reading G. K. Chesterton’s vicious attacks on Annie Besant in “Orthodoxy”

(1961: 30, original 1908). What is also striking is how much characterizations of spirituality by writers like Chesterton have in common with the inadequacy approach in the sociology of religion today. There is the same tendency to attack and trivialize, the same slide into moral condemnation, and the same claims about individualism, selfishness and mumbo-jumbo. What this suggests is that the inadequacy approach represents a latter-day instantiation of the very long conflict between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. Rather than understanding this opposition to be constitutive of spirituality, and examining the religious field in terms of this important fault line, inadequacy theorists *take sides*. Its proponents are themselves caught up in a battle they should be trying to illuminate and explain, and in this battle they take either the part of either the rationalist, secular opponent of 'superstitious' spirituality, or the traditional religious critic of 'selfish', 'unChristian' (or even 'gnostic') spirituality.⁸

Social location

Be this as it may, there may still be some substance to the inadequacy approach's claim that spirituality is privatized, individualistic and socially precarious. It is certainly true that spirituality rarely takes shape in institutions analogous to churches, does not strive for doctrinal or organizational unity, does not have a unified, hierarchical leadership, and is unlikely to have direct or even indirect connections with state power and governmental processes. This does not, however, warrant the conclusion that spirituality is 'privatized'. Here again we see the distorting effect of identifying 'real' religion with historic western churches, for the fact that spirituality neither looks like nor behaves like a church does not warrant the conclusion that it has no role in public life and takes place only in the privacy of one's own home – or even one's own skull.

As Aupers and Houtman point out, whatever the rhetoric of spirituality might itself imply about 'getting in touch with' an essential sacred

⁸ If spirituality is an outgrowth of Christianity, or a trajectory within it which is permanently hostile to institutionalized forms of Christianity, then its roots may be traced even further back – as far, indeed, as to the source of Christianity. This is the position of Ernst Troeltsch in "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches" (1931), where he traces the simultaneous development of the 'mystical' and 'church' types of Christianity, and the later development of the 'sect' type characteristic of Protestantism. This is why it is so significant, and misleading, when scholars like Steve Bruce offer a reworking of Troeltsch in which church and sect give way to denomination and cult. The effect is to make spirituality come last, the final station stop before secularization, whereas for Troeltsch it was there at the start of the line.

core, individuals are socialized into holistic spirituality, and the 'personal' experiences which are considered to be central to such spirituality are cultural products (see Chapter 7 in this volume). As Besecke shows, even contemporary subjective-life spirituality which does not involve regular participation in associational activities should not be regarded as privatized, but is better understood as a public conversation and a form of communicative action (see Chapter 5 in this volume). And as Schmidt and others remind us, social and political concern can be counted a defining feature of much modern spirituality: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, W. E. B. Du Bois or Howard Thurman had a powerful influence in championing freedom, equality, diversity and civil rights; Martin Luther King was strongly influenced by Thoreau and Gandhi; the Dalai Lama and religious progressives have allied on a number of social and political issues (including the campaign to 'Free Tibet'); groups like the Quakers and Unitarians continue to punch vastly above their weight in campaigns for peace, gay rights, women's rights and other liberal causes; there are new spiritual alliances around particular progressive causes, including anti-capitalism (Lynch 2007).

It is also worth pointing out that although less visible than purpose-built churches or synagogues, subjective-life spirituality has created its own physical spaces within society, often by colonizing existing spaces – in homes, shops, medical centers, church halls and so on. In addition, it is rapidly creating its own designated spaces, including 'spiritual' bookshops, coffee shops, and centers which house many different activities and sell many different products. Several recent works offer vivid portraits of the life of the small communities established by neo-pagan spiritual groups (for example Berger 1998; Salomonsen 2002). Likewise, subjective-life spirituality takes cultural, social and physical shape in a plethora of annual and more frequent events such as mind-body-spirit festivals, pilgrimages, fetes and other gatherings. It also locates itself, increasingly, within sites primarily dedicated to other functions, including parts of the beauty and leisure industries, the publishing industry, and the spheres of education (including primary education), and health-care (such as nursing).

This is not to deny that some forms of subjective-life spirituality are more concerned with changing existing distributions of power in society than others. As our knowledge of such spirituality grows, and as such spirituality grows more internally diverse, we can start draw more sensitive distinctions rather than apply a single characterization. As Salomonsen (2002) shows, even within a single spiritual group/ network

(the Reclaiming collectivity) it is possible to distinguish between ‘utopians’ who strive for social, political and economic change, and ‘generics’ who are more concerned with personal change. Likewise, some forms of spirituality are more concerned with ritual and community, for example most Pagan groups, than are others. New Age, for example, probably has the strongest focus on individual self-development, and least by way of shared social forms, hence Heelas’ (1996) accurate designation of it as a ‘self-spirituality’. But these are matters for research, rather than assertion.

Moral horizons

Just as the inadequacy thesis assumes that because spirituality is not like a church it must be privatized, so it assumes that because it is not like a church it must be unethical and lacking in what Charles Taylor calls ‘moral horizons’ (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). Having considered the wider historical and theological paradigm which shapes such critique, we can see that what is really at stake is not so much a lack of moral horizons, as *differing* moral horizons which some sociologists find incompatible with their own. It is here we get to the heart of much of what is really at stake in the characterization of spirituality as inadequate, and see why the latter is so morally-laden and deeply-felt.

The strength of feeling leaks out at many points in the sociology of religion. One of the most telling is in the much-cited account of Sheila Larson which appears in Robert Bellah et al.’s “Habits of the Heart” (1985), a book which is organized around an opposition between communalism and individualism in American life, and which brackets congregations with the former and spirituality with the latter. Larson is a nurse who, when interviewed, speaks of her faith in “her own little voice” and describes her religion as ‘Sheilaism’ (Bellah et al. 1985: 220). Despite Larson’s commitment to the care of others, Bellah and his co-authors paint her as a living embodiment of individualism, and ask why women like this are no longer run out of town in the way Christians once ran the religious radical Anne Hutchinson out of the Massachusetts Bay (1985: 235).

The violence of such remarks is only explicable in terms of a battle between those who defend the values of ‘religion’ against those of ‘spirituality’. As in this case, such values are bound up with wider political and personal commitments, and often include divergent understandings of gender difference and women’s roles. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, the image of a pampered woman attending to the needs of

her 'mind, body and spirit' rather than those of her family can easily become emblematic of all that is at stake (Sointu and Woodhead 2008).

There is a real, and important, debate about the nature of the good life in a good society going on here. The question is whether it is appropriate to conduct it under the guise of social-scientific neutrality. In my view it is not. This is not to say that all sociology should be value-free, but that it should not present itself as a neutral observer of social phenomena when it is in fact taking sides. Such an approach falls between two stools, failing as moral debate, and failing as sociological analysis. In relation to the issue at stake – the study of spirituality – it has led to distorted portrayals which have inhibited research and understanding of the contemporary religious field, and it has taken extensive empirical work, and the input of several disciplines, to arrive at a more balanced and defensible account.

Conclusion

Over forty years ago Thomas Luckmann wrote that the 'main assumption' of the sociology of religion:

Consists in the identification of church and religion (...) Religion becomes a social fact either as ritual (institutionalised religious conduct) or doctrine (institutionalised religious ideas) (...) The discipline, thereby, accepts the self-interpretations – and the ideology – of religious institutions as valid definitions of the range of their subject matter (1967: 22, 26).

Despite the proliferation of spirituality since Luckmann wrote these words, the sociological identification of 'real religion' with a very particular kind of western institution – and its commitments – continues to exercise an influence, as I have tried to show. I have noted that this influence is not confined to those who identify with 'real religion' and attempt to further its interests, but that it is also shared by some who defend a strong version of the secularization thesis. Both agree in presenting spirituality as 'fuzzy', deprived, and even depraved.

By putting spirituality into historical context, I have tried to highlight how an opposition between 'religion' and 'spirituality' lies at the very origins of spirituality, and how it became influential in the development of religious forms in the modern West. I have suggested that the sociological study of spirituality should take account of this longstanding and constitutive opposition, and of how spirituality's emphasis on the subjective dimension of religion – in opposition to forms of religion

which give greater attention to social and symbolic aspects – is part of its defining character. But I have also cautioned against accounts which fail to note the historical roots of the distinction, and hence to appreciate the wider social and political struggles with which they are bound up. Such accounts end up representing and reproducing one side of the struggle between religion and spirituality, and thereby merely perpetuating that struggle rather than standing outside it in order to understand it better. Most of them set ‘real religion’ against ‘fuzzy spirituality’, but it is quite easy to imagine a counter-reaction in which sociologists of religion start to defend, say, ‘growing’ and ‘harmonious’ spirituality against ‘dying’ and ‘divisive’ religion. What is important for the sociologist of religion is not to take sides, but to give generous and attentive accounts of how different forms of contemporary religion continue to be constructed by those who do.

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CHAPTER THREE

I DID IT MY WAY?

INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND SOCIAL CONFORMITY IN NEW AGE RELIGION

Olav Hammer

The individualistic imperative

A few years ago, I was invited to hold a public lecture on the attitudes toward science in the New Age milieu. The session was partly sponsored by the University of Gothenburg, so I had prepared a fairly scholarly presentation. My talk focused on the double rhetorical role of science in contemporary religiosity: often rejected as materialistic and prejudiced, but also invoked in order to legitimize belief. As it turned out, I had badly misjudged my audience. The front rows were largely filled with individuals active in the local New Age scene. It soon became all too apparent that these were people who hoped to hear from me that science, e.g. quantum mechanics in Fritjof Capra's version, confirmed the New Age vision.

One of my arguments proved particularly unpalatable to the people in the auditorium. New Agers, I suggested, often make a bold leap from declaring that they are personally unable to provide a natural explanation for a particularly striking experience, to stating that no such explanation exists. Therefore, the New Age argument goes, the existence of supernatural forces must be postulated. An angry voice countered with the suggestion that I disregarded the many mysterious abilities that really could not be explained without reference to such metaphysical concepts as mind-over-matter, and mentioned fire-walking as an example. I pointed out that there are well-documented natural explanations of fire-walking, and suggested that her example, rather than weakening my argument, in fact supported it. My interlocutor triumphantly responded that she wasn't interested in hearing me summarize what other people had written or said. Only two things mattered: did I have my own opinion, and was it based on my personal experience? I attempted to explain that no experience of walking on coals could

possibly be relevant to understanding the physics of heat capacity and thermal conductivity, but soon realized that I had lost the discussion. Since I didn't speak from firsthand experience, but was quoting authorities that the New Agers did not recognize as such and felt no particular respect for, I had alienated my audience.

This brief anecdote illustrates a very common sentiment in New Age circles. In discussions with believers, on web sites and in the literature, one finds references to the primacy of personal experience and the need to follow one's own personal spirituality. As one particular book on healing through colors puts it: "The greatest teacher is in yourself. What we offer, are just guidelines."¹

Individualism, in several guises, is perhaps the most highly prized norm of New Age religion. This ostensible individualism is closely connected with other characteristic traits of New Age discourse. We are all supposed to choose only what rings true to our hearts. Subjectivity, intuition and feeling are presented as the best ways to gain knowledge, whereas the intellect plays a subordinate role. The same book on color healing suggests that "the [colored therapeutic] oils, in most cases, have their strongest effect if chosen with the heart and not with the head" (Ibid.: 71) and that "it is highly unlikely that [users] will experience unfolding benefits from choices made through the intellect" (Ibid.: 78). The ultimate goal of this subjective spirituality is also thoroughly individualistic: it is to transform our own selves.

The fact that intuitive, individual preferences tend to result in contradictory choices, does not seem to present any real problem. The authors briefly dismiss the issue: "It would be impossible to answer the question of the 'true' system. All would be true to the extent to which people at their level of growth support them. However, they would all be untrue if they were not truly experienced." (Ibid.: 54–55). My angry audience would have concurred: since my understanding of fire-walking was based on an intellectual assessment of second-hand sources, it was by their definition "untrue".

Emic and etic perspectives

A sizeable body of scholarship appears to accept this professed individualism as an empirical fact. A classic formulation of individualism as a

¹ Attributed to Vicky Wall, introductory motto quoted in Dalichow and Booth (1996).

core constituent of much modern religion can be found in Émile Durkheim's paper "Individualism and the Intellectuals".² Complex, modern societies are characterized by such a diversity of circumstances that collective beliefs and rites no longer function as cohesive elements. Instead, the individuality of each person has become the ultimate value. "The Declaration of the Rights of Man" codifies the emergence of a new social order: a ritualized and sacralized attitude toward the individual. Durkheim remarks that "whoever makes an attempt on a man's [sic!] life, on a man's liberty, on a man's honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous in every way to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned", and that individualism is thus a "religion in which man is at once the worshiper and the god".

Several influential contemporary scholars have argued that the New Age is thoroughly subjective and individualistic. Thomas Luckmann, in "The Invisible Religion", already in 1967 saw the emergence of a market of religious elements, from which individual "seekers" could pick and choose freely. The Durkheimian echoes are particularly clear in Paul Heelas' description of the New Age as a detraditionalized "Self religion", in which there is a (relative) rejection of external voices of authority (1995: 22–23, 26). Steve Bruce repeatedly refers to the eclecticism of the New Age, and suggests that "the operating principle of the New Age milieu [...] is its almost complete acceptance of alternative views" (1996: 212–213). Similarly, in the introduction to their edited volume "Beyond the New Age", Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman endorse a similar view of the New Age as a field of modern religious experimentation (2000: 1).

The seemingly unproblematic transition from emic ideal to empirical fact is all the more remarkable, since so little *prima facie* evidence speaks in favor of the New Age actually being a thoroughly individualistic discourse. Durkheim reminds us that the religion of the individual, like all other religions, is socially constructed.³ The sociology of knowledge has ever since its inception taught us that all knowledge is embedded in a social context. Regardless of whether one espouses an epistemological position that is closer to the realist or the relativist end of the scale, it is

² Originally published in 1898 as "L'individualisme et les intellectuels", English versions of this text have been anthologized in W. Pickering (ed.), "Durkheim on Religion", London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, pp. 59–73, and in Robert Bellah (ed.), "Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society", Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1973, pp. 43–57.

³ The argument runs throughout Durkheim's "Individualism and the Intellectuals".

hardly controversial that whatever propositions are at any given moment considered to be valid knowledge, these are formulated against a specific socio-historical background.

Like any other worldview, New Age concepts do not originate in the minds of free-floating, autonomous individuals, but are produced by historically situated people. In fact, it is remarkable how narrowly circumscribed the expressions of New Age religion tend to be. After even a brief acquaintance with the New Age milieu, one will recognize a certain type of aesthetics, a particular way of expressing oneself. New Age book shops all over the world are strikingly similar: the same muted music is played in the background as customers navigate between shelves carrying the same range of books and displays presenting the same crystals, aromatic oils, posters and CDs. The rituals and doctrinal elements that are presented in most of the literature are also quite homogeneous. Whereas the historical and anthropological literature documents a dazzling range of methods of divination, only half a dozen or so have any substantial following in the New Age milieu. Of all the potential answers to the question of life after death, only one has attracted any interest: reincarnation, in a particular model that developed in the wake of the theosophical movement.⁴

Rarely is the gap separating the ideal of subjective experimentation with spiritual alternatives and the reality of a fairly homogenous discourse as striking as in the many cases where New Age spokespersons attempt to defend their practices from the apparently excessive innovative urges of others. Books may encourage their readers to be creative and to pick and choose as they like. Individual New Agers may react as if anything less than perfect spiritual freedom would be utterly unacceptable. Nevertheless, quite a few therapies and other ritual systems are transmitted via formalized systems of education and protected by copyrights and registered trademarks. In the recent past there have been several conflicts over the “right” and “wrong” versions of Neuro-Linguistic

⁴ The term reincarnation refers to a variety of afterlife conceptions with only few uniting traits. See Obeyesekere (2002), for an overview of reincarnation beliefs among Native Americans, in Hinduism, Buddhism and classical Antiquity. Theosophical models of reincarnation posit that certain components of the human spiritual constitution survive the death of the physical body, and are reborn in a new human body; furthermore, reincarnation is a process of learning and spiritual evolution. New Age beliefs tend to accept these theosophical tenets, but are less complex than the canonical theosophical doctrines as formulated by Helena Blavatsky.

Programming (NLP) and of the enneagram.⁵ Even Aura-Soma, the method presented under the arch-individualistic motto “The greatest teacher is in yourself”, turns out to be a highly detailed divinatory and therapeutic technique, protected by trademarks. Those who wish to practice Aura-Soma at a more advanced level are even required to sign a contract stipulating that they must preserve the method intact.⁶

Powerful forces thus seem to hold any unbridled individualism in check. Although much of the academic literature assents to the self-description of New Agers, existing scholarship does contain suggestions as to how one can interpret the boundaries and the conformity that one so readily finds. Two arguments are particularly prominent. The first is historical, arguing that the New Age builds on well-defined pre-existing currents which strongly color the production, interpretation and acceptance of new religious elements. Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) meticulously reconstructs the roots of much New Age religion in Western esoteric currents, especially as these have been affected by the forces of secular culture.⁷ Hanegraaff’s historically oriented discussion thus presents quite a different scenario than Heelas’ concept of a detraditionalized religiosity. For the immediate precursor of much New Age discourse, i.e. the Theosophical Society, Steven Prothero (1996) makes a similar point. Theosophists such as Henry S. Olcott suggested that they were presenting the inner, esoteric core of Buddhism to a Western audience. In Prothero’s view, Olcott’s professed reception of Buddhism was largely determined by his Protestant background. Olcott only appropriated the elements that made sense to him from this specifically Protestant vantage point.

The second argument is anthropological, suggesting that at least some religious networks are sufficiently structured to allow newcomers to be gradually socialized into the locally accepted beliefs and discourses. Properly speaking, the fieldwork of Tanya Luhrmann (1989) concerns the neo-pagan milieu rather than the New Age, but her concept of an

⁵ Conflicts surrounding the use of the enneagram are reported in the German New Age magazine “esotera” 1996:10; Richard Bandler, co-founder of Neuro-linguistic programming, filed a lawsuit in 1997 in order to protect his rights to NLP as his intellectual property; see www.nlpschedule.com/random/lawsuit-nlpc.html (all Internet addresses cited here were last checked and active on March 25, 2006).

⁶ See e.g. point 5b) in the Teacher’s Agreement, signed by those who wish to learn this particular divinatory and therapeutic method, on www.asiact.org/1Education/ASIACT_Faculties/Aura-Soma/Teacher_Training/teach_agree.asp.

⁷ See especially the historical overview in chapters 13 to 15.

“interpretive drift”, i.e. a gradual socialization into the ways of speaking and acting in a particular community, seems well suited also to the latter.⁸

The remainder of the present discussion will formulate some hypotheses that go beyond the suggestions offered by these authors, and should make us seriously question the common contention that individualism and subjectivity are paramount factors in New Age religion.

Identity and trust

Studies of autobiographical narratives show how deep-seated the conviction can be that our lives are the result of our conscious choices (e.g., Linde 1993). At the same time, even the briefest acquaintance with different cultures will show that our cultures play a crucial role in molding us into the people we become.⁹ Even modern societies, which ostensibly encourage a considerable amount of personal choice, provide a host of socializing institutions. Parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, historical examples, therapists, counselors, television and other media, pop artists and film stars, various experts, self-help books and a host of other literature are just some of the voices that contribute to the discussion of how one could or should construct one's life. As Anthony Giddens (1991: 33) remarks, even child rearing, a set of practices that from time immemorial has been handed down from one generation to the next, has increasingly become the domain of experts.

Selecting a set of personal options requires a high degree of conscious deliberation and reflexivity. Reflexivity, however, comes with a price: problems arise once we realize that the available socializing institutions are many and contradictory. According to one pop psychological trend, we should listen to our ‘inner child’; another trend insists that we take more responsibility for our role as adults. Some experts recommend a high protein, low-carbohydrate diet in order to stay healthy and fit, whereas other reject the very same diet as profoundly unhealthy. Young people who contemplate pursuing higher education are recommended to study a subject that interests them, but are also sternly warned that the most popular educational options risk leading to long-term

⁸ For the theory of interpretive drift, see especially chapter 21.

⁹ The following discussion of the construction of personal identity largely follows Giddens (1991).

unemployment. How does one make a choice? In most matters, our ability to check the facts for ourselves is practically nil. We lack the resources and know-how to truly be able to judge various psychological trends, assess the nutritional value of common food-stuffs or project employment statistics into the future. The option that does remain for most of us is to take a leap of faith and place our trust in one or the other of the many authoritative voices. The crucial issue is how to choose one's preferred authorities.

Wouter Hanegraaff (1996: 515–522) succinctly defines the core characteristic of the New Age as an overarching culture criticism. New Agers will disagree on many issues, but have in common a deep-seated distrust of what they perceive of as the dominant values and institutions of Western society. This distrust can be heard in conversations with practitioners and clients of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), who can wax eloquent on the failings of biomedicine, its perceived inability to address the root causes of illness and its purported greed in promoting pharmaceutical products and suppressing natural alternatives. It can be heard in discussions with astrologers and their clients, who reject skeptical voices as belonging to narrow-minded and bigoted materialists. It comes to the fore in the reactions of many New Agers to the established churches, perceived by many as patriarchal and ossified structures, inimical to any expression of personal spirituality. Much New Age discourse can be understood in terms of this general distrust. Personal choice and the construction of identity are unthinkable without trust in authorities and role models. Yet, in the choir of available voices, many of those who are defined as experts by the institutional pillars of society are treated with suspicion. The cultural elite, the representatives of mainstream science and the spokespersons of the established churches come far down the list of options.

Who, then, are the preferred authorities of New Age religion? The spread of this novel religious culture has gone hand in hand with the emergence of new channels of dissemination of information and lifestyles, channels that support popular sentiment and compete with the institutions that in the past represented the principal sources of authority. Traditional social formations such as church and school are thus increasingly complemented by – or even replaced by – personal networks, markets and media. Scholarship on conversion and on social epistemology provides important clues as to how these loci of religious production and distribution affect the social nature of New Age religion.

Networks, market and media

A number of studies document the importance of personal networks in the process of religious conversion. In his seminal study of conversion, Lewis Rambo (1993) suggests that family ties and friendships are crucial both in influencing people to convert to a new religion, but also in resisting conversion.¹⁰ When friends and kin support the organization and world view that a potential convert enters, their approval provides a crucial reinforcement to take the decisive step. Rambo in particular points at the “source reliability” factor: new religious beliefs that may otherwise be perceived as unfamiliar and strange, are made more acceptable by being endorsed by individuals whom one trusts. Although classic understandings of conversion view the process as a powerful and nearly total restructuring of one’s world view, i.e. as a considerably more radical appropriation of new religious elements than one commonly finds in the New Age milieu, source reliability plays a crucial role in the latter as well.

Statistics suggest that women represent a very sizeable part of the New Age constituency (e.g., Frisk 2003). A classic study of the social epistemology of American women shows that issues of gender are directly relevant to the impact of source reliability in adopting a New Age perspective. In research carried out in the 1980s, Mary Belenky (1986) and her colleagues systematically explored the ways in which women of different ages and backgrounds constructed the mental maps necessary to orient themselves in the world. The women they interviewed tended to adhere to one of five ideal-typical epistemological principles, implicit ways of deciding what counts as evidence. *Silence* characterizes a small minority of extremely deprived women who feel powerless and “deaf and dumb”. They find it exceedingly difficult to reflect on themselves and on the world around them, to articulate any personal opinion at all. Their basic epistemological principle is to keep quiet and accept unconditionally what others tell them. The truly “deaf and dumb” in fact rely on authority figures not only to *tell* them what to do, but to actually *do* things for them. *Received knowledge* represents a major advance. Women in this group are “listeners”, they have found enough confidence to ask questions, to learn and to apply the information they get, but depend heavily on various experts to supply them with that information.

¹⁰ For the role of social networks, see especially chapter 8.

The third epistemological position, *subjective knowledge*, is the one most immediately relevant to the present discussion. There is a developmental aspect to Belenky's work, in that subjectivists are often women who have gone through a stage of received knowledge (sometimes also of silence) before consciously revolting against the passivity and dependence of their approach. The onset of subjectivism in some women's lives resulted from major changes in their personal circumstances. Subjectivism entails a move towards much greater independence from others, by no longer requiring external authorities to tell them what to think. Other, more advantaged women adopted a subjectivist standpoint for intellectual reasons. Since authorities can contradict each other, truth appears to them as personal and multiple.

Subjectivists come to devalue logic, analysis and abstraction as avenues to knowledge. Institutional experts representing these purportedly inferior epistemic pathways, such as scientists, doctors and teachers, are intensely distrusted. Many subjectivists express particular misgivings about learning through the written word, and suggest that emotional decisions based on direct personal experience are preferable. Subjectivism ultimately becomes an anti-rationalist position.

There are obvious adaptive advantages of learning to follow one's own inner voice, as compared to being directed by external – usually male – authorities. However, the transition is far from straightforward, and does not usually entail a total leap from other-directedness to being in touch with a strong gut feeling. In their need to make a break with a past over-reliance on authorities, or in their need to find a way through the at times bewildering multiplicity of personal truths, “they consider turning for answers to people closer to their own experience – female peers, mothers, sisters, grandmothers [...] Truth for these women is particular and grounded in the firsthand experience of others most like themselves” (1986: 60). In this seeming paradox lies the close similarity between the epistemological choices of subjectivist women and of New Agers. Ideally, knowledge and truth are construed as coming from immediate personal experience. In reality, however, much of the mental map is constructed by trusting the experience of others, especially other women. Subjectivists have shifted authorities: they rely not on the threatening, negative knowledge of institutional experts, but on the insights of close female kin and friends.

Although network theories go a long way toward elucidating the mechanisms by which religious elements spread, they provide only partial answers. The networks are obviously not self-contained; trends in

the New Age milieu are evidence of the introduction and selective promotion of new elements in such networks. In the decades that have passed since the Scandinavian (and in particular the Swedish and Danish) New Age scene took shape in the early to mid 1970s, there have been a number of such trends. Some of these waves of interest concern particular books; to mention just a few: Fritjof Capra's "The Tao of Physics" was widely read in the 1970s, but much less so today; "A Course In Miracles" became a major focus of interest the mid 1980s; interest in James Redfield's "The Celestine Prophecy" surged in the mid 1990s, whereas Neale Donald Walsch's "Conversations With God" was widely discussed in the first few years of the 21st century. Over the years, specific themes such as crystal healing, dolphins or angels have also had waves of popularity. These waves of popularity suggest that New Age discourses and practices spread in a two-tiered cultic milieu. Some topics and books have primarily spread only within the more religiously oriented sector of the New Age milieu. Others attract a much wider attention. Roughly, the dividing line goes between religious innovations that are boosted by attention in the more popular or entertaining segments of the media, and those that are not.

Evidence for this distinction is not least supplied by media studies. Stig Hjarvard (2005: 163–182) notes that in Denmark, interest in religion is largely kept up via the media. A poll conducted in April 2005 asked 1005 individuals how they in the last two months had occupied themselves with "spiritual" matters. The second most common option chosen by respondents (after "In conversations with relatives and close friends", selected by 30.7 percent) was "By watching television" (25.7 percent). By contrast, the options "Church attendance" and "Reading the Bible (or another sacred book)" came far behind, with 10.5 and 5.2 percent. Furthermore, the most popular television shows tend to present a particular kind of religiosity: New Age themes packaged in the form of entertainment attract fairly high numbers of viewers, whereas other religious subjects treated in a more sober, documentary form tend to be seen by a much smaller segment of the population.¹¹ A "light" series called "Den 6. sans" (The sixth sense) that deals with the paranormal,

¹¹ This generalization disregards the impact of single, high-profile events. Television broadcasts of discussions on Islam obviously attracted many Danish viewers in the aftermath of the Muhammad cartoon crisis, but it should be remembered that the chain of events following the publication in September 2005 by *Jyllandsposten* of the infamous drawings was unprecedented in Danish history.

was seen by 16.6 percent of the Danish population. A series with a similar topic, “Åndernes magt” (The power of the spirits) reached 12.4 percent of the potential viewers. Two “serious” programs on other religious topics (“Deadline” and “Tal med Gud” [Speak with God]) were only seen by 1.7 and 1.1 percent. Infotainment thus appears to play a crucial role in producing New Age religion.

The American situation is no doubt somewhat different, in the sense that church attendance plays a much more significant role than it does in most of Western Europe. Nevertheless, infotainment is a major source of New Age innovations also for the American cultic milieu. Perhaps the best example of the way in which infotainment allows particular New Age products to spread rapidly through the New Age milieu is the Oprah Winfrey show. Books endorsed on this and similar talk shows have a substantially better chance of becoming bestsellers in America.¹² Agents see the commercial potential of marketing these books overseas. Sales campaigns will focus on those particular books rather than on the dozens of other volumes on similar subjects that happen to be published at the same time. The net result is that an appearance on American prime time television can significantly increase sales figures, even in countries where these talk shows are practically unknown to the general public.

Commercial organizations that lie outside the media sector will also have an interest in boosting such trends. Feng shui, originally a Chinese divinatory technique used to regulate the location and construction of buildings in accordance with beliefs in auspicious and harmful forces, has in a suitably reinterpreted and westernized form become one of the most widely disseminated contemporary trends in the New Age milieu. Beside publishers who carry feng shui books on their catalogs, and media that attract an audience interested in this particular form of divination, ‘feng shui’ can be of interest to other businesses. An issue of the Swedish IKEA magazine “Handla hemma” (Shop at home) introduces feng shui in ways that resonate with the self-perception of New Agers as open-minded, in opposition to bigoted self-styled experts: “Does it really work? Skeptics doubt, the curious try for themselves.”¹³ The magazine then presents various feng shui-inspired ways of combining colors, refurbishing one’s home or workplace and experimenting with lighting, modes of spiritual interior decorating that are not explicitly connected

¹² See e.g. the Academy of Achievement website on Oprah Winfrey, www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/win0bio-1.

¹³ *IKEA Handla hemma*, Sept–Nov 2000, pp. 10–14.

with any advertisements for particular products, but are nevertheless certainly compatible with an excursion to the nearest IKEA outlet.

Market forces and the impact of infotainment presented by the media combine to introduce products of popular religious culture that, in Clifford Geertz's well-known terminology, serve both as models of and models for popular discourse. They are "models of", in the sense that the most influential products reproduce preexisting interests. They are "models for", by combining, rephrasing and repackaging these interests in a novel and appealing form. The remarkable popular interest in Dan Brown's bestselling novel "The Da Vinci Code" can be seen as a symptom of this synergy. The details presented in the book may be unfamiliar to most readers, but the broad themes are staples of the cultic milieu. There are innumerable versions of the general idea that Jesus preached a very different message than the one heard in mainstream churches, that major ecclesiastical organizations have skewed Jesus' "true" message, and that there have been specifically feminine forms of religiosity that a male-centered hierarchy has suppressed. Although we as yet lack detailed analyses of the reception of Dan Brown's books (as opposed to the many attempts at debunking his ideas), a large part of his success in spreading these ideas can surely be attributed to the novel repackaging of these themes and the fictional form he has chosen.

Personal networks as well as the media act as powerful mechanisms of diffusion. Many people will act as if close friends and the media are reliable authorities. Friends and media in turn report on practices that are created by others. They will recommend books written by specific authors or methods created by individuals with sufficient time, ability and resources to take on a particularly creative role in the New Age milieu. Just as in other religious milieus, New Age religion is generated, reproduced and distributed by a small set of "religious virtuosi."¹⁴

Experience and explanation

What makes individual seekers accept the discourses provided by New Age religious virtuosi, yet adamantly insist that they are the creators of their own spirituality? One answer has to do with the sheer availability of New Age explanatory models.

¹⁴ Max Weber in H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (eds.) (1948); on the concept of religious virtuosi, see especially pp. 287-292.

For New Agers, belief in the transcendent and interest in the existence and properties of the supra-human agents (which, according to Protestant norms, should be the “essence” of religion *per se*), appears to be strictly limited. Far more literature and much more Internet bandwidth are devoted to the influence of these agents on the human condition. New Age discourse addresses the questions of how supra-human agents and forces can enable us to remain healthy, understand our own personality, or make sense of uncanny experiences. In brief, the New Age milieu provides answers to specific issues posed by individual New Agers – answers that can be tested. Did the alternative therapy foster greater well-being, did the astrologer present a plausible character portrait, does the New Age explanation make sense of a puzzling event?

An example of such an “uncanny” experience is a common New Age therapeutic ritual, past-life regression. This is a technique by which subjects are made to perceive vivid and emotionally intense internal imagery. The quite extensive New Age literature on past-life regression, discussions with people who have participated in such sessions as well as my own participant observation confirm the remarkable realism of these inner scenarios. People report dramatic eidetic imagery of being transported into the biographies of medieval knights, Native Americans, soldiers in the Napoleonic wars, Chinese monks or ancient Egyptians.

Information on the existence of such experiential possibilities is easy to find. Reports in popular magazines, advertisements on the notice boards of local New Age book shops and word-of-mouth make a first-hand acquaintance with past-life regression and other experiential rituals potentially available to a wide audience. Their unfamiliar and mysterious nature calls for an explanation. This is also provided by the New Age milieu. The very name “past-life regression” privileges one particular account above all others. Leading questions posed by the therapist (“what did you look like?”, “what language did you speak?”, “what was your name?”) reinforce the basic premise that the images are depictions of real events, memories of earlier incarnations.¹⁵

¹⁵ Interestingly, this appears to be one topic on which there are distinct local variations. The comments above are based on discussions with past-life therapists and participant observation in Sweden, and on literature available in Swedish New Age book shops. Stef Aupers (personal communication) informs me that past-life therapists in the Netherlands are more prone to adopting a pragmatic explanation, i.e. that the actual existence of past lives is deemed irrelevant, considering the sheer fact that the method works.

There is a sizeable literature that promotes naturalistic perspectives on such experiences (e.g., Spanos 1996).¹⁶ Typically, however, this literature is little known to the general public, is only disseminated in specialized publications and is promoted precisely by those institutional experts that elicit distrust among many New Agers. Few New Agers will thus have heard of the experimental studies that suggest that the eidetic images produced in these ritual settings are fantasies rendered particularly vivid as the result of role-playing.

The fact that the New Age explanation is frequently the most readily available account creates a circularity that is characteristic of New Age rituals. Explanation and experience are discussed as if they were two sides of the same coin, and will thereby reinforce each other. The vivid images are presented as reflexes of past-life memories, and hence their very existence supports belief in reincarnation. Conversely, the widespread acceptance in New Age circles of reincarnation serves to provide a plausible mechanism that might account for the existence of the eidetic images. Thus, something as seemingly personal as a first-hand experience becomes a privileged way of transmitting socially constructed explanations.

Cognitive reinforcement

Once social forces have led to an acceptance of a particular account of such topics as alternative medicine, divination or unsettling personal experiences, mechanisms of cognitive reinforcement contribute to giving these narratives an impression of unproblematic factuality. Such mechanisms also defuse the potential impact of dissenting information, and give New Age discourse a competitive advantage over other explanations.

Studies by Harvey Whitehouse (2000) suggest that there are two fundamental cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to solidly internalize socially transmitted religious beliefs. Some events are so striking and dramatic that they are fixed forever in the memories of those who have encountered them. Frightening and painful initiation rituals are a prime example of this category. In the New Age setting, this mechanism would support the internalization of the explanatory frameworks

¹⁶ See pp. 135–142 for a naturalistic explanation of past-life regression and a summary of previous research.

provided to explain visions and apparitions. Other elements are internalized because there is an organization that actively promotes socialization and rote memorization. The prototypical example is scholastic education in a monastic situation. Details of complex doctrinal systems can be hard to memorize and perhaps even dull, but repetition is ensured by the educational system of the monastic community. In the New Age, a similar example would be astrology, for which some New Agers spend considerable time and effort memorizing culturally available theories.

However, relatively few aspects of New Age religion involve either highly dramatic incidents or long-term rote memorization. I would hence suggest that there is another reason why, in New Age contexts, individual choice often goes hand in hand with social conformity. Socialization works very well, even in the absence of any marked institutional pressure, because New Age religion in many ways follows cognitive “common-sense” pathways. Beliefs are easily transmitted, easily reinforced by peers, social networks, media and other authorities, and easily accepted by individual seekers, because they are cognitively natural.

Any handbook on human cognition will illustrate the ways in which our cognitive capacities are not only adaptive and indeed vitally important mechanisms, but are also the source of common, rough and ready short-cuts of perception, memory and thinking. Here, I will offer merely two examples of the ways in which adaptive but “insufficiently well-calibrated” cognitive processes lead to a ready acceptance and internalization of propositions encountered in the New Age milieu: the clustering illusion and confirmation bias.

Our quality of life, even our ability to survive, hinges on our capacity to draw inferences from the data we encounter. If we see heavy, grey clouds, we infer that it may rain. We have on many previous occasions noted how rain will cause us to get wet and cold, unless we bring an umbrella or wear appropriate rain-proof clothing. We feel that there is a recognizable pattern in such events, infer that this scenario may occur again, and therefore decide to bring an umbrella. We make basic inferences such as these many times every day; most of the time so routinely that they do not even register as inferences. Our ability is, however, not very well calibrated. In short, we do not only see patterns when these follow from the data at hand (as in the case of the rain clouds), but also when we according to normative standards of rationality should not find any. The term clustering illusion for this process is due to our propensity to see meaningful clusters of events, even where only randomness prevails.

One reason why divinatory rituals common in the New Age milieu, such as astrology, are so popular is because the clustering illusion make them appear effective in the eyes of the participants. Like other New Age elements, astrology is socially transmitted: networks and popular media introduce and reinforce the belief that it is possible to understand one's personality and one's destiny by analyzing a birth chart. In the abstract, however, such a belief will typically only be mildly entertained as an interesting hypothesis. Belief will be much more strongly reinforced if and when one decides to try for oneself. Because astrology clients are willing to perceive correlations between what the diviner (astrologer) tells them, and biographical details that they remember, a consultation will typically be experienced as a confirmation of the validity of astrology. Conversations with people interested in astrology will again and again uncover how this first striking encounter is perceived as the cause of a continuing fascination with divination.

People are seemingly easily converted to a new perspective by having it presented by "soft" authorities and by having personal experiences that appear to confirm the validity of these beliefs. Such new beliefs tend to have a certain degree of tenacity: most people do not change opinions again and again. What prevents people from deconverting from a New Age perspective? Confirmation bias operates when we attempt to judge whether a given hypothesis is correct. When we entertain a particular hypothesis and wish to determine whether it is correct, we are likely to devise tests that confirm the hypothesis: "to test a hypothesis, think of a result that would be found if the hypothesis were true and then look for that result (and do not worry about other hypotheses that might yield the same result)" (Baron 1994: 253).

A widely reported study shows how disconfirming data are in fact actively used to reinforce the opinions that one already holds (Lord et al. 1979). Subjects were selected for their strong opinions for or against capital punishment. Each subject was then presented with two carefully balanced reports, one for and one against the death penalty. Finally, the subjects were asked to assess the reports they had just read. Those who were initially opposed to capital punishment felt that the arguments that supported their own point of view were well constructed and relevant, whereas the report presenting opposing data was perceived to be deficient. Those who were in favor of capital punishment were equally convinced that the report supporting their own point of view was more convincing. Ultimately, both groups of subjects became more convinced that their own opinion was right and the opposing one was wrong.

Although people can and do change their opinions, even on matters of deep conviction, belief thus has a considerable persistence. New Age attitudes are initially adopted because they provide explanations of issues (past lives, the correlation of the planets with aspects of human life, invisible forces permeating the cosmos) on which many people do not have any strong opinions before confronted with them in conversations, in the media or through personal experience. Once such attitudes have been internalized, confirmation bias ensures that they are only with difficulty dislodged by opposing beliefs.

Conclusion: the force of gentle persuasion

In several autobiographical accounts, actress Shirley MacLaine presents her journey into New Age belief.¹⁷ The author describes her transition from being a skeptical onlooker, to becoming convinced of the validity of a range of New Age practices and doctrines, from channeling to reincarnation. These practices and doctrines are, of course, those made available to her by people in her social network. Nevertheless, MacLaine considers herself a person who has “never been much for doing anything communally” (1983: 143) and calls this participation in rituals scripted by others and her gradual adoption of pre-existing, culturally available religious options a “quest for my self” (Ibid.: 5).

Her meeting with a trance channeler is characteristic of the process. During a business trip in Sweden, MacLaine has the occasion to visit Sture Johansson, a carpenter from the Stockholm area who acts as a channel for the disembodied entity Ambres. MacLaine meets Johansson/Ambres through a Swedish acquaintance named Lars. MacLaine is thrilled to meet a trance channeler and figures that the opportunity to do so is more than just a coincidence. At the same time, she is repelled by the vocabulary used by Lars when speaking of Ambres. MacLaine describes her ambivalent feelings:

I found that the minute I got into discussions of the metaphysical and heard people using words like “occult”, “astral plane”, “cosmic vibrations”, “etheric memory”, “soul”, “God”—the standard vocabulary of a study as old as time—I reacted with nervous derision, sarcastic laughter, suspicion

¹⁷ See in particular her books “Out on a Limb” (1983), “Dancing in the Light” (1985) and “It’s all in the Playing” (1987), all published by Bantam Books.

or outright contempt. This time was no exception. Yet I wanted to know more. I wanted to “experience” a medium myself. (Ibid.: 139).

As she begins to participate in the ritual, her doubts are put aside. Listening to the distinct voice of Ambres, she felt sure that the trance channeler Sture Johansson’s own personality had nothing to do with it.

He was only some kind of telephone through which some spiritual entity spoke. In fact, I could ‘feel’ the personality, the humor, the ancient rhythm of the thoughts of this entity called Ambres. He gestured and laughed and made succinct and overt points with his own energy, not the energy of Sturé [sic] (Ibid.: 145).

MacLaine’s picture of herself as a level-headed and skeptically inclined individualist, and her acceptance of trance channeling as a real phenomenon after meeting with Johansson/ Ambres, can be read symptomatically as representative of the many narratives of personal experience that circulate in the New Age milieu. In order to assess the strength of the social cues involved in interpreting an experience such as this, it should perhaps be borne in mind firstly that the author was only able to understand Johansson/ Ambres through the medium of an interpreter, secondly that she herself, as a professional actress, is presumably well acquainted with the need to embody more than one personality. Nonetheless, MacLaine is almost instantly willing to suspend disbelief. Few advocates can be gentler and less overtly coercive, yet stronger in inducing conformity, than the opinions of close friends and first-hand experiences.

My discussion began with a quote by Vicky Wall: “The greatest teacher is in yourself”. Her statement is symptomatic of a sentiment that one finds again and again in New Age sources, and which has found its way into parts of the scholarly literature as well. This postulated individualism is often attributed to the absence of any single, centralized organization that could enforce uniformity. However, Shirley MacLaine’s meeting with “Ambres” suggests a very different conclusion. A hierarchical organization with a strong tendency to enforce a certain discourse in top-down fashion is easily recognized as such, and can be resisted. An apparently amorphous general opinion, friendly voices that affirm that we should trust our own experience and accept only what rings true to our own intuition, and which go hand in hand with presumably hard-wired cognitive processes, are much less readily identified as loci of external authority.

Given the existence of such homogenizing social and cognitive forces, it is hardly remarkable that personal choice leads to a religious discourse

that is collective and instantly recognizable. Hundreds of New Age writers and untold numbers of individual seekers have made their individual decisions, and the result is a set of variations on a few common themes. The unfettered individualism of the New Age turns out to largely be a rhetorical convention.

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CHAPTER FOUR

PRIVATE RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

LIFE SPIRITUALITY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Siobhan Chandler

Introduction

Social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon. (Emile Durkheim, 1965[1893]: 64)

In this paper I want to examine the concept of civil society from the perspective of life spirituality. This undertaking is quite distinct from the more usual course of evaluating life spirituality through the lens of civil society as it is commonly conceived. This is because life spirituality – the further frontier of what is often called New Age – is typically deemed inconsequential in this social sphere. The reasons for this are complex. Life spirituality is a diffuse, institutionally-decentralized, late modern, spiritual sensibility that is highly subjectivized and often mobilized through market mechanisms. There is a strong academic consensus that its individualistic and highly commodified nature works against any cooperative, communal, and most importantly, ethical vision of social life. Any attempt to include life spirituality in the ambit of civil society tends to be met with resistance because stock assumptions – few of which have been subject to empirical verification – continue to dominate the discourse. Old interpretive habits are not easy to arrest, but fundamentally the question of whether life spirituality contributes to civil society remains an open one.

What follows is a reconsideration of the civic stature of life spirituality. I suggest that beneath a veneer of surface eclecticism is a consistent worldview supported by grassroots participation in a networked milieu. More deeply, its civil-social network supports and is supported by core values that resonate with an increasingly widespread cultural turn towards relational autonomy – that characteristically late modern requirement for a mode of self-reliance that nevertheless engages and is engaged by others.

Life spirituality

Before commencing our examination of civil society, a brief definition of 'life spirituality' is in order. The term New Age is still frequently used in academic circles to describe the spiritual orientation of contemporary seekers whose beliefs and practices resemble the late 1970s New Age movement. New Ageism has historical roots going back several centuries, but scholars today generally date its near origins to the American counterculture uprisings in the sixties. With its zeal for religious experimentation, the counterculture era laid the foundation for a plethora of new religious movements, including New Age that developed steadily through the 1970s and 1980s. New Age expressed the counterculture motifs of self-development, autonomy and personal authentication of religious truth claims by drawing on the Western esoteric tradition, the human potential movement, and various schools of Eastern mysticism. In the late 1980s, however, for a variety of reasons the popularity of New Age dwindled. In particular, the term 'New Age' became negatively charged and many people dropped it altogether. Yet, the New Age mentality, if it could be called that, did not disappear but continued changing along with the times; it remains alive and well today albeit in a slightly modified form. In fact, many aspects of New Age (i.e. its ethic of self-determinism and self-care) have found easy footing in what has become an increasingly individualistic society by articulating if not exemplifying many mainstream cultural values. Thus, the boundary between what could be called the cultural and religious dimensions of New Age are not always easy to discern. As for the term New Age, I admit to being somewhat perplexed by its ineradicability. While academics might like the term, its practitioners rarely do. Robert Fuller's moniker "spiritual but not religious" (2002) seemed a step forward until I discovered, in the course of my own fieldwork at least, that this identity is popular with church-going Christians as well. The phrase 'spiritual but religiously unaffiliated' is accurate but ponderous. Thus in addition to retaining New Age and other standard academic nomenclatures, following Paul Heelas, I will also use the term "life spirituality" and its various cognates to cue my reader to the evolving nature of New Ageism.

What is civil society?

There is no simple definition of civil society. The concept is probably best described as a cluster of theories that attempt to articulate how to

best inhabit a social world structured by the coercive and/or oppressive powers of the state and the economy. What is the proper role of government in ordering peoples' lives and mitigating the power of larger social institutions through which they live and work? What mechanism makes a good society possible so that all can peacefully coexist and prosper? What can citizens do to ensure the continuation of their rights and liberties, and what do they owe to one another in the process? For theorists working within the civil society discourse, the answer lies with the creation of a collective field of free association in which citizens pursue objectives with little or no interference from the government or market whether to meet their own needs and desires or, in many cases, those of less fortunate others. This realm of voluntary engagement and interaction includes groups such as NGOs, philanthropic organizations, citizen advocacy groups, religious organizations, trade unions, sports teams and clubs for the hobbyist. At its most intense, it is a space where ethnic, cultural and gender groups strive for recognition and agendas for social and political reform are galvanized. Whatever form it takes, civil society offsets the atomism inherent in modernity and tries to balance peoples' needs for autonomy with the social realities of communal life.

In America, Robert Putnam's highly influential "Bowling Alone" (2000) reinvigorated the civil society debate with his suggestion that civil society was eroding due to declining participation in what had once been a rich civic life. Drawing on evidence from interviews, polls, election surveys and membership reports, Putnam reported sharp declines in social and political participation in the United States. He concluded that Americans in the 1990s were less civically minded than the average American had been in previous generations. Among other things, they voted less, volunteered less and were less likely to express confidence in elected leaders or their neighbors for that matter. He suggested that Americans were being systematically pulled apart from their communities and each other and remarked on what he saw as a disturbing collapse of honesty and social trust (Ibid.: 27). He explained the withering of civil society as a loss of social capital – the networks and norms of trust and reciprocity that kept society functioning in adaptive and beneficial ways. The Putnam thesis emphasized that civility was reinforced when people learned the social rules of conduct by meeting together in groups. Here, according to the theory, they would be propelled to further acts of social and political involvement, thereby creating stronger communities while enhancing democratic processes. Although critics find the connection between associational life and political behaviors ambiguous (Boggs 2001; Foley and Edwards 1999), the important point

is that Putnam and his followers see participation in civil society as, well, civilizing.

Putnam's civil society with its myriad grassroots institutions is quite specifically conceived as a matrix of socio-moral behavior. In the communitarian view, civil society is a lost good that must be recovered. Amitai Etzioni puts it this way:

In the 1950s American society had a strong and clear set of social values, but these were somewhat authoritarian, unfair to women, and discriminatory towards minorities. These values were roundly attacked by the civil rights movement, the counterculture, and the women's rights movement, among others. Although these movements opened America's eyes to the negative practices of its own society, these attacks caused a moral vacuum, typified by an unbounded relativism, situational ethics and excessive individualism. Liberals were reluctant to step in and fill the void and help evolve a new moral culture. Social conservatives, especially the religious right, have viewed a return to traditional morality as they key to national salvation. (...) [This unresolved] moral vacuum (...) has continued to gnaw at us (2001:21).

Although Putnam's theory of social capital has been vigorously debated, his communitarian views of civil society resonate with a large body of sociological thought that eyes late modern self-expression and individualism with overt suspicion (Bauman 2004; Bellah et al. 1985, 1991; Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973; Bibby 2002, 2004; Bowen 2004; Bruce 2002; Sennett 1998). According to these thinkers, any forces that augment the individualism of our age are considered highly problematic and in urgent need of remedy. In this regard, Putnam's theory gives empirical muscle to those who argue for the social dangers of excessive autonomy and subjectivity. As a political scientist, Putnam does not dwell on the specificities of New Age per se; however, following his line of reasoning leads to the inescapable conclusion that by focusing on autonomy and self-development, religiously unaffiliated spirituality encourages the type of behaviors that are incompatible with healthy social life. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere (2008), there is a growing body of evidence that suggests religiously unaffiliated spiritual seekers are neither more selfish nor atomistic than the rest of the population; it cannot be conclusively argued that there is something inherent in New Age style beliefs that encourages its adherents to be socially disengaged and politically inactive. At best it can be suggested that religiously unaffiliated spiritual seekers are socially engaged in different ways than other religious groups, but this alone is not enough to prevent scholars from denying this engagement altogether.

In what follows, I will take a closer look at how the theory of civil society has been implicitly used to marginalize the social contributions of religiously unaffiliated spiritual seekers. The main and somewhat contradictory axes of this argument are as follows: 1) life spirituality is institutionally decentralized and therefore lacks the means to mobilize followers and coordinate action; and 2) life spirituality is commodified and therefore is a by-product of or is aligned with the economic apparatus that jeopardizes the health of civil society as a realm autonomous from the market and the state. I will examine each of these points before turning to a reconsideration of their plausibility. Because of the complex nature of the issues, these remarks are necessarily cursory.

Postulate 1: life spirituality is institutionally decentralized

The term intermediate (or secondary) institutions (or associations) refers to those groups in civil society that stand between the individual and the state. Labor unions, NGOs and religious organizations are among the largest but by no means the only intermediate groups active in this sphere. The important point is that a corporate identity and institutional structure is necessary if groups are to participate in civil society – something that life spirituality is said to lack. Indeed, there is a long history in the sociology of religion of associating subjective modes of religiosity with social fragmentation and atomism (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967). For example, Robert Bellah et al. write that despite the ecology, peace, feminist and other movements of the sixties, the “mystical type” is prone to distortions including “an extreme weakness in political and social organization” (1985: 246). Jeremy Carrette and Richard King have likewise argued that privatized religions perpetuate the idea of the “closed self,” that is, a self that is personally and not socially created (2005: 85). They think that New Age’s psychological model of the human being is “pernicious and dangerous” because it overstates the notion of an independent self at the expense of social interdependence (Ibid.: 57).

While it cannot be argued that life spirituality is organized and propagated in the same way that organized religion is, it does not follow from here that those who embrace life spirituality create no intermediate structures. There is ample evidence in the ethnographic literature that since the 1970s these people have continued to create and sustain spiritual groups of many kinds (e.g. Aupers and Houtman 2006; Bloch 1998; Corrywright 2003; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Roof 1999; Tipton 1982;

Wuthnow 1976, 1998; Zaidman 2007). Some of these groups, such as gatherings in people's homes, are highly informal, but others – such as the well-known Harmonic Convergence in 1987 – attract thousands (Smilgis 1987). Yet, over and over, critics have disaffirmed the social reality of life spirituality. This position is largely articulated in four interconnected ways: (1) life spirituality is numerically insignificant; (2) life spirituality does not foster a collectivity; (3) life spirituality promotes autonomy and individualism making it a source of social fragmentation; and (4) life spirituality is expressed in networks, not institutions. Let's briefly consider these points.

Life spirituality is numerically insignificant

Ambiguity is routine in studies of life spirituality and is reflected in the empirical data. A meta-analysis of five major American studies of the 'spiritual but not religious' demographic suggested that the prevalence of this religious orientation ranges from 9%–20% of the population (Marler and Hadaway 2002). Perhaps the best empirical data comes from the Kendal Project (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Through head counts in churches and tallies of holistic therapy use in Kendal, a town in the South Lakeland district of Cumbria, England, Heelas and Woodhead documented how a culture of life spirituality has been emerging since the 1970s. They estimated that between .9% and 1.6% of Kendal's population were active participants in activities, such as yoga, counseling, aromatherapy and so forth, linked with a life-spiritual outlook. Although this is not a large number – only 600 individuals compared to the approximately 2200 involved in congregational activities – it represents a 300% increase in the "holistic milieu" during the 1990s, a time when population growth was only around 11% (Ibid.: 45). Should life spirituality maintain this same level of growth and traditional church attendance continue to decline, Heelas and Woodhead conclude, it would take only 30 years for life spirituality to outpace religious participation (Ibid.: 48).

Yet because life spirituality is difficult to isolate and measure, some scholars argue that it is a marginal phenomenon. In "God is Dead" (2002) Bruce considers New Age spirituality at some length. He writes that for all its seeming popularity, New Age religiosity is numerically insignificant, with not more than 100,000 participants in Great Britain in the past twenty-five years (Ibid.: 80–81). More recently, Bruce and Voas (2005) reappraised Heelas and Woodhead's Kendal data. They contend

that many of the so-called acts of spiritual participation were fuzzy and inconclusive. They challenge the peculiarity of packing a variety of imported recreational activities, miscellaneous methods of relaxation and diverse forms of alternative medicine, all practiced mainly by people who do not even pretend to see them as spiritual, as the second coming of religion in the West (Ibid.: 50–51).

In short, they think, “the importance of alternative spirituality has been exaggerated” (Ibid.: 58). The prominent Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby would likely concur. He thinks that despite the media’s suggestion that Canadians are turning to a wide range of religious options, relatively few people are identifying with alternatives to traditional religion (2004: 63). He writes:

In a nation of close to 30 million people, fewer than 6,000 individuals identified with any of such highly publicized religions as Wicca, Scientology or New Age. To put things in perspective, the 1991 census found that Canadians describing their religion as New Age numbered 480 in B.C., 150 in Ontario, and 15 in Quebec. These data suggest that what we have in Canada is an extremely tight ‘religious market’ dominated by Catholic and Protestant ‘companies’. New entries find the going extremely tough (2004: 64).

Although Bruce and Bibby are on opposite sides of the secularization debate, they both agree that life spirituality is inconsequential. The reason they can make these kinds of confident assertions is that we lack clear categories of analysis when it comes to life spirituality. Scholars of religion and sociology have been slow to respond to the emergence of unorthodox spiritualities of life. This accounts not only for the paucity of empirical data but also the lack of resolution of complex methodological realities that plague analyses of this group. As such, the precise extent and influence of life spirituality is unclear giving additional weight to a second major proviso regarding its social significance – lack of a collective identity.

Life spirituality does not foster a collectivity

Life spirituality goes by many names. In my fieldwork with Canadians who self-identified as ‘spiritual but not religious’, many identified their religiosity by saying things like: “I am a shaman;” “I am not religious;” “I can’t categorize it;” “I am an atheist (I don’t have time to explain pantheist)” and “I am an expanded Christian.” This is certainly consistent with the view first articulated by Luckmann (1967) that in late modernity,

the process of meaning-making (religion) was personalized and, therefore, privatized. He called this new form of social cohesion “invisible religion” and gave purchase to the idea that subjective religion lacked a recognizable face. Since that time others have followed suit. For example, Steven Sutcliffe rejects any notion there is a social collectivity known as the New Age movement (2003). He writes:

(...) I reject the consensus of the secondary literature (...) that ‘New Age,’ is a movement of some kind. This notion essentialises what are in fact a conglomeration of meandering, divergent, even ‘accidental’ social processes, lacking clear criteria of participation and falsifiable boundaries (2003: 13).

In a different sense, Canadian sociologist of religion Kurt Bowen also thinks contemporary spiritual quests do not foster collectivity because they are inward and not outward looking. Fully realized, he says, the privatization of religion means “religious commitment has no consequences for the daily life of its adherents,” it has no impact beyond the personal realm (2004: 21). As such, he concurs with Peter Emberley’s openly disparaging account of Canadian New Age spirituality as “‘transitory and ephemeral,’ pursued in ‘communities of solitude,’ in which they ‘seem to be escaping commitment and responsibility’”(Ibid.: 19). This perspective is directly linked to the third proviso; life spirituality is individualistic not communitarian.

Life spirituality is individualistic

Life spirituality is individually discerned and mediated and accepts many possible routes to awakening and personal development. While the life spiritual seeker sees agency in the freedom to pick-and-mix, critics are less kind. Since the early 80s, writers have portrayed it – with varying degrees of emphasis – as narcissistic and hedonistic, a spirituality where personal fulfillment trumps more traditional religious concerns with the welfare of the larger community (Bellah et al. 1985; Bowen 2004; Bruce 2002; Carrette and King 2005; Lasch 1978). Heelas’ (1996) regrettable choice of the term “self spirituality” to describe New Ageism was seized upon by critics who read it as proof that it is a selfish spirituality (e.g. Carrette and King 2005: 88–89; 99). Overall, New Ageism is interpreted as a type of religiosity where one is never held accountable, whether to tradition, doctrine, community or morality. Because they lack an institutional center of gravity, religiously unaffiliated seekers are viewed as free-floating, without social and/or religious weight. The fact

that life spirituality is reified and propagated through loosely connected social networks is pointed to as evidence of its fragmentary nature. This brings us to the fourth and final proviso: life spirituality is expressed in networks and not institutions.

Life spirituality is expressed in networks and not institutions

Since Colin Campbell first theorized the cultic milieu in 1972, it is customary to describe the socio-organizational matrix of the New Age in terms of networks linked through a common ideology of seekership, “kept alive by magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations and informal meetings through which its beliefs and practices are disseminated” (2002 [1972]: 15). In other words, life spirituality with its plethora of grassroots and commercial activities is seen as a fluid medium that is structurally diffuse. Because networks are non-hierarchical by design, they are considered well adapted to preserving the integrity of a religiosity favoring autonomy and egalitarianism but unsuited to fostering stability, consistency and group solidarity. Networks cannot regulate personal belief or behavior in the way that a more structured institution – with its centers of authority and communication – can. Because life spirituality is expressed in networks, it can be seen as thriving while nevertheless having little social impact.

Taken together, the foregoing provisos are a significant challenge to any claim life spirituality might have to social significance and a place in civil society. But there is a conundrum for proponents of these views: if life spirituality is such a marginal and/or diffuse phenomenon, what accounts for the veritable profusion of goods, including workshops, seminars, books, CDs, holistic healthcare products, with life-spiritual themes? Indeed, if the vitality of the life-spiritual marketplace is taken as an index of its popularity, then arguing that it is an “invisible” religion is problematic. Frequently, an alternative strategy is deployed: life spirituality does indeed have an institutional medium (otherwise how and why else would all that *stuff* exist?) and that medium is the marketplace.¹ This leads to the second postulate, namely that life spirituality does not

¹ Because of the ambiguity concerning the size and specificity of life spirituality its market activities are difficult to accurately assess. For an interesting perspective, however, consider the so-called LOHAS (lifestyles of health and sustainability) sector in the US, which includes approximately 23% of the population. In 2005, LOHAS consumers spent \$209 billion on goods and services related to healthcare, personal development, environmentally and socially conscious products. For more information

contribute to civil society because it is commodified. It is wholly a product of economic society and is the spiritual co-efficient of late capitalism and neo-liberalism.

Postulate 2: life spirituality is commodified

Many scholars argue that the primary institutional reality of life spirituality is the marketplace (Bruce 2002; Possamai 2007; Redden 2005; York 2001). Because life spirituality is not linked to a specific institution and because it is frequently found in commodified form, many scholars have adopted the idea that it is nothing more than a reflection of a shallow consumerism. This has raised serious questions about its social and therefore moral integrity. Bruce, for instance, thinks that the sale of life spiritual products and services mirrors what amounts to a life-spiritual “consumerist ethos” that reinforces New Ager’s autonomy (2000: 90). Yet neither loyalty nor morality are part of this ethos; Bruce asserts that New Age consumers beat the bushes until a personally meaningful spiritual book, practice, guru or teacher appears and when that no longer satisfies, a replacement is sought in a never-ending cycle of purchasing-driven seeking (Ibid.).

Critics of this so-called “New Age capitalism” (e.g. Carrette and King 2005; Lau 2000) argue that shopping for spirituality distorts the moral horizon of religion by reducing it to a consumer item, and diverting religions’ mandates for social justice and personal morality to the softer realms of personal fulfillment. For example, Lau (2000) argues that yoga, aromatherapy, and macrobiotics have merely become the stock-in-trade of the leaders of American big business who have co-opted the appealing elements of Eastern and other non-Western religious traditions in the name of commercial transactions. As part of their rhetoric, she argues, big businesses such as Aveda manipulate the consumer into thinking that purchasing alternative lifestyle products amounts to political participation. On the contrary, Lau asserts, this is a meaningless mode of cultural critique not only because these forms of consumption are in effect status symbols but because they wrongly appease the con-

see <http://www.lohas.com/journal/maketsize2005.html> and http://www.nmisolutions.com/r_lohas.html. The research of Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson (2000) introduces the basic tenets of the LOHAS orientation, which is consistent with many life spiritual values (see page 14-17; 29).

sumers' conscience while ignoring the global reality of mass inequality and injustice (Ibid.: 132–135). Similarly, Carrette and King (2005) see New Age spirituality as the handmaiden of neoliberal abuse and injustice. They argue that not only does life spirituality do little to avert the spread of suffering that millions face in the wake of globalization but it is entirely complicit with it. New age, they argue, is a capitalist spirituality that puts profits before people and promotes desire fulfillment over duty, discipline and service. The result is a feel-good spirituality for the “urban and the affluent” that operates by “subordinating and exploiting religious themes and motifs to promote an individualistic and/or corporate-oriented pursuit of profit for its own sake” (Ibid.: 20).

Life spirituality and civil society

So far, I have briefly sketched two main postulates that imply that life spirituality does not contribute to civil society, namely that it is institutionally diffuse and commodified. In what follows I would like to challenge the plausibility of these claims. I suggest that the idea that life spirituality is socially insignificant is held in place by an unexamined assumption rooted in a communitarian view of civil society. In fact the concept of civil society is contested (Wuthnow 2003: 193–195) and open to a range of interpretations (see Chambers and Kymlicka 2002). As such, the remainder of this chapter will counter the argument presented above.

Counter-postulate 1: life spirituality fosters collectivity

The perception that life spirituality is institutionally decentralized is certainly true if by that one means there is no central agency that invokes doctrinal consistency and provides public spaces for ritual observance. However, at another level of analysis, scholars see convergence and homogeneity within the movement itself. Wouter Hanegraaff makes the interesting claim that “*New Age is synonymous with the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less specific movement*” (1996: 17). Indeed, since James R. Lewis proposed a rudimentary but insightful taxonomy emphasizing the key features of New Age (1992: 6–7), its “*lingua franca*” has been rehearsed in almost every scholarly description of it. More recently, Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman have argued that New Age “is remarkably less eclectic and inchoate than is typically assumed” (2006: 202); its perennialist orientation does not

contradict but rather enhances a coherent doctrine of being and well-being (Ibid.: 206).

In assigning a foundation of loosely shared beliefs to life spirituality, scholars effectively show that its so-called fragmentation may not be as inveterate as some social observers presume. Furthermore, Heelas (2006) has demonstrated that the holistic milieu in Kendal is typified by numerous one-on-one and small group interactions that suggest a relational rather than utilitarian style of individualism. These findings are corroborated in my recent research in Kitchener-Waterloo, a community of 300,000 in Ontario, Canada (2007–2008, unpublished). My interviews with 32 ‘spiritual but not religious’ men and women indicates regular involvement in a range of one-on-one therapies, particularly energy healing and alternative medical therapy, as well as numerous spiritually significant group activities such as tai chi, therapeutic-touch healing networks, dance and meditation groups and spiritual circles of between 4 and 6 members. Likewise, my online questionnaire data (n=265) revealed that 79.5% of respondents believed it was at least somewhat important to be in community with like-minded spiritual seekers and nearly 62% have belonged to at least one spiritual group in the past two years. While this data is not conclusive, it supports Heelas’ suggestion that life spirituality does not necessarily lead to social isolation. Yet, fundamentally, the fact life spiritual seekers share a *lingua franca* and meet regularly in groups or one-on-one as the ethnographic literature indicates has done little to reverse the preconception that it is individualistic and socially atomistic. It appears scholars still see traditional religious institutions, i.e. ‘churches’ or congregations, as the only legitimate means of binding adherents and transmitting doctrine and morality.

This bias, however, is directly challenged by social network research, which sees networks as a new social reality, supplanting traditional forms of social organization (Castells 2004; Tindall and Wellman 2001: 266). Generally speaking, network analysis studies the relationships between various parts of the social structure. The sources of social motivation and aggregation are not analyzed in terms of the psychological attributes of actors, but rather as the outcomes of the patterns of relationship in the social system that are seen to both “facilitate and constrain opportunities, behaviors and cognitions” (Tindall and Wellman 2001: 266). Network theory avoids the oversimplified opposition between group membership and social isolation. All groups – even dyads – are seen as networks; variance is merely a function of group density and

interconnectivity (Ibid.: 266). Castells (2004) sees networks as a technologically based social reality that emerged in the 1970s as modes of production and consumption shifted in line with the revolution in information and communication technologies (Ibid.: 15–22). The value of this type of social structure, he argues, is that it is flexible, able to reconfigure itself according to changing environments while keeping goals intact (Ibid.: 6). Although individual nodes may blink in or out of existence, values and/or aims are dispersed through multiple nodes any of which can reproduce its messages; the inclusion or exclusion of any particular node does not disrupt the overall aims and orientation of the entire network giving it stability and durability (Ibid.). Not only can a network bypass blockages to find new connections, it can also recombine elements to meet evolving requirements (Ibid.: 7). The advent of the Internet, new communication technology and media has radically altered the networking power of the cultic milieu. From Castells' perspective at least, networks such as those inherent in life spirituality have unique adaptive advantage that makes them structurally stable. In the absence of a comprehensive network analysis it is analytically premature to consider networks as ill disposed to the sustained transmission, reproduction and mobilization of life-spiritual values, group consensus, and action. For example, a recent collaboration of Oprah Winfrey and Eckhart Tolle to promote the message of his book "The New Earth" through an online lecture series has reached millions.² While scholars and purists may scoff at its populist appeal and commodified form, they cannot deny its effectiveness at transmitting and reproducing the values and ideas of life spirituality. At present, social network analysis is a promising but as yet largely unexplored approach to reconceptualizing the social viability of life spirituality. It may show that life spirituality contributes both directly and indirectly to the promotion of civil society but in ways that traditional scholars of religion and civil society do not recognize.

Counter-postulate 2: life spirituality is economically mobilized

While the absence of institutional coordinates motivates scholars to dismiss life spirituality's inclusion in civil society on what might be called

² http://www.oprah.com/article/oprahsbookclub/anewearth/pkganewearthwebcast/20080130_obc_webcast_marketing.

structural grounds, its economic activities are frequently condemned on moral grounds. As the earlier discussion highlights, analyses of the economic parameters of life spirituality are highly polemicized. Redden appreciates that “conceptualizing the New Age market is not the same as saying New Age is a market and nothing else. A market model is valid [only] at a certain level of analysis (...) it does not explain everything about the New Age (...) only some of its characteristics” (2005: 243). Yet over and over again, its market dynamics are equated with corruption, greed, immorality and rampant consumerism. There are, however, several ways to reconceptualize this.

To begin with, the relationship of the economic sphere to civil society is ambiguous. On the one hand, because neoliberal economic policies have opened a yawning gap between the haves and the have-nots, some civil society theorists see the market – supported by neo-liberal governments – as an institutional behemoth that poses real threats to ordinary citizens and their communities. In this view, the economic sphere is not fundamentally civil; it promotes competition, materialism and self-interest. The more liberal conception of civil society, however, sees the economy as itself a realm of voluntary association. The dynamic of the market does not operate through coercion, but is characterized as a medium of persuasion: a means for individuals to exercise choice and self-expression (Lomasky 2002). While there are elements of truth to both of these conceptualizations, it is necessary to recognize that the ambiguity of the market is inescapable for all actors in civil society – and not just those inspired by life spirituality. For example, governments give money to a range of NGOs and other not-for-profit foundations, associations and organizations that stay afloat through fundraising and other economic activities. The aims of these organizations are not generally discounted simply because they participate very actively in economic activity, which is generally accepted as a part of ‘doing business’. After all, even the most civically minded organization needs to rent space, buy furniture, publish material, make phone calls and so forth. In short, just as associations and organizations that operate in civil society often have financial requirements, life spirituality is ‘kept alive’ by its economic activity. By this measure, life spirituality is not doing anything particularly unusual, let alone unethical.

In fact, some criticism of the commodified nature of life spirituality rest on an analytic error that confuses the exploitation of life-spiritual themes by market actors with the function of life spirituality in the lives of its adherents. Since the 1950s, it has been increasingly common for

businesses, including multinational corporations, to adopt countercultural symbolism to capture a desired market share (Frank 1997). As a child of the counterculture, life spiritual themes are popular not only because they hint at alternative lifestyles but also because they are non-exclusive and resonate with the culture of subjective wellbeing that is so pronounced in our individualistic society. It is not uncommon these days to see life-spiritual motifs being used to sell a variety of secular goods and services including spa services, healthcare products and even bicycles and condominiums. Yet the appropriation of life spiritual themes by big business for mass marketing campaigns should not be equated with the types of economic activities that merely move goods and services through grassroots life-spiritual networks. It is doubtful that corporate marketing ploys are created by or for life spiritual seekers specifically. In this regard, it is crucially important to differentiate between the market activities of life spirituality in its religious mode and the broader, late-modern impulse to self-expression, exploration and enhancement, an impulse that includes consumerism.

Heelas in particular rejects the 'blanket reduction' of life spirituality to consumption as critically unfounded (Heelas 2008: 168; 202) because it assumes the motivations behind the purchase of life spiritual products and services are typically superficial and self-indulgent (Ibid.: 137), and that practitioners have sold out on true spirituality for profit (Ibid.: 199). While he admits that, because of its market dimensions, New Age can sometimes serve as "spirituality of and for consumer culture, especially in subjective wellbeing mode," (Ibid.: 90), he thinks that much depends of "what (..) purchasing is *for*." Consumption conveys meanings, which have "purposes, intentions, commitments, ends; meanings which can turn the raw act [of consumption] into any number of forms of significance" (Ibid.: 188). Many life spiritual seekers use market provisions to overcome "significant personal difficulties or challenges" (Ibid.: 142) and to imbue life with existential meaning. Citing the case of "Julie," who used a spiritually infused art therapy practice to cope with a cancer diagnosis (Ibid.: 139), Heelas argues, correctly I think, that it is meaningless to speak of her pursuit of art therapy as consumptive capitalism. Only 7.6% of those interviewed in the Kendal project consider their mind-body-spirit activities as a form of pampering (2008: 110), strongly suggesting that provisions purchased as a means of participating in life spirituality are not primarily self-indulgent. Instead, Heelas interprets the purchasing activity of life spiritual seekers as a means of making contact with the spiritual dimensions of life, and improving

self-care so that one can bring health, joy and wellbeing to others as well (Ibid.: 154–155).

While critics like to dismiss New Age provisions and services as ‘consumer garbage’, Heelas’ research underscores the reality that, in fact, little research investigates the complex relationship between life spiritual values and market activities. Further research will need to specifically assess the degree to which spiritual goods and services are bought for the thrill of acquisition versus spiritual deepening before any reliable conclusions can be reached. Overall, the market operations of New Age spiritualities mobilize its message in the form of goods and services and operate as an important institutional bulwark against dissolution and insignificance. In other words, the market enables life spirituality to express itself in civil society just as it allows churches, labor unions, feminist organizations, and other groups to do so.

Concluding remarks

If as Durkheim famously observed “social life is wholly a moral phenomenon” the idea that life spirituality does not contribute to civil society has reaching implications. Critiques of life spirituality revolve around the danger that individualism and consumerism pose for our communities – fears expressed explicitly in the communitarian view of civil society. I have argued that the civil society discourse operates as an implicit theoretical axiom whereby life spirituality is configured as socially insignificant, or worse, socially corrosive because it lacks traditional institutional structures and is mobilized through the economy – a social sphere that is perceived as a potentially threatening juggernaut, especially in its neoliberal form. This should not be taken to mean that scholars deliberately or thoughtfully engage the concept of civil society as part of their theorizing about New Age or life spirituality. What is striking in fact is that the concept of civil society is rarely mentioned let alone systematically analyzed. My objective has been to reveal how the assumption that life spirituality does not contribute to civil society is open to theoretical reframing. Specifically, I have argued that life spirituality shares a sufficiently common spiritual philosophy, or *lingua franca*, that makes it possible for life spiritual seekers to communicate and interact in mutually agreeable ways. Furthermore, these religiously unaffiliated spiritual seekers engage one-on-one or in small groups and maintain a collective consciousness through increasingly sophisticated

networks, which are mobilized both through economic structures and communications media such as the Internet. For this reason, it is reasonable to suggest that life spirituality possesses an identifiable institutional base, albeit a highly untraditional one. It may be pragmatic for scholars of new religious movements to accept that at some level, life spirituality is an inevitable feature of modern society; it is ambiguous, but this ambiguity will never be overcome as long as we rely uncritically on authoritative discourses infused as they are with caricatures and hasty moral judgments. Ultimately, however, the only way to verify the claims articulated in this paper is through empirical research.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SEEING INVISIBLE RELIGION

RELIGION AS A SOCIETAL CONVERSATION ABOUT TRANSCENDENT MEANING¹

Kelly Besecke

Introduction: religious conversation in the United States

Barnes and Noble's 2003 Bestsellers list included "The Five People You Meet in Heaven"; "The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?"; "Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life"; "What Should I Do with My Life?: The True Story of People Who Answered the Ultimate Question"; "The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment"; "Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson"; and "The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom". In stores across the country, people pick up books like these from tables colorfully labeled "Spiritual Matters." Interested readers then gather together to discuss these books' ideas; they meet in book clubs with names like "Spiritual Pathways," "Spirituality and Life," "Wisdom Tea," "Seekers," "Reviewing Religion," "Conscious Living," "The Inspired View," and "Reflections."

Authors of contemporary wisdom books travel around the country giving talks and leading workshops; their talks have titles like "Everyday Enlightenment," "The Spiritual Adventure: Using Wisdom Traditions for a Meaningful Life," "Bringing Your Soul to Work," "The Heart of Compassion: Healing and the Sacred," "Going on Being: Buddhism and

¹ This chapter, originally published in *Sociological Theory* 23:2, owes a great deal to the influence of a group of colleagues during my time at the University of Wisconsin, whom I came to think of as "the democracy dudes"; affectionately and respectfully, it is dedicated to them: Paul Lichterman, Nina Eliasoph, Rebecca Krantz, Susan Munkres, Lyn Macgregor, and Jorge Cadena-Roa. Thanks also to Rachel Dwyer, John Evans, Phil Gorski, and Greta Krippner for reviewing early drafts of the article. Special thanks to Thomas Luckmann for reading the article and providing me with several of his more recent conference papers.

the Way of Change,” and “Improving Your Life Using the Wisdom of the Ages.”

The magazine rack at the local grocery store displays a *Life* magazine cover that shouts “WHEN YOU THINK OF **GOD**, WHAT DO YOU SEE?”; a “Newsweek” cover story called “God and the Brain: How We’re Wired for Spirituality”; a ‘Ladies Home Journal’ that allows readers to “Test Your Spiritual I.Q.”; a TV Guide with a cover story on a miniseries called “Jesus”; a “Shape” magazine that recommends, in a story called “Head Trips,” that readers take “spiritual vacations” to “learn to integrate the sacred into everyday life.” Contemporary folk singers tote their guitars and their voices to crowded coffeehouses and colleges across the country, singing songs with lyrics like these:

God is Spirit / Spirit is everything / even the Devil

Hell is fear / what to do? / You’re not in it / it’s in you / even the Devil / and God

Good and Bad / are empty names / opposites are all the same / even the Devil / and God

Joy and pain / are Siamese twins / sharing a brain

Body is Spirit / Spirit is everything / even the Devil.²

The growing societal conversation about what the Barnes & Noble people call “spiritual matters” has begun to capture the attention of sociologists of religion. Robert Wuthnow describes the popularity of this nonspecific, nonchurch religion as a historical shift in Americans’ relationships to the sacred, toward a “spirituality of seeking” (1998: 3). Wade Clark Roof describes a similar shift, from belief-oriented religion to an attitude of religious quest, facilitated by an expanding “spiritual marketplace” marked by new “suppliers” of religious meaning (1999). These two works offer rich interpretations of an emergent American religious culture; they paint a conceptual picture of the religious landscape as it appears to the individual seeker-of-meaning. However, as their use of the word “spirituality” signals, these authors have a primary interest in individuals. They look at contemporary American religious culture through a conceptual and methodological lens that highlights individuals’ relationships to religious meaning, individuals’ relationships to religious

² Lyrics to “Even the Devil is God”, Stuart Davis, *Bright Apocalypse*, Dharmapop records, 1999.

institutions, and individuals' relationships to religious traditions. Because of this, the emergent religious culture they depict takes on a distinctly individualistic cast.

For example: both authors note the crescendo of popular books about spirituality, religion, myth, and the soul. Their minds on what this means for individual spirituality, they conclude, rightly, that individuals in the contemporary United States have direct access to a variety of religious meaning systems, and that individual authority and discernment, instead of institutional or ecclesiastical authority, now play a central role in defining religious meanings.

Other sociologists have commented on what they saw as religious individualism or religious privatization in modern times (e.g., Berger 1967; Bellah et al. 1985; Tamney 1992; Yamane 1992). These scholars have looked at the contemporary religious scene and have seen a waning of emphasis on religious institutions – their boundaries, traditions, communities, and authorities – and a waxing of this more nonspecific, reflexive religious sensibility that seems to either circumvent or transcend the boundaries of traditional religious institutions. This noninstitutional religion goes by the name of “spirituality” and relies on individual discernment, reflection, and authority; for this reason, such extra-institutional religion has often been conceptualized as “individualism.” Indeed, for the past fifteen years, the famous “Sheila” in “Habits of the Heart”, has served as a kind of scholarly totem for this phenomenon.

What I want to point out here is something this institutional-individual analytic dualism misses. Simply: *Americans are talking with each other about religious meaning*. We can look at the proliferation of books (lectures, workshops, magazines, songs) about spirituality through our institutional-individual lens, and see an indicator of Americans' increasing ability to buy their own meaning from a range of new “suppliers”; this is what Roof did, hence his emphasis on an expanding spiritual marketplace. But we can also look at such phenomena through a different lens, one that highlights, instead of individuals and institutions, the important social role of interaction and communication. Seen through this “communicative” lens, the “spiritual matters” section of the Barnes and Noble looks less like individualism in a narrow sense, and more like *American society talking to itself about meaning*. This kind of religious behavior – this religion that is practiced in public and in interaction, but outside of traditional religious institutions – offers a window into a dimension of religion that the “individualism” lens obscures.

Specifically, this kind of religious behavior points to religion as a kind of *conversation*. Conventionally, sociologists conceptualize religion along two dimensions: the institutional, and the individual; the church, sect, or cult, and the believer, member, or seeker. I am proposing a third way of conceptualizing religion, one that parallels institution and individual, but that instead emphasizes the important role of communication. Specifically, religion in the modern world is well understood not only as a kind of social institution, and not only as an individualized meaning system, but also as *a societal conversation about transcendent meanings*.

Transcendent meanings – references to a context for life that exists on a plane beyond (“transcending”) apparent reality – have been described by much of our definitional literature as the heart of religion (Bellah 1970; Berger 1969; Geertz 1973; Luckmann 1967; Wuthnow 1981). Like other meanings, transcendent meanings are products of interaction and communication; they do not emerge wholesale inside people’s heads, nor are they the exclusive province of religious institutions. Approaching religion as a societal conversation about transcendent meanings allows us to grasp the social significance of religious communication, wherever it occurs. Phenomena like “Wisdom Tea” book discussion groups are difficult to see, let alone to understand, with a concept of religion that focuses only on religious institutions and religious individuals. By recognizing communication about transcendent meanings as a primary dimension of religion, we can begin to comprehend the “religion” that takes place in otherwise “secular” settings like bookstores, lecture halls, movie theatres, and cafes. By analytically distinguishing communication from institution, this concept also offers a new way of approaching communication that does take place within religious institutions; it allows us to recognize this communication as an important piece of a larger societal conversation. At a theoretical level, a definition of religion that recognizes the social significance of communication can contribute to our understanding of religious modernity by adding dimension to the debate about secularization and by allowing us to rethink interpretations of modern religion as “privatized.”

Plan of the chapter

An important platform for my conceptual discussion will be Thomas Luckmann’s 1967 book, “The Invisible Religion”. Luckmann’s theory of religious transformation highlights the important role of

noninstitutional religion in late modernity. His essay begins with a critique of contemporary sociology's habit of identifying religion with church; he goes on to offer a theory of religious transformation in recent times from institutional specialization to a more diffuse system of religious meaning. Since this article is an attempt to articulate a concept of religion that is analytically independent of specialized social institutions, Luckmann's analysis is an apt place to begin. I will argue, however, that Luckmann's analysis of the religious transformation he outlines is limited by his assumption that *noninstitutional* religion is equivalent to *private* religion. Luckmann understood his theory of religious transformation to be a theory of religious privatization, and indeed that is how it has usually been read. I argue instead that the transformation Luckmann theorizes isn't best described as privatization. Within his book, there are the seeds – sprouts, even – of a theory that can grasp the noninstitutional-but-public kind of religion whose social significance this chapter is trying to understand.

Secondly, I argue that these hidden sprouts in Luckmann are illuminated – or, to continue the metaphor, brought to fruition – by contemporary work in theory and culture that highlights the social power of communication. This body of work describes communication as constitutive of a third sphere of society, neither institutional nor individual, but cultural. This work enables a conceptualization of communication as a third analytic dimension of religion that interpenetrates religion's institutional and individual dimensions.

Finally, I draw on original research to point out the analytical and theoretical usefulness of recognizing this *communicative* dimension of religion. Specifically, I show how the kinds of phenomena described at the beginning of this chapter are more clearly understood with a concept of religion that highlights communication. I then suggest that this reconceptualization of religion can speak to our theoretical understanding of religious modernity.

Invisible religion

A central argument in Thomas Luckmann's thin book "The Invisible Religion" is that *religion* is not the same as *church*. Luckmann charged contemporary sociologists of religion with identifying religion as a concept with a uniquely Western institutional expression of Judaism and Christianity. Further, Luckmann argued that institutional specialization

itself is a unique social form of religion and that the religion concept should be understood much more generally. “The identification of church and religion,” according to Luckmann, “fits into the dominant view of sociology as the science of social institutions – the latter term understood narrowly” (1967: 22). Luckmann’s own theory, by contrast, highlights the primary role of *noninstitutional* religion in modern societies.

In “The Invisible Religion”, Luckmann has two overarching concerns, both stemming from his goal of analytically separating religion from church. First, he offers a definition of religion that releases it from identification with any particular social form. Religion, for Luckmann, is not primarily a differentiated social institution. Rather, religion is primarily a meaning system.³ This separation of religion from its social forms opens up for empirical and theoretical inquiry the question: if religion is a meaning system and not a social institution, what social forms has it taken? What social relationships have mediated people’s engagement with this symbolic system? Answering this question is Luckmann’s second concern: he offers a history, a story of religious transformation, culminating in a theory of religious modernity.

I want to take up Luckmann’s two big topics separately. Luckmann’s definition of religion provides the groundwork for my argument about religion as a kind of communication; first, then, I want to summarize this definition. In making this summary, I am drawing upon my background as a cultural sociologist; I believe this cultural perspective draws to the forefront some useful implications of Luckmann’s definition. Second, Luckmann described his theory of religious transformation as a theory of privatization. I look closely at his and other scholars’ discussions of privatized religion and ultimately argue that privatization is not the best interpretation of the religious transformation Luckmann has theorized.

Religion is cultural through and through

Luckmann’s definition of religion is a distinctly cultural one. That statement is distinctly banal: on the one hand, everyone knows that religion is a cultural phenomenon; on the other hand, no one knows just what

³ Luckmann’s emphasis on meanings as central to religion accords with much of our definitional literature – much of which appeared at exactly the same time as “The Invisible Religion”: Bellah 1970; Berger 1969; Geertz [1966]1973; see also Wuthnow 1981.

any given author might mean by the word *culture*. In this case, I mean a couple of things by it. First, I mean that Luckmann's assessment of what religion is primarily about – what it most centrally *is* – is *meaning*. Specifically, religion is a system of *transcendent* meanings; meanings that point people to a context that transcends everyday life. Luckmann calls these meanings “symbolic universes”:

The familiar forms of religion known to us as tribal religion, ancestor cult, church, sect, and so forth are specific historical institutionalizations of symbolic universes. Symbolic universes are socially objectivated systems of meaning that refer, on the one hand, to the world of everyday life and point, on the other hand, to a world that is experienced as transcending everyday life (1967: 43).

What religion most centrally is, then, is not an organization or a social form or a social relationship; what religion most centrally is, is a system of symbols that meets people in the terms of their everyday life and points them to a realm of significance that goes beyond – “transcends” – those terms. Internally, then, religion is cultural in that religion is meaning.

In Luckmann's definition, religion is also cultural “externally”; that is, religion exists in the social world in the way that culture exists in the social world. To get at this idea, it's best to think visually. For Luckmann, culture consists of layered sets of meanings arranged in a nested hierarchy of significance, complexity, and abstraction. At bottom, Maslow-like, are meanings we need to get along at a most fundamental level; for example, the simple categories we use to order the world around us – to use his examples,⁴ “trees, rocks, dogs, walking, running, eating, green, round, etc., etc.” A little higher up, we find higher levels of abstraction: “maize does not grow where aloe grows; pork is inferior meat; there should be no marriage between first-degree cousins; if invited for dinner take flowers to the lady of the house.” Continuing our journey up the culture hierarchy, we pause at “early to bed and early to rise keeps a man healthy, wealthy and wise; a true warrior does not shrink from pain; and a lady does not smoke in public,” climb up to “he lived and died a man,” and arrive, near the top of our hierarchy of meanings, at “a just social order.”

⁴ I use his examples throughout this paragraph, not only for clarity and accuracy, but also because I couldn't do better for entertainment value. All are from page 57 of “The Invisible Religion”.

For Luckmann, religion is the topmost layer of this hierarchy of meanings that constitutes a society's culture. This layer is made up of meanings that transcend everyday life; it consists of symbols like God, Nirvana, Tao, Brahman, Allah, Christ, and Unity Consciousness. These symbols, these meanings, Luckmann calls "the sacred cosmos" (1967: 61).

This understanding of religion as a topmost layer of culture has a couple of important implications. First, religious meanings can't really be isolated from the rest of the meanings that make up a society's culture. Religion is a part of culture, because religious meanings – God, Nirvana, and so forth – and "secular" meanings are made up of the same stuff. Religious meanings and other meanings are in the same general category "meaning" – they're all symbolic representations, they're all culture. Religious meanings are a type of meaning; if culture is shared meanings and practices, then religion is shared meanings and practices that point people to a transcendent reality. In this sense, religion is to culture as Meaning is to meaning.

A second implication of religion's cultural nature is what Luckmann calls its "objectivated" status. As he puts it, "The sacred cosmos forms part of the objective social reality without requiring a distinct and specialized institutional basis" (1967: 61). In other words, as cultural phenomena, religious meanings – transcendent meanings, symbolic universes – are by nature *public, collectively created, shared* phenomena. Religious meanings are part of the objective social reality. To talk about religious meaning is not to talk about a psychological phenomenon; like culture, religion is public; it is not located exclusively inside people's psyches. This is important: to say that religion provides meaning is again to say something that everyone already knows. But religious meaning is generally addressed as an individual, psychological phenomenon: individuals need to find personal meaning, individuals need to feel like their lives are meaningful. By describing religious meanings as "objectivated," Luckmann opens the way to understanding meaning as a public phenomenon; meaning as something that is not just for individuals, but for societies. A society's life can be meaningful. A society can be permeated by meaning, or it can appear flat, grey, "disenchanted." A society can locate itself within a context of transcendent meanings, or it can limit itself to the mundane. References to possible transcendent meanings can permeate social life, or they can be absent from social life – or, squeezed to the margins, they can appear in the flattened, dead, distorted, two-dimensional form of dogmatic pronouncements.

So religious meaning is not just an individual phenomenon; neither is it just an institutional phenomenon. Meaning is public even without the institutional house provided by church. Religion exists in the social world as culture exists in the social world – via shared meanings and practices. Reducing religion to its institutional expressions (church, sect, cult) is analogous to reducing culture to media, to movies, to the arts, to the educational system. Clearly, there are institutions that specialize in the dealing of culture (meanings), but culture exists apart from these institutions.⁵ Likewise, church, sect, and cult are institutions that specialize in transcendent meanings, but transcendent meanings exist apart from these institutions – as culture exists – in our actions, interactions, and communications. Transcendent meanings permeate society in the same way that other meanings permeate society; religion is socially present in the same way that culture is socially present.

Religion in modern societies: privatization?

Having defined religion as a meaning system rather than a social institution, Luckmann's second overarching concern is to identify the varying social forms that have historically mediated people's engagement with this meaning system, with a special eye toward identifying the social forms of religion emergent in modern societies. He offers a history that accords with the essentials of the modernization stories offered by sociology's great theorists of social transformation – Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, and Habermas. The story is a familiar one: in primary societies, social life was comparatively undifferentiated; what today are separate social institutions – the family, education, the political system, the economic system, the religion – were all coterminous. The symbolic universe permeated the society, and people engaged with it in everything they did; it was part of everything. The equivalent today would be if the office and the school and the voting booth all reinforced the same general meaning system, the same symbolic universe – or in the vernacular, the same religious sensibility, the same cosmology. Phase two is differentiation. Each of these social institutions differentiates, and we get *The Economy and Politics* and *The Family and Religion* as separate social

⁵ Most contemporary work in cultural sociology addresses culture as shared meanings and practices that underlie all aspects of social life. See for example Alexander 2003; Edles 2002; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Smith 1998; Spillman 2002; Swidler 2001.

institutions. It is this phase in which “religion” becomes identified with “church” in the popular mind.

So far, this is more or less the same master narrative of differentiation that we find in other theories of social transformation. It is phase three, contemporary times, where differences among theorists become tangible; Luckmann is focused in on religious transformation in particular, rather than societal modernization in general. In his phase three, differentiation causes the failure of religious institutions from the point of view of individuals. The symbolic universe offered by the church fails to provide an integrating meaning system for an increasingly differentiated society; religious interpretations are no longer reinforced outside the religious sphere. The result is a transformation of the social form of religion; institutional specialization of religion wanes (1967: 87), and religion begins to take on a different kind of social presence. Luckmann describes it this way:

The social form of religion emerging in modern industrial societies is characterized by the direct accessibility of an assortment of religious representations to potential consumers. The sacred cosmos is mediated neither through a specialized domain of religious institutions nor through other primary public institutions (1967: 103).

In contrast to both primary societies and early modern societies, religious meanings in late modernity are directly accessible to people, unmediated either by modernity’s primary social institutions of economy and state, or by the specialized institution of the church.

Up to this point, I am happy with Luckmann. At this point, it becomes important to pay close attention to the semantics of his argument about religion in late modernity. He continues:

It is the direct accessibility of the sacred cosmos, more precisely, of an assortment of religious themes, which makes religion today essentially a phenomenon of the ‘private sphere.’ The emerging social form of religion thus differs significantly from older social forms of religion which were characterized either by the diffusion of the sacred cosmos through the institutional structure of society or through institutional specialization of religion (1967: 103).

Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as *privatized* is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one.⁶ Indeed, *The Invisible*

⁶ A very significant exception is Jose Casanova, in “Public Religions in the Modern World”, and a new wave of studies of religion and the public sphere. These studies are

Religion is often read as primarily a theory of religion privatization, rather than more generally as a theory of religious transformation. This excerpt, however, suggests that the diagnosis of “privatization” is premature, because this diagnosis is based on an identification of *public* with *institutional*. It is the direct accessibility of transcendent meanings to people, without the mediation of a) primary social institutions, by which he means economic or political, or b) specialized religious institutions, that makes contemporary religion “private” in Luckmann’s eyes. “Private,” then, is really a catch-all word for everything that falls outside of these institutions.⁷

Although the phrase “religious privatization” means different things for different scholars, Luckmann’s implicit definition still seems to hold for a majority of scholars who have written on the issue.⁸ For Luckmann, public religion is religion that is mediated either through political or economic institutions, or else through specialized religious institutions (1967: 103). In current discussions of religious privatization, some scholars emphasize the former, some the latter. For the former group, public religion is religion that influences a society’s political or economic life. Private religion, in this view, is religion that is located within individual psyches, in close relationships, or in leisure time, “leisure” presumably acting as a catch-all category for all social activities that are neither economic nor political. In this view, then, what counts as public is politics and paid work; everything else is private (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Berger 1967; Tamney 1992).

The other major perspective on public versus private religion focuses on the interpretive authority sustained by religious organizations and their elites. For these scholars, religious privatization is more or less equivalent to religious individualism; they equate public religion with

all primarily concerned with the political presence and democratic potential offered by religious institutions; none of them address the public presence of religious *meaning*, which is the primary concern of “The Invisible Religion” and of this chapter.

⁷ Since the 1960s, Luckmann’s work has developed in a line that resonates with the communication-centered concept of religion I offer here, but that still holds to his 1966 thesis that modern religion is privatized. In an excellent 1993 conference paper, Luckmann argues that the most significant dimensions of modern morality are to be found in processes of moral communication, rather than in specifically moral institutions. He maintains, however, the assumption that noninstitutionalized communication is necessarily *private*, as well as his association of “public” with religious, and especially economic and political *institutions*. See also Luckmann (1995, 1996, 1998) and Berger and Luckmann (1995).

⁸ See Casanova (1994) and Dobbelaere (1999) for great analyses of the several ways scholars with varying theoretical agendas use *public* and *private*.

organized religion and describe private religion in terms of individuals' independence from such organizations (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Roberts 1990; Yamane 1997). For many of these scholars, the shift in the locus of interpretive authority from churches to individuals is presented as an indicator of religion's declining social significance.

The problem with these characterizations of contemporary religion is not a "wrong" understanding of public and private.⁹ As Casanova and Dobbelaere have noted, public and private are not the most helpful concepts these days anyway; arguing over their meaning seems beside the point. Rather, the problem is an important assumption that seems to go along with the designation "private." For many scholars, "private" seems to be a shorthand for "socially inconsequential." When these scholars say that religion in contemporary society is privatized, they mean that religion may influence individuals, but it does not have direct consequence for the character of society. So, Bellah and colleagues describe privatization as a situation in which "the primary contribution of religion to society is through the character and conduct of citizens" (1985: 225). For Donald Capps, privatization means that "religion exerts less influence on the social order but retains its influence on personal life" (1985: 242). And Bryan Wilson (1982, 1985) describes privatized religion in haven-in-a-heartless-world terms; privatized religion may do psychological good for individuals living in a hostile social system, but it is "inconsequential" for the social system itself (1985: 20). The source of the latter two statements is Phillip Hammond's collection, "The Sacred in a Secular Age"; this book's organization tells the story: a section called "Private Life and the Sacred" contains essays on psychology, mysticism, and healing. To speak of religion as "privatized," then, seems to be to speak of religion as almost an exclusively psychological phenomenon, with very limited and indirect social consequence.

This implicit location of private religion inside the psyche belies the social nature of much of the religious phenomena that have been labeled private. Indeed, much of the religion that has been interpreted as privatized religion or religious individualism is remarkably "public" in the

⁹ Both of these interpretations of public and private have been challenged, however. The "public = politics and economics" version has been challenged most notably by feminist scholars, including especially Nancy Fraser (1989). Paul Lichterman (1996) offers a critique of the second version's assumption that individualized commitments are necessarily socially precarious.

more common-sense definition of the word—it takes place in public places (cafes, bookstores, lecture halls, discussion groups) that are open to members of the public and available for public scrutiny. Perhaps, then, these religious phenomena are both more social and more socially consequential than we've recognized. I want to put forth exactly this argument. The argument in brief goes like this: 1. "Public" and "private," as they are used in the sociology of religion, do not cover the field of religious activity in modern societies; a conceptual gap exists between them. 2. This gap is filled by a recognition of communication as a category that is analytically autonomous from individual and institution. 3. We know, from work done elsewhere in sociology, that communication is socially powerful. 4. Sociologists of religion are not fully recognizing the analytic autonomy or the social power of communication. 5. Finally, I offer a communicative definition of religion that will allow us to take full advantage of the communication category.

When Luckmann titled the English version of his book "The Invisible Religion", he was probably thinking that it's privatization that makes religion "invisible." Ernst Troeltsch likely meant something similar when he described mysticism as "[t]he secret religion of the educated classes" (1931: 794). What is it that makes noninstitutionalized religion appear so hidden to social scientists?¹⁰ My research suggests that it's not that it's all really taking place "in private" – inside people's heads, or in backstage conversations with intimate friends and family members. Perhaps the problem is partly methodological; it's difficult to locate, for study, social phenomena you can't look up in the yellow pages. But more to my point here, I think we have some conceptual problems; we lack a category for the social-but-not-institutional. That is, until the cultural turn of the last thirty years and the new emphasis on talk – to which I now turn.

Studying the invisible: the social power of communication

It should be clear, at this point, that our usage of public and private leaves an enormous gap in our ability to conceptualize religious reality.

¹⁰ An early reader of this chapter suggested another possible answer to this question: Perhaps it is religious pluralism that sociologists find so distracting; perhaps we have been assuming that religion's social power hinges on consensus, on its manifestation in the form of a relatively homogeneous "sacred canopy" that envelops a whole society. This is a fascinating topic in itself, and one which deserves its own essay. My intuitive response

If private religion is located primarily inside people's psyches, and public religion is that which engages politics or economics, or else takes place in churches, then we lack a category for everything else. This gap between private and public, individual and institutional, has been noticed elsewhere in sociology, most significantly by democratic theorists, who call the analogous "everything else" in the political world "civil society" or "the social" or "the public sphere." Casanova suggests that we cannot fully understand modern culture unless we recognize the importance of this third sphere: "The novelty of modernity derives precisely from the emergence of an amorphously complex, yet autonomous sphere, 'civil society' or 'the social', which stands 'between public and private' proper, yet has expansionist tendencies aiming to penetrate and absorb both" (1994: 42). Since religious privatization has been understood to define religious modernity, and since I've suggested that this is a misreading of much of the reality of religious modernity, it makes sense to examine the ways that these scholars have characterized social phenomena that lie between public and private.

Most significantly, scholars concerned with this third sphere of society consider it to be defined by *communication*.¹¹ Nancy Fraser, for example, describes the social as "a relatively new societal arena... noncoinciden[tal] with the familiarized institutional spaces of family and official economy" and defines it as "a site of discourse about people's needs" (1989: 156). Similarly, Nina Eliasoph says the public sphere "is not just a closed, hierarchical workplace and not just family but is a third setting for conversation" about issues of common concern (2003: 11). Craig Calhoun, following Habermas, conceives of the public sphere as a

is to turn to Habermas and democracy theory, as I do below: We recognize diversity of opinion as essential to a powerful democracy; why should such diversity necessarily threaten the power of religion in a democratic society? This question of pluralism has been taken up from a different vantage point in "competitive marketing" theories of religious modernity (see, e.g., Finke and Stark 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1992; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke, Guest and Stark 1996).

¹¹ These scholars also highlight the importance of social spaces for this communication to take place. This dimension of public sphere theory also applies to the argument I am making about religious communication, thus the importance of the public meeting spaces in which this kind of communication occurs. Luckmann calls these spaces "secondary institutions"; in "The Invisible Religion", they are a theoretical aside in his overall argument about privatization. For the sake of clarity, I do not develop this idea here; instead I want to forefront the concept of communication itself. Readers should keep in mind, however, that cultural development requires public space; the kind of communication that nurtures a reflexive culture requires arenas for open conversation. This applies not only to political culture, but also to religious culture. See Luckmann (1998).

third realm mediating between state and citizen; he describes it as “a product of communicative action” and urges readers to “think of the public sphere as involving a field of discursive connections” (1992: 32, 37). Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato describe civil society as centered upon “the public spheres of societal communication and voluntary association” (1992: 411). In all of these formulations, communication among members of a society about a topic – collective interests, the common good, a just society – is recognized as fundamental to the social realisation of that topic. As Nicholas Garnham says, “I take it as axiomatic that some version of communicative action lies at the heart of both the theory and practice of democracy” (1992: 364).

Democratic theorists are drawing on a long tradition, beginning with Tocqueville, that recognizes the importance of communication to a vibrant democracy. Communication’s social power is not, however, limited to the political arena. Jurgen Habermas, drawing on Mead, points out that communication is fundamental to social life; he describes language and culture as taking “a certain transcendental status” in relation to the rest of the social world (1987[1981]: 124). Habermas’ theory of society accords communication a pivotal role: the life world, as he defines it, is constituted, sustained, and reproduced by communicative action. The many acts of communication taking place in a society at any given time constitute a kind of conversation that acts as an ongoing collective definition of our societal situation. And, according to Habermas, communication is of special social significance in modernity; as differentiation progresses, the social world requires ever-greater acts of interpretive and communicative achievement in order to be livable. Differentiation produces a state in which “the renewal of traditions depends more and more on individuals’ readiness to criticize and their ability to innovate.” The renewal of the life world in modernity depends upon “the cooperative interpretation processes of participants themselves” (1987[1981]: 146).

Outside the realm of high theory, the social consequence of communication has been recognized most explicitly by cultural sociologists. These scholars argue that communication determines a culture’s capacities; communication enables and constrains what is considered to be possible and legitimate and real. The authors of “Habits of the Heart”, for example, postulate that the social reality of Americans’ commitments hinges in part on the ways our culture provides for talking about those commitments. They argue that the languages of commitment that Americans have available to them influence the quality of social

commitment and community that American society can sustain. Anthropologists have long described language as the essence of culture; the authors of 'Habits' extend that formulation: "Cultures," they say, "are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants" (1985: 27). Robert Wuthnow (1991) adds to this viewpoint in his study of compassion in America; he argues that language is what makes compassion culturally possible; if we can't talk about it, we can't conceive of it as a social possibility.¹²

Indeed, Wuthnow has done more than anyone else to bring an understanding of the social power of communication into the sociology of religion. Wuthnow speaks of communication much as the democratic theorists do; he considers it to be constitutive of a third realm between private and public, individual and institution: "Religious discourse lies at the intersection of the individual and the community," he says, and "[r]eligion is institutionalized not only in organizations and individuals, but also in patterns of speech" (1992: 48, 50). Despite this insight, however, Wuthnow's conceptualization of religious communication is confined by his allegiance to the individual/institutional model of religion. To illustrate his argument about the powerful role of religious discourse, he draws on examples from the standard religion-is-church paradigm: sociologists should examine the content of sermons, he suggests; we should pay attention to newspaper stories about religious leaders; we should analyze conversations in which one person tries to convert another to a particular religion. Similarly, empirical studies of religious communication have focused almost exclusively on communication that takes place in church, in seminary, or in interviews with individuals who identify as members of a particular church (e.g., Bouma and Clyne 1995; Carroll and Marler 1995; Lukenbill 1998; Wittberg 1997; Wood 1999; Wuthnow 1994, Wuthnow ed. 1994).

To fully gain from recent insights into the social power of communication, it is necessary to go beyond the institutional/individual dichotomy. At an empirical level, we cannot fully grasp the breadth of religious communication that takes place in nonchurch settings if we only recognize as "religious" communication affiliated with particular religious organizations. At a social theoretical level, we cannot articulate the

¹² This understanding of language as constitutive of social reality will resonate not only with cultural sociologists and sociologists of knowledge, but also with George Orwell fans who remember the dire implications of "newspeak" in "1984". Or, a colleague points out, with fans of Wittgenstein, who said, "The limit of our language is the limit of our world."

significance of these phenomena *for society* if we only recognize them as examples of privatized, individualized religion.

Instead, I argue, we should approach these phenomena with a new concept of religion. This new concept of religion begins with Luckmann's definition of religion as a layer of transcendent meanings diffused throughout a culture. This definition is enhanced by democratic theorists' insight that communication constitutes a third analytic sphere between the individual and the institutional and cultural sociologists' understanding of culture as a socially powerful conversation. Combining these two insights, we arrive at an understanding of religious culture as *a societal conversation about transcendent meanings*. By emancipating it from an identification with church, this definition places religious communication alongside individual and institution as a third analytic dimension of religion. In doing so, this definition allows us to grasp the social consequence of religious communication that the "private" label obscures. If communication makes things socially real, legitimate, and possible, then communication about transcendent meanings – wherever it takes place – is consequential for the social reality, legitimacy, and possibility of the transcendent – or, to put it another way, communication is what makes God socially real.

To put the argument another way, it makes sense to rethink where we locate religion – that is, not just in churches and other organizations and not just in the private sphere of the individual psyche, the family, or even close relationships. Religion lies in communication, in conversation. Religion understood institutionally looks like a church, sect, or cult; religion looked at individually looks like psychological orientations and the occasional belief. Looked at culturally, religion looks like a *conversation* – a societal conversation about transcendent meanings.

What does this all mean? The empirical, analytical, and theoretical usefulness of the definition

Definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either 'true' or 'false,' only more useful or less so. (Peter Berger 1967: 175).

Up to now, I have been arguing for the logic of a definition of religion that accounts for its cultural, communicative dimension. Now, I want to make this argument more concrete by addressing the sociological usefulness of the concept. The discussion so far raises three important questions: 1. What am I talking about? What does this phenomenon,

a “societal conversation about transcendent meanings,” look like empirically? 2. What does this reconceptualization of religion get us, analytically? How does it help us to better understand specific empirical phenomena? 3. What does this reconceptualization of religion get us theoretically? Can it enrich our understanding of religious modernity? To conclude this article, I will answer questions 1 and 2 together, using some of my own fieldwork, and then I’ll address question 3.

Empirical analysis: interpreting “The Mystic Heart”¹³

On a hot Sunday in August, fifty people have gathered in the suburban living room of Linda and Jeff Anderson for an event called “The Mystic Heart.” The Andersons have invited Peter, a Christian monk, and Chris, a professor of religious studies at a nearby college, to speak and lead discussion on the topic of mysticism. Some members of the audience are friends or students of one or the other speaker, some are friends and neighbors of the Andersons, some attend church with the Andersons, some attend an adult education centre where both Peter and Chris have taught, and some were drawn by word of mouth. After the two men speak for a while, a question-answer period begins:

Chris: A couple semesters ago, I had three women from India in one of my classes. We got to the point in the semester, where on the syllabus for that week, the topic I had listed was “The God Problem.” And so I would say in class, okay, next week we’ll talk about the God problem, or this set of readings deals with the God problem. And every time I said that, this set of Indian women, ordinarily very quiet and polite, would giggle. Finally I asked them, what is this, what’s funny about the God problem? And they looked at each other and giggled, and finally one of them said, “I see the sun on the sand; I might doubt whether the sand is the source of light, but I don’t doubt the sun.” God is obvious to Indians. They don’t have this problem of does God exist.

Stacey: In my New Age group, there’s the idea that regional consciousness creates everything. I’m creating my whole experience. I think that’s partly true, but also that there’s this huge truth of the divine that I don’t feel like I can control.

¹³ What follows is an excerpt from fieldnotes collected in the course of research for my dissertation, “Rational Enchantment: Transcendent Meaning in the Modern World”. The dissertation addresses the potential of contemporary American religion to influence the character of modernity by regrounding modernity in a sense of shared transcendent meaning. The ideas developed in this chapter emerged in the course of the larger project.

Peter: We each control our lives, that's a solipsism, with a kernel of truth, with roots in Hindu tradition. The desires you have eventually have an impact on what happens for you. Solipsism is an ignorant form of consciousness, common among philosophers—they're so aware of their window on reality they assume they are reality.

Chris: You are God, but you're not the totality of God.

Laurie: Every cell in a person's body is aware of every other cell, and that's why we work. It's a lot like, Ken Wilber has this idea of holograms. In a hologram, the whole image is contained in each part. So we might be holograms of the whole, infinite variations of the one truth.

Steve: What's the role of worship in a mystical life?

Peter: Worship is good, it's a community exercise. But it's just one note. If that's all you do, it's not fabulous for your mystical life. God is singing a great symphony and people get stuck on one note. If all God is is sort of chairman of the universe and everything you do is sort of perfunctory bowing (...) Worship is our need to remember what's important in life, like that money is not god, sex is not god, there is no god but God.

[Chris brings up the question of the purpose of prayer.]

Linda: If prayer is communion with God, you can live your life in communion with God and your life is a living prayer.

John: What does it mean to love God?

Peter: Hmmm. It's probably not a question of an emotional feeling, although those can jump-start the realization of loving God. Practice loving one another, being compassionate, because ultimately loving all creatures *is* loving God.

How can we understand this snippet of dialogue; how can we understand this event? This was not a church-sponsored event; the people at the event were not members of the same church and were not even members of the same religious tradition; the room contained Christians, Jews, Hindus, New Agers, and a fair number of people who either affiliated with more than one religion or did not affiliate with any particular religion conventionally understood. Nor did these people themselves constitute a religious community; they just were drawn to the Andersons' living room by this event. This event does not appear to be a "religious" event, then, if to be religious requires an affiliation with a religious institution. This living-room discussion does not appear to have much to do with economic or political institutions, either; the event was scheduled on a weekend so people could include it in what Bellah et al. call "leisure time." Clearly, then, this is not public religion in the sense of institutionally mediated religion.

So is this private religion? Religious individualism? These labels are not of much help, either, especially if they are used in the heavily psychological sense that is common in sociology. This event was interactive, social, and not easily captured by our conventional measures of individual religiosity; “beliefs,” for example, were not a centerpiece of this discussion. Nor was the event private in the family-and-friends-only sense; it was open to the public at large and many people had not seen each other before. The discussion itself was not individualistic in the sense of being mostly oriented to each individual’s personal well-being; it was not what Bellah et al. have called “therapeutic” religion and Wuthnow has described as “me-first” religion (Wuthnow ed. 1994).

So is this religion at all? Looked at through a communicative lens, the religious quality of this event falls into place. It *is* religion, it’s people talking with each other about transcendent meaning. Indeed, through a communicative lens, the above dialogue looks a lot like the “cooperative interpretation processes” upon which Habermas says the renewal of the modern life world depends. The social significance of this little snippet of dialogue becomes even clearer when taken in context of the many other conversations with which it intersects: Stacey draws on conversations among the members of her New Age group, Peter brings with him a lifetime of conversations with other religious specialists, Chris draws on conversations with his students, and Laurie brings Ken Wilber’s ruminations into the mix. In this context, this little snippet of dialogue appears not just as an excerpt of the Andersons’ Sunday afternoon Mystic Heart event, but also as an excerpt of a larger, fluid and dynamic societal conversation.

This societal conversation does not only take place at esoteric gatherings in suburban living rooms. It’s important to recognize that the line I’ve drawn between religious institutions and religious communication is useful analytically and is not meant to describe empirical reality, as if people don’t talk to each other in church. I have tried to make an analytic distinction between religion’s communicative dimension and its institutional expression, in an effort to highlight communication’s analytic autonomy from religious institutions. Now having done that, having identified communication about transcendent meanings as an appropriate object of study for sociologists concerned with religion, it’s important to recognize that such communication does sometimes take place in religious institutions – in Bible Study groups, in sermons, in Sunday School, in adult education classes. But this is only part of the conversation; people also have conversations about transcendent meaning

apart from any connection to particular religious institutions, and they are not therefore “less religious” than the conversations that take place in Bible Study class on Sunday morning. By the same token, the communicative definition of religion that I have offered sheds a new light on religious institutions; they now can be understood as important interlocutors, perhaps important nodes or centers for a society-wide conversation about transcendent meanings, rather than bearing the burden of having to *be* religion in an otherwise secular society.

Theoretical consequence: understanding religious modernity

A concept of religion as a societal conversation about transcendent meanings casts a different light on our picture of religious modernity; it highlights aspects of religious modernity that otherwise remain obscure and un(der)theorized. I want to highlight two ways it does this. First, the most visible concept used to discuss religious modernity is *secularization*; a definition of religion that highlights communication adds dimension to this concept. Second, analyses of modern religion as public or private gain from recognizing communication about transcendent meaning as an example of public religion.

The most visible contemporary scholarship on religious modernity is the continuing debate about secularization. Has religion lost social power in the course of modernization? Scholars engaged in answering this question rely on institutional and individualistic conceptions of religion. So on one side of the debate, contemporary secularization theorists argue that modernization, for a complex of reasons, gradually erodes institutional religion’s social-systemic power (Bruce and Wallis 1992; Bruce 1990, 1992 1996; Dobbelaere 1999; Voye 1999). On the other side, scholars who disagree with the secularization thesis either point to continuing high levels of religiosity among individuals (Greeley 1969, 1972a, 1972b, 1989; Finke and Stark 1992; Stark 1999), or appeal to “competitive marketing” theories of religion which argue that institutional religion is strengthened by modern pluralism (Finke and Stark 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1992; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke, Guest and Stark 1996). In an effort to locate some common ground between these two sides, several contemporary scholars have advocated a “neosecularization” paradigm that more carefully specifies the concept of secularization; these scholars recommend attention to institutional religion’s power over both other institutions *and* individuals (Casanova 1994; Chaves 1994; Tschannen 1991; Yamane 1997; see also Gorski 2000).

A communication-centered concept of religion adds dimension to the secularization debate by introducing a third way for religion to influence society. Institutions and individuals are agents of social power; if we also recognize the social power of communication, then the secularity of a society would be measured by the extent to which members of that society are communicating with each other about transcendent meaning. Put differently, and in keeping with Luckmann's analysis, religion can influence a society by permeating its social institutions, by shaping its individual members, *and* by influencing the character of its culture through communication.

As Phil Gorski has demonstrated, most questions about secularization are ultimately historical questions, requiring historical analysis (2000). Implicit in the discussion about secularization, however, is a set of concerns about contemporary society. What is the social role of religion in contemporary society? What is religion *about*, sociologically, in modern times? In terms of this chapter, what is the social role of religious communication in contemporary society? How might we understand the crescendo of popular books about the soul, for example, or the apparent rise in popular use of the word "spirituality"? I am not prepared to offer empirical demonstrations or systematic arguments in order to answer these questions. I do, however, want to offer a speculation.

When Luckmann and other theorists postulated the privatization of religion perhaps they were on to something. Luckmann described modern religion as invisible because *it's so hard to see*. In his eyes, religion is easier to see when it has its own institutional house, or when its meanings permeate a society's social structure. But perhaps there is something else to this invisibility question. Perhaps in other societies – premodern societies, or societies that have modernized differently from the Western European model – religion was (is) more publicly visible, not only for its institutional presence, but for its tangible, concrete presence in public spaces: the temples, the *stupas*, the public rituals, the ceremonial dances, the religious imagery to be found in public art and architecture, the pictorial narratives with religious themes carved like graffiti into walls and big rocks. A person walking around in such a society would regularly encounter a kind of "public religion" in that this person would keep running into things that, as Luckmann put it, "refer (...) to the world of everyday life and point (...) to a world that is experienced as transcending everyday life." In other words, the person in such a society would keep running into things that could speak to them of a higher reality, of a larger context, of transcendent meanings.

Perhaps, in the modern West, communication stands in place of *stupas*. When modern individuals in, say, the suburban United States walk through life, they are unlikely to see concrete things *out there* that speak to any transcendent frame of reference. And so, just as Carl Jung and the theorists of religious individualism suggest, individuals are thrown back on their own resources; people interested in any kind of larger meaningfulness must find and sustain it on their own.

But, as good sociologists, we all know that there is no such thing as an isolated individual. Individuals – social creatures – communicate with each other, through conversation, art, music, books, magazines, television, radio, and scholarly research journals. When modern individuals look outside their own psyches for meaning, this societal conversation is what they find; while they contribute to it, it pre-exists them and will continue without them. Perhaps, then, it is communication, it is this ongoing societal conversation about transcendent meanings, that is the public face of religious meaning in contemporary societies. “Invisible religion” might indeed be hard to see – but maybe, if we listen, we can *hear* it.

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CHAPTER SIX

ETHICS OF SENSITIVITY

TOWARDS A NEW WORK ETHIC

Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg

Shamans have more in common with business leaders than anyone might expect. Within the indigenous traditions is a vast and deep knowledge waiting to be tapped by the businessperson who is ready to undertake the next step in developing personal power. (José Luis Stevens)¹

Introduction

Courses in personal development and staff recruitment have become the setting of a remarkable alliance between modern working life and new religious practice as the quotation above illustrates. In Denmark, managers talk about their spiritual thoughts in public and how they use spirituality in their professional life. It's well known that managers from big companies in Denmark seek inspiration from the Silva-method, Sai Baba and shamanism among others (Nielsen 2005; Nielsen 2006; Salamon 2002; Bovbjerg 2001). Leaders see the purpose of leadership from a new angle; as John Seely, Director of Xerox puts it: "The job of leadership today is not just to make money; it's to make meaning" (Nielsen 2006: 1). Apart from meaning, the leader also sees spirituality as a way to increase productivity. In the 1980s and 1990s, we saw the gradual integration of New Age themes in the everyday operations of the business world. A variety of techniques rooted in the New Age philosophy have been applied in private and public organizations, either in order to identify the right employee for the right position through various kinds of testing, or as personal development and teambuilding efforts (Bovbjerg 1995; Bovbjerg 2001).

¹ "The Five Values of Shamans: How to Apply Them to Personal Power in Business", see <http://www.bizspirit.com/bsj/current/fea1.html> (11-05-2006).

The work of Max Weber seems to be an obvious starting point for an analysis of these religious practices in modern business life. In his famous work on the rise of the protestant ethic in the early phase of modern capitalism as we know it in the West, Weber points out that the protestant ethic had an important influence on the development of a new economic behavior and a new attitude towards work.

This provides the most favourable foundation for the conception of labour as an end in itself, as a calling which is necessary to capitalism: the chances of overcoming traditionalism are greatest on account of a religious upbringing. This observation of present-day capitalism in itself suggests that it is worth while to ask how this connection of adaptability to capitalism with religious factors may have come about in the days of the early development of capitalism (Weber 1958: 63).

Are we witnessing the emergence of a new work ethic today? Could New Age philosophy be of crucial importance for a modern work ethic, in the same sense as Weber considers the protestant ethic as central to early capitalism as it developed in Western society?²

The other in our selves

Personal development can involve various forms of supplementary training, such as developing leadership skills or changing a person's attitude toward his or her job, boss or colleagues. The premise of personal development is the notion of a mental 'self' that can be explored, and the idea of personal transformation by transpersonal techniques such as therapy or mental training. The primary aim of my research is to determine how and why the development of the 'inner life' of employees is relevant for their work. By exploring the role of the unconscious – 'the other in our selves' – in contemporary culture I will provide an explanatory framework for the emphasis on developing the personalities of employees. Modern religious practices are in this approach bound to believers' 'inner lives' (Gauchet 1997).

Religious practice can be aimed at a transcendent 'other': at a God that is characteristically absent from the everyday lives of human beings as in monotheistic religions. The religious orientation of contemporary societies is rather directed toward immanence. People understand

² This chapter draws on my book "Følsomhedens etik: Tilpasning af personligheden i New Age og moderne management" (Forlaget Hovedland 2001). (English title: "Ethics of Sensitivity: Disciplining the Self in New Age and Modern Management").

themselves as something 'other': the other is transformed into "the other in our selves". We cannot understand the origins of either psychology or New Age unless we understand the fact that the modern interpretation and explanation of the human is oriented towards the unconscious. The individual's inner life becomes the intangible focus of religious practices and the subconscious becomes a constituent part of modern individuals' understanding of the Self. Within this analytical approach I suggest an understanding of personal development courses as framed in modern religiosity. The primary concern in modern religiosity is the individual's potential, based on the notion that the individual has hidden subconscious resources waiting to be accessed through the development of the Self.

Consciousness and unconsciousness were actually two sides of self-education, two symmetrically opposite instances of conforming to the self by dividing off from the self (Gauchet 1997: 171).

Cultural changes imply that the concept of personality has also changed. As a consequence religious practice is also transformed and now addresses this inward nature. For the modern individual there is an inner core, that is not immediately visible to the individual and is not consciously experienced, but that is considered to be of importance for the individualization of the subject (Gauchet 1998). It is in the unconscious or in working with the unconscious, that the individual constructs his/her identity and gets to know her/himself and perhaps one day experience her/his own individual religiosity (Gauchet 1997).

As an analytical tool for studies in modern religiosity I draw on two ideal types of ethical and mythical religiosity. The first, ethical religiosity is based on the idea of conversion to a coherent system of faith, as we know it from the big monotheistic religions. The second ideal type, mythical religiosity, consists of religious and therapeutic techniques, denoted a 'psycho-religious practice' centered on the conscious and unconscious self (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990). 'New Age' can be used as a common denominator for a variety of branches that offer 'alternative' explanations of very different phenomena; health, philosophy, management, and personal development among others. In the New Age movement, there is no conversion to a coherent faith as in a large number of traditional religious groups; instead the believer shops around in a loose network of attitudes and interests. The idea of authenticity frames the spiritual experience within the individual's narrative of its own being, and knowledge of the self is attained through personal emotional experiences (Hervieu-Léger 1990).

The historically and culturally specific content of the unconscious are crucial to the interpretation of mythical religiosity (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990; Gauchet 1997). Through particular practices, the psycho-religious practitioner expects to achieve self-perfection in a never-ending transformation of the self. The participant is thought to explore unconscious parts of personal life and to liberate her/himself from external domination through therapeutic or meditative methods. Emotional problems are, in psycho-religious practice, associated with inauthenticity and a failure to live in accordance with one's 'true self' – in other words, one does not realize one's potential or one's inner convictions and opportunities, and one must therefore liberate oneself from the dominating influences of the environment. The psycho-religious practice encourages the individual to learn from experience both on a bodily and a mental level. Therapeutic techniques are applied in psycho-religious practices, but it is emphasized in these practices that the human being has a fundamental 'spiritual' or 'divine' substance. A certain habitus of sensitivity evolves through transpersonal methods in this psycho-religious practice (Champion 1990).

Transpersonal psychology, personal growth and management

Courses in personal development in business life closely resemble therapeutic practices, but are not understood as relevant for 'malfunctioning' staff members, but as essential for optimizing the performance of healthy and mature employees. This desire for self-realization and optimizing of human potential illustrates the relation to what we, in religious studies, call Human Potential Movements (Heelas 1996; Hammer 1997). The field of humanistic psychology and the work of Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) in particular, has been an important source of inspiration for modern management as well as for modern religious movements that strive to bring all human assets and capabilities into play – not only in private life, but also through courses in personal development in professional life (Bovbjerg 2001).

British sociologist Nikolas Rose pointed out that work organizations since the 1960s increasingly aim to actively involve their employees as autonomous subjects. Employees have hence come to be seen as subjects adaptable to the aims of the organization, which in turn is constructed in terms of being innovative, flexible and competitive. Modern management must, in Rose's words, "work on the ego of the worker

itself” (1989: 112) and has hence set a new agenda for employees. This change is itself closely related to the increased salience of mythical New Age religiosity since the 1960s and Maslow’s humanistic psychology constitutes one of the most important interfaces between New Age spirituality on the one hand and management discourse on the other.

In the late 1950s, Maslow developed a theory of motivation, based on the idea of a pyramid of five types of hierarchically ordered human needs – a theory that evolved into a type of transpersonal psychology in which individuals are encouraged to exceed their personal bounds. The four most basic needs are, in ascending order, the physiological ones, the need for physical safety, the need to belong and the need for status. The fifth, highest, and most significant human need is however that of self-actualization, construed by Maslow as the driving force in the growth of every individual. Ethically ‘good’ characteristics are associated with self-actualizing individuals, who have accomplished ‘personal mastery’. The pinnacle of experience, as it is known in the context of humanistic psychology, consists of unique mystical personal experiences. These are characteristic of people who live at the level of self-actualization or the level of ‘being’ (Maslow 1998). Although Maslow’s work features numerous references to Taoism and Zen-Buddhism, Gestalt therapy, intuition, and meditation practices, the Swedish researcher Bärmark (1985) suggests that this needs to be understood as a search for inspiration for his scientific work rather than as pure mysticism in itself. Be this as it may, Maslow’s theory comprises an understanding of the self, an ethic and a lifestyle that encourages self-sufficiency and personal authenticity, consciousness of the body, self-realization and continuous personal improvement (Savard 1986).

Although humanistic psychology has become academically marginalized, at least in Denmark, its cultural influence seems enormous (Brinkmann 2005). The idea of ‘hidden potentials’ and ‘personal growth’ is widely accepted. At an international conference on business and consciousness it was put this way:

When business is done from a place of fullness, we don’t so much work as play to connect, to create, to manifest our potential, to actualize. You go to work to share your creativity, and you are full and incidentally, you get a pay check.³

³ Naomi Rose, “Bringing the Soul into the Workplace: A Report on the International Conference on Business and Consciousness”, see <http://www.bizspirit.com/bsj/current/fea4.html> (11-05-2006).

Ideals of personal development have become widespread in schools, sports, childcare, and work. It is nowadays a popular notion and a common practice among the middle and upper classes, where self-realization has become more and more popular since the 1970s (Davie and Hervieu-Leger 1996; Bourdieu 1984). It is popular among people who are well-educated and have good prospects professionally and economically. This indicates why personal development in business life and in companies and organizations is widely accepted and appreciated among large groups of employees. The therapeutic practice is mainly aimed at mentally healthy employees who are considered worth the investment of courses in personal development. It's not about curing the unhealthy, but as Maslow puts it in his theory of an 'eupsychology', it is based on studies in mature self-realized people using their full potential (Bämark 1985; Maslow 1976). Courses in personal development have become 'therapeutic normality', in short: they are aimed at optimizing the performance of all employees, not just those who underperform.⁴

The application of spiritual methods is today no longer unfamiliar in business life, where it is typically framed as a humane and committed attitude towards employees. Transcendental Meditation (TM), for instance, has the slogan: "When heart and bottom-line aren't opposites" (From the flyer, "Success without stress", about the use of TM in companies). Director Peter Ilsøe practices the meditation technique provided by NATHA, Nordic Center of Spiritual Development, and describes its benefits as follows:

It's a cool system: millennia of experience communicated the Western way. And the results are wonderful. Your mind becomes sharper, concentration, memory and ability to learn has improved. By intensifying the senses and strengthening the will, ideas and decisions come about in a magical way like physical manifestations. The time I use practising yoga I win back by improved efficiency in all aspects of everyday life. (Flyer from Nordic Centre of Spiritual Development; my translation)

⁴ Critics of the new trends in medical research talk about 'medicated normality' in the sense that medication is increasingly aimed at conditions that fall outside traditional pathological definitions (Møldrup 1999). 'Healthy' people are medicated more than ever before and they have become the target of promotion of new medical products. The drug Ritalin, for instance, is used to optimize school pupils' and students' performance and to lower their examination anxiety. EPO and other performance-enhancing drugs are frequently used in professional sports. Preventive medicine is another aspect of medicated normality that is aimed at healthy people (Møldrup 1999).

Another example of management theory that draws inspiration from eastern philosophy is that of the Learning Organization (LO). From the 1990s onwards, the idea of the learning organization has been very popular in Denmark, and has been implemented in both private and public organizations. Peter Senge's book "The Fifth Discipline" (1990), inspired by system theory and Buddhism, has been very important for leaders who wanted to change the way modern organizations operate. Although LO is normally thought of as developed from systems theory, it is in fact an eclectic method, based on a variety of theories and techniques. Moreover, it resembles humanistic psychology in that it is also concerned with the human capacity to 'grow' and the opportunity to access untapped resources in the individual (Bovbjerg 2001).

Senge (1990: 143) argues for the need of a closer connection between personal development ("life's higher virtues") and what it means to be economically successful. The employee's relation to his/her company is no longer based on a contract between two partners negotiating remuneration for a task. This kind of contract was between two parties who had a potential conflict of interest. The ideal modern working relation is now a 'compact' between the company and the employee, which is partly a formal agreement on work and payment, but is also partly an implicit agreement that they have a common interest in providing for self-realization through work. Senge (1990: 311) puts it this way:

The essence of this compact is the organization's commitment to support the full development of each employee, and the person's reciprocal commitment to the organisation.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming: a transpersonal method

In my research, I have examined the increasing interest in the cultivation of the Self and how this trend has found expression in New Age theories and modern management, focusing on the use of personal development courses in business in recent decades and using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) as the main case study. NLP is one example of a personal development course that is firmly rooted in the fields of New Age as well as modern management. It was in vogue in the 1990s and seems to be so still. The method has often been applied in conjunction with the introduction of the Learning Organization (LO) in Danish workplaces. Along with business counseling and other alternative methods such as fire walking, meditation and Landmark,

NLP competes on a market where services such as leadership-training and courses in personal development are offered to companies and organizations (Bovbjerg 2007). As a ‘transpersonal’ method, it conceives of training and therapeutic practice as the road to personal change. By adopting a perspective of change as the main goal, personal development is understood as a way to obtain personal and professional success (Bovbjerg 2001; 2007).

NLP emerged from collaboration between its originators Richard Bandler, a psychologist and computer programmer, and John Grinder, a professor of linguistics, both from California. It is based on the notion that neurological processes are significant for our conduct. We store experiences through our senses. This can happen both consciously and unconsciously, but the majority of our neurological processes occur below the threshold of our consciousness (Dilts 1983: Part I). The relation between consciousness and subconscious can be transformed by changing the way we perceive the world. We can do this through language, which, on the one hand, is the means by which we bring order to our thoughts and, on the other hand, is the way we communicate with others. If we acquire knowledge and control of our language, the NLP trainers claim, we can ensure that our communication functions optimally and thereby attains the desired effect. The use of the term ‘programming’ indicates a mechanistic view of the brain and to some extent the consciousness, which is often given expression through metaphors drawn from the world of computers. Just as computers must be continually improved in order to keep up with the times, NLP trainers believe that the human brain must be upgraded again and again throughout our lives (Bovbjerg 2001; 2007). An NLP-trainer describes her understanding of the brain in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*:

What you can teach people is how their “biocomputer” works. (...) Very few people understand how the mind works. So it is difficult to function optimally when you don’t know what buttons to push. Most of what we have on our internal hard drive consists of programmes that have been stored there during childhood. But you wouldn’t dream of working with ten-year old software in a real computer. And you can actually learn to install new programmes that work better for you as an adult. It is possible to learn how to use yourself more productively with the potential you have. It is a matter of changing the situation from one in which others are in charge to one in which it is I who am in charge of my life! The directions come from the inside, not the outside. (Hellman, in *Politiken*, 9.4.2000, my translation)

While, according to NLP's founders Bandler and Grinder, traditional psychology had been developed in order to treat deviant and sick people, they were concerned themselves with what it meant to be 'a whole person', 'actualized' or 'integrated' as a human being (Bandler 1985). The resulting therapeutic approach is aimed at changing a person's perception of his negative experiences, his memories and his relations to others through mental techniques. NLP-trainers teach a number of tools for changing participants' way of thinking about their life and their behavior. Students use a transforming practice to work with inner mental images of emotions or specific experiences and the aim is to change the emotional framework of these images or past experiences. It is assumed that one can thereby change a student's feelings about these past events from negative to positive. The notion of a divided consciousness is integral to several of the techniques taught in NLP. One example of this is the use of trance and hypnosis. The student is expected to gain access to his/her subconscious wisdom through trance and self-hypnosis; self-hypnosis is supposed to put the practitioner in a state where (s)he can learn from her or his subconscious through 'inner guidance'. One of my informants put it this way:

Then you have all that stuff about calibration⁵ and all. It's a bit like, you can go in and look at people and see what sensory systems, how is your posture, and then you can go in and create a rapport⁶ by aligning them. It is something about meta-models, meta-programs. And the meta-model – that has to do with how to ask questions. How exactly you go in and generalize, what words you say, and how you ask questions to go in and uncover some of that. It is meta-programs, quite simply something about what you are, are you a procedural person or an opportunity person? Are you into large chunks, or into small? (Kathrine Johansen, NLP student; my translation)

⁵ In NLP, 'calibration' is the art of seeing and hearing minor changes in another person's body language and voice tone. These shifts can be as small as slight skin colour change, pupil dilation, eye direction shift, or voice tone change. In NLP, these body language and voice tone changes are understood as indicating internal or mental shifts in the images, feelings and sounds that make up the individual's thought processes (O'Connor and Seymour 1990). Being able to read these signals is seen as an essential NLP skill for anyone working with people, such as coaches, sales people, negotiators, teachers and medical professionals (www.nlpacademy.co.uk/practicegroups/Calibration.asp; Bovbjerg 2001).

⁶ 'Rapport' is a NLP-concept that describes the quality of harmony, recognition and mutual acceptance that exists between people when they are at ease with one another, with their communication proceeding smoothly (<http://www.nlp-now.co.uk>).

The pragmatic dimension is emphasized in regard to these techniques, and the most important source of legitimacy for the method, according to the NLP consultant, is indeed that 'it works'. The individual's understanding of the world and of personal events is described as a *mental map* that serves as a perception filter (O'Connor and Seymour 1990). However, the focus is not on limitations but on opportunities based on the belief that every human being possesses the capacities and talents that are necessary for any act of transformation (Dilts 1983).

NLP at work

As part of the research for my book "Følsomhedens Etik" ["The Ethics of Sensitivity"] (Bovbjerg 2001) I have conducted fieldwork studies from 1997 to 1999, which mainly consisted of observational studies and interviews. I did observational studies of courses in personal development at a NLP institute and in a public institution in Copenhagen and I interviewed NLP-trainers from two NLP institutes and two consultancy firms. A total of thirty formal interviews were conducted with 1) NLP teachers/trainers from specialized institutions and consultancy firms; 2) employees and middle managers who were responsible for implementing human resources strategies; and 3) employees at different levels who had participated in NLP-courses. The employees come from nine public and private organizations (health care, central and local government, telecommunication, computer companies, banks and insurance companies). All informants were between 25–60 years old, a little more than half was women. All names of informants and companies have been replaced by pseudonyms. Informants have not been chosen randomly, but rather as typical examples of people who either find NLP meaningful, in particular for their working lives, or who are critical of it after attending one or more NLP-courses.

My research has focused on the understandings of NLP-courses of three relevant parties involved – NLP consultants, managers responsible for implementing HRM and employees.

Consultants

Consultants argue that courses in personal development are effective ways to train people to become better managers and to train staff to become self-managed. It gives them knowledge about their patterns of reaction and provides more insight in their own selves. Secondly,

consultants claim that the courses aim to make employees capable of developing new competences and to unveil hidden resources. One of my informants, an NLP-trainer and consultant, called NLP “the psychology of the people”.

‘Joe Ordinary’ needs to know his limits in order to create opportunities. An ‘ordinary’ person often ends up in conflicts where only a few changes are required for him to move on in his life. This is about convictions about your self; it’s about respect for others and about the faith in our own resources. In reality I have the required potentials! Right from the beginning the focus of NLP was on ‘functionality’ or on ‘the healthy’ in the extreme sense. What works? In NLP we don’t care about theories, which brought us in conflict with the academic world. Bandler and Grinder never missed a chance to scoff at and tear to pieces the academic world, but, on the other hand, in reality they were aware of the fact they were deeply indebted to it. When I talk of the ‘psychology of the people’ it’s not a protest against established psychology. It’s an attempt to pass on the established psychology to the people or ‘the man on the street’. (Flemming Vind; my translation)

Flemming Vind is concerned with how ‘Joe Ordinary’ is able to deal with his life. The pragmatic aspect – the method ‘works’ – is important to his approach to NLP. On the one hand, the method should improve the student’s quality of life rather than cure him of malfunctions; on the other hand, NLP encourages an anti-authoritarian attitude, because NLP students are supposed to become experts on how to think and act self-directed in everyday life. Flemming Vind hence wants to convey his life-model, according to which humans are free to make their own choices in life. He believes his students should only respond according to their own needs and should never submit to systems or to other people’s power.

Another informant also takes a critical stance towards science. Peter Sørensen is working to connect Eastern religion with Western science. He discovered his spirituality while attending a NLP mega session in the USA. To aid his spiritual development he has chosen personal masters/guides to open his mind to the insight he needs. His religious attitude is quite characteristic of New Age adherents:

I don’t identify myself with Christianity. I would say Christ is a good role model. Take some of the other dead figures; whether it’s Buddha, Krishna or Jesus, they are all the same. In my opinion it’s the same things they are talking about. They just use different words or different expressions according to the cultures they lived in. (Peter Sørensen; my translation)

While Peter Sørensen sees Christ as his own spiritual role model, similarly he sees himself, his own spiritual practice and his work as role models for those who attend his NLP courses in Danish companies:

You [as a consultant] have some clear attitudes, a clear understanding of people that you communicate and that you are a good example of, right? You have the ability to take the initiative, and you are more or less self-motivated, right? This means that suddenly there's no need [for the firm] to spend a lot of energy on me [as an employee] because I more or less run things myself. That is, obviously, someone has to get me started on something, and I obviously have to ask the questions that have to be asked, but I think there's plenty of work to do if you've got that drive and you don't just expect things to happen for you. Because that's what missing out there: people who are really self-motivated and competent. (Peter Sørensen; my translation).

At the time of the interview, Peter Sørensen was employed in a large consultancy firm where he took care of courses for both public and private organizations. He was very much into spiritual training and participated himself continuously in therapies. He emphasized that this was not due to pressing personal problems, but rather motivated by a desire to be on the cutting edge of developments in the field and to get to know himself better. He notes in passing that development is a personal matter but at the same time argues that professional development is synonymous with personal development. Ideal employees are those who take initiatives in order to get the job done. If they follow the right path of personal development, their impulses toward work will come from 'within' – they will become self-motivated.

The goal of the courses by Peter Sørensen's and his colleagues is to create environments in which change is permanent and which as such constitute inspiring and innovative workplaces that will foster joy, enthusiasm and creativity. To accomplish this, consultants and managers are expected to demonstrate that progress is possible, while managers have to 'walk the talk': they have to inspire their employees – by offering courses in personal development for example.

It is really about purity in the sense that you are shaping a conscious culture. (...) In the old days, you sought to control people's behaviour. "Do this" and "do that", and rules and guidelines and all that. Now management means giving people new qualifications, new learning, and new knowledge. And when they have new knowledge, then they can also do some other things. What is becoming much more common now and will continue to grow in importance is that you manage by way of values.

The foundation is the fact that we have the same attitudes, the same values, that bind us together. (Peter Sørensen; my translation)

To Peter Sørensen personal development is not just about raising the consciousness of the employees. It is just as much about encouraging a particular kind of conduct and ensuring that employees start to think of themselves in relation to their company in new ways. If the relevant adjustments occur within the employee himself, s/he will align his or her own interests with those of the company.

Managers

Managers and boards of directors are usually the ones to decide which methods and consultants they prefer when they provide courses in personal development. They can choose various strategies: they can train key-employees within the company, who then become responsible for training and educating the others; or they can hire external consultants to facilitate a training process within the organization or in NLP training-centers. My material contains an example of a company that has chosen to educate some of its own staff as NLP-trainers, who then are supposed to propagate the NLP-way to the rest of the staff. Developing employees' personal competences is not just to please them and improve staff-relations and cooperation within the company, but also to improve vitally important client relations. As middle manager Karl Christiansen put it:

I don't pay them [the employees] to like their job. I pay them to do a job. But the work we do is based on human relations, so I have to give them some flexibility and insight in how these things are. This is what they get their salary for. (...) It will become a required qualification that you possess personal flexibility and readiness to change. Basically, what it comes down to is this: if an employee does not have it, it is 'Goodbye!' and we hire someone else with those competences, right? (Karl Christiansen; my translation)

Although Karl Christiansen stresses the ethical demand of maintaining a distance between work life and employees' personal lives, he was nevertheless responsible for introducing Gestalt therapy first and later on NLP into the organization. As he sees it, the company's needs for new qualifications are related to the personalities of the employees. Becoming flexible and ready for change means that the employees have to work with their personality.

My second example is a public organization, where NLP and LO were introduced to help employees develop capacities of working in self-managing teams, aimed at improving the work atmosphere and solving problems of staff retention and absence due to illness. According to my informants, the board of directors of this public organization believed that all human beings possess capacities and resources that they fail to use in everyday life. They were hoping to stimulate employees to tap into their hidden and unexploited resources so as to improve their performance. Several of my informants have pointed out that Sue Knight's book "NLP at Work: The Difference That Makes a Difference in Business" has been a major source of inspiration for organizations wanting to implement NLP as a strategy to develop their employees. She writes about the benefits of NLP:

For many people the result of applying these techniques is the achievement of personal congruence, a sense of being true to yourself in a way that enables you to achieve your full potential. NLP has the power to help you continually to develop that potential to keep on developing and learning in ways that efficiently harness your energy. (Knight 1995: 81)

There is no doubt that increasing employees' effectiveness and optimizing their performance, constitutes an important motivation for providing NLP-courses in public and private organizations.

Employees

In many workplaces, the management suggests courses in personal development, but often employees also ask for them. Personal and professional development are considered two faces of the same coin among consultants, managers and many employees. As mentioned above, New Age theories are usually adopted by the middle and upper classes, which means that lots of employees find it natural and preferable to combine their interest in personal development with their professional life and interests. From this follows that many modern employees with a high level of education or middle-range training seek out organizations that provide personal development and supplementary training.⁷ Some employees consider personal development a way to change their life. One of my informants considers insights about her unconscious and liberation the key reason to seek personal development:

⁷ My fieldwork has shown that employees, managers and consultants do not make clear distinctions between personal development and supplementary training.

If you are told by others what you are, and people do that all the time, you have limitations imposed on you, limitations that can be overcome. Again, I think you can learn if you really want to. (...) When you have no sense of inner balance – like when you are very stressed, you say “Hey, why am I stressed at this point? What is it I am doing now?” Listen to yourself; listen to your body, to your thoughts. Listen to what feels right, and that is of course an individual question. (Hanne Mikkelsen; my translation)

Informant Hanne Mikkelsen believes her NLP-training is a way to get in touch with her ‘authentic’ self, where she expects to find the right hidden resources to use at work. She expects that this personal development and liberation of hidden resources will make her an attractive employee. Hanne Mikkelsen has developed her interest in psychology through work. Others also develop their interest in alternative thinking through work. This is a good example of how mythical religiosity, in which religious thoughts, therapeutic techniques and interest in psychology are combined in the same practice, is relevant for understanding courses in personal development in work life. In my material most of the informants who were employees were very happy that their organization gave them the opportunity to take courses in personal development. Some of my informants are critical of New Age and NLP, while some of those who are overall positive nevertheless find that their personal integrity has been harmed. One of my informants, for instance, describes her experience of having a nervous breakdown during a course:

There was an incident where I was very surprised about what happened to me personally. I couldn’t stop crying – I was in misery – it was really terrible, right. It continued, and they do have assistants, but no one came to help. Then I turned to those two [the instructors] – they were taking a break. All he says to me is to look up to the right and break contact with my feelings and then go to therapy.⁸ I will never forgive him for that. It’s irresponsible to leave a person in this state. On a course he is supposed to be responsible, right? I will never forget this. There is something that attracts me to NLP, something very interesting; but I have become very careful because I was hurt – right? (Karen Petersen; my translation)

In sum, employees are most likely to see courses in personal development as part of their supplementary training, and they accept the fact

⁸ As explained in note 5 above, moving the eyes in a particular direction is meaningful in a number of typical NLP exercises. When the instructor asks Karen Petersen to look to the right, he assumes that this will help her blocking contact with her feelings and hence terminate her crisis.

that the courses involve personal experiences and maybe painful incidents from their childhood; even Karen Petersen does not object to the personal development and its relevance for her professional life. Employees see themselves as very active in the process, they feel that they are in charge of their personal development and they make no distinction between their personal and professional development.

From the protestant ethic to the ethic of sensitivity

NLP communicates an ethic and an idea of the good life that in accordance with the psycho-religious ideal type of mythical religiosity, aims to achieve self-perfection through a never-ending transformation of the self (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990). The good life is a life under continuous *development* and undergoes constant *change*. "Change is the only constant," is the way it is described by central figures in the NLP literature (O'Connor and Seymour 1990: 6). My research shows that managers and NLP trainers both emphasize the importance of employees taking responsibility for their own work and both expect the latter to develop a positive attitude to their jobs rather than seeing them as a chore: "It's about everyday things. How do I choose to think of my workplace? Do I decide to go to work thinking, 'Bloody hell, another day?'" (Danish NLP trainer in a municipal district; my translation). For this NLP-trainer, a good work ethic is all about attitude adjustment, about a change in the way employees approach their workplace and their colleagues: the work must be driven by passion rather than duty. She and her colleagues talk a lot about making employees "owners of their own transformation", both privately and in the company.

This new work ethic seems to result from a transition from a production society to a consumption society, because in the former, the work ethic is related to the ability to produce, whereas in the latter, work has become imbued with an aesthetic dimension that emphasizes the sublime. Work is increasingly judged according to its ability to create experiences and the aim is no longer to seek to limit the time spent on the job in order to create leisure time; on the contrary, the goal now is to remove the boundary between calling and occupation, job and hobby, work and play. 'Workaholics' have no fixed hours, but see work as the highest and most satisfying form of entertainment (Bauman 1998). Modern employees are supposed to invest their whole selves in their work in the sense that work must be a passion and the self must be a resource in relation

to seizing the opportunities for development that the job has to offer. Consistent with this, American sociologist Emily Martin (1997) suggests that employees in modern work organizations must establish positive attitudes toward change and must take an active stance in regard to it. This implies, according to Martin, that individuals are seen as consisting of capacities and potentials that can be realized or fail to be realized. She describes this belief in change as a myth that frames the social relations in terms of the way we conduct ourselves.

The employees I have studied have adopted a new approach to their work. They express their relationship to the organization in which they happen to be employed in terms of commitment, flexibility and readiness for change and they thus consider themselves units that must constantly be brought up to date, not just professionally, but also in a personal sense. Just as the company has to keep up with current trends in order to be competitive, the employee cannot just let her/himself go with the flow in the company. He/she must actively seek out opportunities to develop himself so as to retain an attractive working capacity. As Martin (2000: 583) puts it: "People with resources to do so are increasingly speaking of themselves as mini-corporations, collections of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed."

The individual sees himself or herself as a mini-corporation, one that is primarily oriented towards its own interests in the global flow of capital. This is why people feel a need to invest in their own resources and 'hidden potentials', just as if they themselves were a firm (Martin 2000). Employees consider their personal development an individual project in which they experience the optimization of their human attributes and their opportunities for self-expression. In the business community, personal development courses are aimed at nurturing a particular attitude towards work: work as a vocation and a source of pleasure alike. The idea of flexibility thus liberates capitalism from its suppressing connotations by giving employees the impression that they are in charge of their own lives – privately and professionally. In the same process, flexibility gives rise to new forms of control that have great importance for the personality of employees and the building of their character (Sennett 1998).

Courses in personal development would make no sense without an unconscious that contains hidden resources and hidden knowledge of the self. The courses communicate an ethic and an idea of the good life that accords with the psycho-religious ideal type of mythical religiosity.

The unconscious becomes an essential element in ideas surrounding human potential and resources, which is why the theory of a bifurcated consciousness is central to an understanding of modern work culture, where personal development is high on the agenda in many organizations. The ideal employee is seen as in a permanent state of reflection, learning, experience and growth, no longer seeing her or his work from a perspective of duty, but as done *con amore* – as a way to self-realization. The well-developed employee is self-managing, deriving devotion to the job from inner necessity.

In his classical work on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism Max Weber (1958) has argued that in the sixteenth century a particular work ethic evolved, in which work was seen as done to the glory of God. According to the new work ethic that I have discussed in the present chapter, the ethics of sensitivity, human beings must work in order to find their ‘authentic Self’ in an interminable process of growth that imbues lifelong learning and eternal change with spiritual meaning. In this new ethics of sensitivity, which has emerged from post-protestant New Age spirituality, work is hence no longer to the glory of God, but to the glory of the Self.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BEYOND THE SPIRITUAL SUPERMARKET

THE SOCIAL AND PUBLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman

Introduction

In most of the social-scientific literature, New Age – or ‘spirituality,’ as increasingly seems the preferred term – is used to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices. Most participants in the spiritual milieu, it is generally argued, draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. New Age is thus referred to as “do-it-yourself-religion” (Baerveldt 1996), “pick-and-mix religion” (Hamilton 2000), “religious consumption à la carte” (Possamai 2003) or a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon 2000). In their book “Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality”, Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000: 1) even go so far as to argue that “New Age turns out to be merely a particular code word in a larger field of modern religious experimentation”, while Possamai (2000: 40) states that we are dealing with an “eclectic – if not kleptomaniac – process (...) with no clear reference to an external or ‘deeper’ reality”.

This dominant discourse about New Age basically reiterates sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann’s influential analysis, published about forty years ago in “The Invisible Religion” (1967). Structural differentiation in modern society, or so Luckmann argues, results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a ‘market of ultimate significance.’ On such a market, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences. Indeed, in a more recent publication, Luckmann notes that New Age exemplifies this tendency of individual ‘bricolage’: “It collects abundant psychological, therapeutic, magic, marginally scientific, and older esoteric material, repackages them, and offers them for individual consumption and further private syncretism” (1996: 75).

Luckmann emphasizes that those personal meaning systems remain strictly private affairs: by their very nature, and unlike traditional church-based Christian religion in the past, they lack a wider social significance and play no public role whatsoever. Writing thirty years ago, the late Bryan Wilson has made a similar claim about the post-Christian cults, stating that those “represent, in the American phrase, ‘the religion of your choice,’ the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns” (1976: 96). And more recently, Steve Bruce has characterized New Age as a “diffuse religion,” noting “There is no (...) power in the cultic milieu to override individual preferences” (2002: 99).

Accounts such as those are found over and over again in the sociological literature, as Besecke (2005: 186) rightly observes: “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one.” Work done in anthropology and the history of religion nonetheless suggests that this orthodoxy is deeply problematic (Hammer 2001, 2004; Hanegraaff 1996, 2001; Luhrmann, 1989). And indeed, from within sociology itself, Heelas (1996) has demonstrated convincingly that New Age spirituality is remarkably less eclectic and incoherent than typically assumed. Our aim in the current paper is to elaborate on those dissenting voices and demonstrate that this sociological orthodoxy is not much more than an institutionalized intellectual misconception. More specifically, we criticize three related arguments that together constitute the privatization thesis: 1) that New Age boils down to mere individual ‘bricolage’ (section 2), 2) that it is socially insignificant, because “the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible” (Bruce 2002: 99) (section 3), and 3) that it does not play a role in the public domain (section 4). We summarize our findings and briefly elaborate on their theoretical significance in the final section.

We base ourselves on data from a variety of sources, collected during the first author’s Ph.D. research in the period 1999-2003 (see Aupers 2004). Besides literature on New Age and a variety of flyers and websites of Dutch New Age centers, we especially draw on in-depth interviews with two samples of New Age teachers. Focusing on this ‘spiritual elite’ rather than on people who only vaguely identify with labels such as ‘spirituality’ or ‘New Age’ enables us to study the worldview of the spiritual milieu in its most crystallized and ‘pure’ form. Besides, these are of course the very people who communicate this worldview to those who

participate in their courses, trainings and workshops. The first sample consists of spiritual trainers who work for Dutch New Age centers in the urbanized western part of the country.¹ The centers have been randomly sampled from a national directory of nature-oriented medicine and consciousness-raising (Van Hoog 2001) and the respondents have next been randomly sampled from those centers' websites. Eleven of those initially contacted – a very large majority – agreed to be interviewed.² The second sample consists of trainers at Dutch New Age centers that specialize in spiritual courses for business life. Apart from this theoretically imposed restriction, the sampling procedure was identical to the one just described. Nine in-depth interviews were completed with, again, almost no refusals.³ Finally, we rely on data from a theoretically instructive case study of the Dutch company Morca that has embraced New Age capitalism. Within the context of this case study, the first author has conducted in-depth interviews with Morca's president-director, his spiritual coach, four employees who had participated in the company's spiritual courses, and three employees who had not. Unless indicated otherwise, we draw on data from the first sample of spiritual trainers in section 2, on those from the second one in section 3, and on those from the case study in section 4.

The ethic of self-spirituality

Diffuse religion cannot sustain a distinctive way of life (Bruce 2002: 94).

As the sociological orthodoxy suggests, teachers of Dutch New Age centers indeed prove to combine various traditions in their courses. One may use tarot cards in combination with crystal-healing and Hindu ideas about chakras; another may combine traditional Chinese medicine, western psychotherapy and Taoism into another idiosyncratic concoction. There is, in short, no reason to deny the prominence of 'bricolage' in the spiritual milieu.

¹ This is the so-called 'Randstad,' which is where most Dutch New Age centres are situated anyway.

² Those interviews have been conducted by Inge Van der Tak, our research assistant at the time (2002), carefully supervised by ourselves, of course. Interviews lasted about ninety minutes on average and were tape-recorded and typed out verbatim (see Aupers, Houtman and Van der Tak 2003 for a report of the findings). The same procedure was followed for the two rounds of interviews conducted by the first author (see below).

³ Those interviews have been conducted by the first author in 2003.

What is a problem, however, is that whereas scholars on New Age typically assume that this ‘bricolage’ or ‘eclecticism’ is the principal characteristic of New Age, *none* of the interviewees feels that the traditions on which s/he bases his or her courses are at the heart of one’s worldview. As the Dutch New Age centre “Centrum voor Spirituele Wegen” argues in one of its flyers, “There are many paths, but just one truth.” This *philosophia perennis* or ‘perennial philosophy’ derives from esotericism – and especially from Blavatsky’s New Theosophy (Hanegraaff 1996) – and has influenced the first generation of New Agers in the 1970s through the work of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Aldous Huxley. According to this perennialism, all religious traditions are equally valid, because they all essentially worship the same divine source. Perennialism’s virtual omnipresence in the spiritual milieu can be illustrated by means of the following explanations by three of the interviewed New Age teachers:⁴

I feel connected with the person of Jesus Christ, not with Catholicism. But I also feel touched by the person of Buddha. I am also very much interested in shamanism. So my belief has nothing to do with a particular religious tradition. For me, all religions are manifestations of god, of the divine. If you look beyond the surface, then all religions tell the same story.

That is important: you can find spirituality in every religion (...) In Christianity you’ll find Gnosticism, in Hinduism it is the philosophy of Tantra, in the Jewish tradition it is the Kabbalah. The fundamentalist versions of religion are divided: only Allah, only Jesus Christ. But the esoterical undercurrent is almost the same!

For me it is easy to step into any tradition. I can do it with Buddhism from Tibet, with Hinduism, and I can point out what is the essence of every religion (...) I am dealing with almost every world religion (...) There is not one truth. Of course there is one truth, but there are various ways of finding it.

More fundamental than ‘bricolage’ in short, is perennialism: the belief that the diversity of religious traditions essentially refers to the same underlying spiritual truth. Accepting this doctrine, people become

⁴ Unlike those in the remainder of this section, these three quotes are taken from the interviews with the second rather than the first sample of spiritual trainers. It should be emphasized, however, that all respondents from both samples adhere to this type of perennialism.

motivated to experiment freely with various traditions to explore ‘what works for them personally.’ As already briefly indicated above, Heelas (1996: 2) has done path-breaking work in laying bare the precise nature of this underlying spiritual truth, pointing out the primacy of the doctrine of self-spirituality:

Beneath much of the heterogeneity, there is remarkable constancy. Again and again, turning from practice to practice, from publication to publication, indeed from country to country, one encounters the same (or very similar) *lingua franca* (...) This is the language of what shall henceforth be called ‘Self-spirituality’ (...) And these assumptions of Self-spirituality ensure that the New Age Movement is far from being a mish-mash, significantly eclectic, or fundamentally incoherent (emphasis in original).

In the spiritual milieu, Heelas explains, modern people are essentially seen as “gods and goddesses in exile” (1996: 19): “The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated (...) by mainstream society and culture” (1996: 18). The latter are thus conceived of as basically alienating forces, estranging one from one’s ‘authentic,’ ‘natural’ or ‘real’ self – from who one ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ is:

(T)he most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God,’ ‘the Goddess,’ the ‘Source,’ ‘Christ Consciousness,’ the ‘inner child,’ the ‘way of the heart,’ or, most simply and (...) most frequently, ‘inner spirituality’ (1996: 19).

This, then, is the binding doctrine in the spiritual milieu: the belief that in the deeper layers of the self one finds a true, authentic and sacred kernel, basically ‘unpolluted’ by culture, history and society, that informs evaluations of what is good, true and meaningful. Those evaluations, it is held, cannot be made by relying on external authorities or experts, but only by listening to one’s ‘inner voice’: “What lies within – experienced by way of ‘intuition,’ ‘alignment’ or an ‘inner voice’ – serves to inform the judgements, decisions and choices required for everyday life” (Heelas 1996: 23).

Like traditional forms of religion, the idea of self-spirituality consists of a well-defined doctrine of “being and well-being” (Goudsblom 1985) or a “theodicy of good and evil” (Weber 1920). A ‘mundane,’ ‘conventional’ or ‘socialized’ self – often referred to as the ‘ego’ –, demonized as the ‘false’ or ‘unreal’ product of society and its institutions, is

contrasted with a 'higher,' 'deeper,' 'true' or 'authentic' self that is sacralized and can be found in the self's deeper layers. In the words of our respondents:

I experience god, the divine, as something within me. I feel it as being present in myself. I connect with it as I focus my attention on my inner self, when I meditate. (...) It's all about self-knowledge, being conscious about yourself. (...) It has nothing to do with something that's outside of you that solves things for you.

I think spirituality is something that lives inside of you. It has a lot to do with becoming the essence of who you are and being as natural as possible.

I am god. I don't want to insult the Christian church or anything, but I decide what I'm doing with my life. (...) There is no 'super-dad' in heaven that can tell me 'You have to do this and that, or else....' I am going to feel!

This sacralization of the self is logically tied to an understanding of social institutions as evil. Modern bureaucracies, for instance, are generally regarded as 'alienating,' 'nonsensical,' 'inhumane,' and 'without soul,' while excessive identification with career, status and pre-structured work roles is regarded as a major source of personal problems. More generally, the subordination of the self to pre-given life orders is held to inescapably result in frustration, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorder, depression, disease, violence, sick forms of sexuality, etcetera. The sacralization of the self, in short, goes hand in hand with a demonization of social institutions to produce a clear-cut dualistic worldview (Aupers and Houtman 2003):

If you cannot find yourself in your work. (...) If you don't have pleasure in your work, then you start to think about yourself negatively and that's a bad thing. Then you become physically and mentally ill.

It can make people really ill. You should know how many people have psychological and psychosomatic complaints because they are imprisoned in a role, a role where they are not at home. I meet many of these people in this center.

'I am my work.' I hear that a lot. When people retire they fall into this black hole. 'I do not exist anymore.' Because 'I am my work, my status. I am the director.' (...) That's hard! Things go wrong then. They will become bitter and unhappy. Sometimes they die soon.

This dualistic worldview constitutes the heart of the doctrine of self-spirituality. Motivated by perennialist philosophy, participants in the

spiritual milieu freely use various concepts to describe the spiritual essence of human beings and ‘follow their personal paths’ towards their deeper selves by delving into various religious traditions. They may speak, for instance, about the ‘higher self’ of Theosophy, the ‘divine spark’ of Gnosticism, the ‘soul’ of Christianity, the ‘Buddha nature’ of Buddhism or the ‘inner child’ of humanistic psychology. Notwithstanding those essentially trivial differences, the underlying doctrine of self-spirituality is uncontested.

The emergence of a pluralistic spiritual supermarket confirms Luckmann’s classical prediction, in short, but has simultaneously blinded many observers to the commonly held doctrine of self-spirituality – the belief that the self itself is sacred. It is this doctrine that paradoxically accounts for the staggering diversity at the surface of the spiritual milieu – an inevitable outcome when people feel that they need to follow their personal paths and explore what works for them personally – and simultaneously provides it with ideological unity and coherence at a deeper level. The common characterization of New Age as ‘pick-and-mix-religion’ or ‘diffuse religion’ is not plainly wrong, then, but rather superficial. If it is believed that the sacred resides in the deeper layers of the self, after all, what else to expect than people following their personal paths, experimenting freely with a range of traditions in a highly heterogeneous spiritual milieu? The diversity of the spiritual milieu *results from* rather than *contradicts* the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and wellbeing.

The social construction of self-spirituality

As we have seen, the spiritual milieu is in fact more doctrinally coherent and hence less diffuse than typically assumed. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether ‘spiritual socialization’ really is an oxymoron, because “the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible” as Bruce (2002: 99) claims. To study this, we analyze the biographies of the spiritual trainers of our second sample. They have been strategically selected because they specialize in spiritual courses for business life and in fact all prove to have started their own careers there. How and why did they make this remarkable shift from ‘normal’ jobs, such as clerk, president-director or manager, to the spiritual world of shamanism, aura reading, tantra and channeling? More specifically: what, if any, was the role played by socialization?

Alienation as the key: who am I, really?

In obvious contrast to the way Christian identities are typically adopted, only one of those nine respondents developed an affinity with spirituality due to parental socialization during his formative period. Contrary to Bruce's suggestion, however, this does not mean that socialization plays no role at all, although this process only started after they got motivated to get involved due to the experience of identity problems. Through excessive identification with the goals set by the companies they worked for, with their pre-structured work roles and well-defined task descriptions, they increasingly felt alienated. This raised questions of meaning and identity: '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?'

The case of Chantal, who now works in the New Age centre Soulstation, is exemplary. She studied economics, rapidly made a career in the business world and, she explains, completely identified with her work. Looking back she states that she was "marched along the paths set out by society" and adds: "I studied marketing and sales, but had never learned to look in the mirror." Like most others, she points out that her identity crisis began with an "intruding conversation" with a consultant:

I was working at MCR, a computer company, and I was the commercial director. A big team, a big market, and a big responsibility for the profits. Much too young for what I did. But that was my situation: You did what you had to do. Then I was invited by a business partner to visit a consultant. I sat there talking for two hours with that man. It was an inspiring visit and suddenly he looked at me intrudingly and said: 'I hear your story. It sounds perfect, looking at it from the outside, but where are you?' In other words: 'The story is not yours. It is the standard "format" of the company you are presenting, but where is your passion? What makes you Chantal instead of Miss MCR?'

The latter question marks the beginning of an identity crisis and an enduring quest for meaning. She adds:

I thought: 'Shit, I have no answer to this question and I have to do something with that.' The result of this conversation was a burnout that lasted almost a year. That's a crisis, you know! In the evening hours I started to do coaching sessions, I started thinking about the question: 'Who am I, really?' You start to look in the mirror. And then, at a certain moment, you can no longer unite your private life with your position at work. It's like your skis are suddenly moving in opposite directions. And that's definitely not a comfortable position: before you realize, you're standing in a split.

The suggestive metaphor of “standing in a split” between the demands of business life and private life applies to most of the respondents. The more they become involved in ‘soul searching,’ the more they alienate from their working environments. ‘Being true to oneself’ becomes an imperative and, in the end, becomes incompatible with the demands of business life. This cognitive dissonance is the main reason why respondents eventually resign from their regular jobs. Marco, founder of New Age centre Merlin, specialized in Enneagram trainings (the Enneagram is a psycho-spiritual model to increase self-knowledge) and shamanistic courses, states in this respect:

That is why I left business life. When I felt that I had to work on the basis of my intuition, or my feelings, this became a problem. (...) It was just not accepted that such a thing as intuition existed. I had to base my accounts on numbers and figures. I couldn’t bear that any longer. Now I want to do work that feels right.

Yet another respondent, Marie-José, worked for nineteen years as a consultant, a manager and, finally, a director. She started working on ‘intuitive development’ in her personal life but felt increasingly that she could not reconcile these private practices with her public task as a director. These were, she explains, “two incompatible languages”:

Finally I ended up in a sort of dull routine and realized that the organization was only interested in its own survival. (...) The only thing that counted was that one could legitimate one’s decisions to the outside world. I severely began to disconnect from the company. (...) It became clear to me that I performed a certain role that fitted the formal position I had in that company. Like ‘This is my role, so this is the way I act and what I feel is something I let out when I am at home.’ Then I thought: ‘I have to leave this company, because I can’t stand it no longer to act as if I feel nothing, while in fact I am overwhelmed by my emotions.’ (...) I figured: ‘What will happen when I express my feelings in the office? Should I cry?’

The process of ‘soul searching’ that follows should not be misconstrued as a strictly personal quest for meaning. Although a latent sense of unease or discomfort may well have been present beforehand, it is indeed quite telling that it typically became manifest only after a conversation with a consultant or coach. Remarks like “He touched something within me,” “Something opened up” or “The light went on” indicate that due to this contact latent discomfort becomes manifest and triggers a process of searching the depths of one’s soul.

What follows is a process of socialization, in which three mechanisms validate and reinforce one another: 1) acquiring a new cognitive frame

of interpretation, 2) having new experiences, and 3) legitimating one's newly acquired worldview. These mechanisms, Tanya Luhrmann (1989: 312) demonstrates in her study on neopaganism, are the pushing powers behind an "interpretive drift": "the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity".

Spiritual careers: knowledge and experience shifting in tandem

Initially, the process of soul searching has a secular character. Motivated by their identity crises, respondents start describing their selves in vocabularies derived from humanistic psychology. Emotions are permitted and valued positively, but are not yet defined as higher, spiritual or sacred. Although they generally start out with humanistic psychological self-help books and courses, they eventually end up doing more esoteric types of trainings, such as shamanism, aura reading and the like.

Daan comments on his relentless participation in various courses as "a sort of hunger that emerges in yourself. You start to nourish and feed it. And so you hop from course to course." By satisfying their 'hunger' on the New Age market, the respondents acquire alternative frames of interpretation, new vocabularies and symbols to interpret their experiences. They learn to label weird, out-of-the-ordinary experiences as spiritual. *Vice versa*, these experiences validate the acquired frame of interpretation. In the words of Luhrmann: "Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement" (1989: 315). The story of Marie-José provides a good illustration:

We were walking on a mountain. (...) And I was just observing, thinking what a beautiful mountain this was and suddenly everything started to flow within me. This was my first spiritual experience. (...) I felt like: 'Now I understand what they mean when they say that the earth is alive.' I began to make contact and understood that I am like the earth, a part of nature, and that my body is alive.

The formulation 'Now I understand what they mean when they say' illustrates that knowledge precedes experience and, perhaps, shapes its specific content. A similar story is told by Chantal. During her stay at Findhorn she learned about the existence of auras, chakras and streams of energy inside and just outside the body. This resulted, she argues, in 'spiritual experiences':

When I was there, someone said: 'You have a healing energy around you and you should do something with that.' Well, I had never heard of these

two words, 'healing' and 'energy.' So I was like: 'What do you mean?' She said: 'I'll give you an instruction.' After that I started practicing with a friend of mine. I moved my hand over her body and I indeed felt warm and cold places. And I felt sensations, stimulation. Then I became curious.

Chantal began to delve deeper in the matter of healing and increasingly felt streams of energy around people. After a while she started to actually see these fields of energy:

After this I began to see auras, colors around people. At that time I still worked at this computer company and – after three months (at Findhorn) – I returned to the office. During meetings I was really staring at people; like, 'I have to look at you, because you have all these colors around you.'

Respondents voluntarily internalize a spiritual conception of the self in the process and radically re-interpret their personal identities in conformity with it. On the one hand, a new image of the self in the present emerges: undefined emotions and experiences are now understood in spiritual terms and the new identity is understood as profoundly spiritual. On the other hand, they start to re-write their biographies: they break with their past identities, now understood as 'one-dimensional,' 'alienated' or 'unhappy.' As one respondent argues: "I now know that I was structurally depressed without being aware of it." Statements such as those exemplify the cultural logic of conversion: they have 'seen the light' and now re-interpret their past lives as 'living in sin.' As with classical conversions, they follow the logic of 'Then I thought..., but now I know.' The more our respondents became immersed in the spiritual milieu, the more these considerations were reinforced, to eventually reach the point of successful socialization, "the establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 183).

Legitimations

Having left their regular jobs and having started new careers as trainers and teachers in the spiritual milieu, it is hardly surprising that our respondents regularly encounter resistance and critique. They are well aware that they are seen by many as "irrational," "softies," or "dreamers" and that their way of life is perceived by many as "something for people with problems." How do they deal with these and other forms of resistance? A core element in their legitimation strategy is a radical reversal of moral positions: they argue that it is not themselves, but the critical outsider who has a problem, although he or she may not be aware

of this. Following the doctrine of self-spirituality, resistance, critique and moral opposition are taken as symptoms of a deeply felt anxiety that cannot (yet) be directly experienced. Critics, our respondents argue, project an unresolved 'inner problem' on the outside world. In the words of Marie-José:

People who have such strong resistance secretly have a strong affinity with spirituality. Otherwise they wouldn't be so angry. They just can't break through their resistance. Obviously they have a problem. Why else would you make such a fuzz about something that doesn't concern you?

Daan tells a similar story:

People are projecting it on the outside world: they get angry. There is obviously something in themselves they are not satisfied with. And then it's easier to get angry with others than to say: 'This is jealousy in me' or 'This is greed.' 'No, let's not take a look at that, let's project it on the outside world.' To handle these problems takes loads of strength and efforts. (...) To enter a process of spiritual growth, you have to be very strong. As we can read in the Vedic literature: it is much easier to conquer seven cities than to conquer yourself.

Marco, who, among other things, works with the Enneagram (a psycho-spiritual model to increase self-knowledge), explains his strategy in dealing with resistance and critique during his courses as follows:

Of course, in my trainings, I regularly meet people who show resistance but I can easily trace that back to their personality. Then I say: 'You see, this is your mechanism of resistance that is now emerging.' (...) Then I say: 'I can fully understand you, I know the reasons why you are saying this.' Then they say: 'It is useless debating with you!' I say: 'But what can I do about it? (...) It is part of the type of person you are, as explained by the Enneagram.'

Our interviewees normalize their positions and pathologize criticism by outsiders by 'reading' it as a symptom of psychological fear, anxiety or insecurity, in short. As a consequence, the 'inside' group is portrayed as courageous and free (because they choose to face their 'demons'), while the 'outsiders' are labeled as alienated because they are disconnected from their deeper selves.

The process of socialization unfolds as follows, then. First, latent feelings of alienation become manifest after a conversation with a consultant, raising problems of meaning and identity – '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?' Second, during the process of soul searching that follows, people are socialized into the ethic of self-spirituality, with knowledge

and experience shifting in tandem. Third, after successful socialization, standardized legitimations are deployed, further reinforcing the ethic of self-spirituality. Those findings are strikingly consistent with those of Hammer (2001), based on a content analysis of a sample of New Age texts in his case. In his book “Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age”, Hammer (2001: 366–7) also demonstrates that several cognitive and social mechanisms are operative so as to make New Agers conform to a set of unwritten norms (see Hammer 2004, for a very brief summary of the argument as well as Hanegraaff 2001, for a similar type of analysis):

Labeled spiritual rather than religious, experiences are presented in numerous New Age texts as self-validating and primary. Thus, attention is turned away from the fact that the frame of interpretation is culturally constituted, and that ritual forms and collective practices fundamentally shape individual experience.

This process of socialization into a spiritual discourse about the self reveals that participants in the spiritual milieu are less authentic than they typically believe they are. After all: how authentic are those concerned, when they have in fact been socialized into a shared emphasis on the primacy of personal authenticity? New Agers’ self-claimed authenticity rather reminds one of the classical scene in Monty Python’s “Life of Brian”, in which a crowd of followers enthusiastically and literally repeats Brian’s words with one voice when he desperately attempts to convince them to go home and leave him alone: “We are all individuals!” they shout, with only one astonished dissenter muttering “I’m not...”

It is striking to note that, apart from the latent feelings of alienation that trigger it, the process of socialization into a spiritual discourse about the self is basically identical to that revealed by Howard Becker in his classical study of marijuana users. In that case, too, acquired knowledge underlies the recognition and positive evaluation of experiences, just as in both cases “deviant groups tend (...) to be pushed into rationalizing their position” by means of standardised legitimations (1966: 38) so as to neutralize critique from outsiders and reinforce the adopted way of life to insiders.

*Self-spirituality’s public significance: bringing
‘Soul’ back to work*

“Sociologists rarely study spirituality in the workplace,” Grant et al. (2004: 267) observe. Although some substantial studies have been

done in this field (e.g., Heelas 1996; Mitroff and Denton 1999a; Nadesan 1999; Roberts 1994; Goldschmidt Salamon 2001),⁵ this blind spot is probably due to the received wisdom that spirituality lacks public significance, remaining confined to “the life-space that is not directly touched by institutional control” (Luckmann 1996: 73) and failing to “generate powerful social innovations and experimental social institutions” (Bruce 2002: 97). But obviously, the very rarity of studies of spirituality in the workplace precludes any premature conclusions to the effect that spirituality fails to affect our ‘primary institutions,’ modern work organizations. “(I)f it appears to sociologists that spirituality cannot take root within secular bureaucracies, it may be because their theories have not yet allowed it,” as Grant et al. (2004: 281) rightly note. And indeed, notwithstanding common claims to the contrary, it is difficult to deny that spirituality has in fact entered the public domain of work organizations.

New Age incorporated

In the 1980s, business organizations became interested in the world-views and practices of the New Age and, *vice versa*, New Age began to turn towards business life (Heelas 1996; Nadesan 1999). Renowned management magazines such as “People Management”, “Industry Week” and “Sloan Management Review” publish articles on the opportunities of spirituality for business life on a regular basis (e.g., Baber 1999; Berman 1999; Braham 1999; Hayes 1999; Mitroff and Denton 1999b; Neal 1999; Traynor 1999; Turner 1999; Welch 1998). Indeed, on a basis of 131 in-depth interviews and 2,000 questionnaires in American companies, Mitroff and Denton demonstrate that employees and managers feel a great need to integrate spirituality in business life. In “A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America” (1999a: 14) they conclude:

This age calls for a new ‘spirit of management.’ For us, the concepts of spirituality and soul are not merely add-on elements of a new philosophy or policy. (...) No management effort can survive without them. We refuse to accept that whole organisations cannot learn ways to foster soul and spirituality in the workplace. We believe not only that they can, but also that they must.

⁵ Substantial fieldwork on New Age and business organisations has also been done in Denmark, published in Danish, by Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg (2001).

Most of the spiritual ideas, initiatives and practices that are applied in business life can be labeled as self-spirituality: "The inner-individual orientation is what most people, including the majority of our respondents, mean by spirituality" (Mitroff and Denton 1999a: 26).

Examples of large companies that have become interested in New Age trainings are Guinness, General Dynamics, and Boeing Aerospace – even the US Army has adopted them (Heelas 1996). It is hard to tell to what extent New Age affects American business life, but there are some indications. Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990: 273) refer to a survey held among five hundred American companies, at least half of which had at one time or another offered "consciousness-raising techniques" to their employees. They estimate that companies in the US spend at least four billion dollars on New Age consultants annually, which is more than ten percent of the total of thirty billion spent on company trainings every year (see Barker 1994; Nadesan 1999; Swets and Bjork 1990: 95).

Since the 1990s, the shift of New Age towards business life has become clearly visible in the Netherlands, too (see Aupers 2005, for more details about the history of New Age in the Netherlands). A prime example is Oibibio in Amsterdam, founded in 1993. Oibibio's business department offered trainings in spiritual management, such as 'Team management and the soul' and 'Management in astrological perspective,' to keep companies "ready for battle" in times in which "dynamic streams of production, services and information increasingly put pressure on organisations and managers." They make the following claim in their flyer:

Our trainers are builders of bridges: they speak the language of business life and pragmatically know how to implant the spiritual philosophy in your organisation; they do so in cooperation with your employees.

Oibibio's bankruptcy in the late 1990s did not trigger a decline of New Age capitalism in the Netherlands. Instead it marked the birth of many other, more successful New Age centers such as Metavisie, Soulstation, Being in Business and Firmament. Metavisie, probably one of the largest players in this field, claims to have offered in-company trainings to seventy-five of the one hundred most renowned companies in the Netherlands.⁶ The list of clients on their website comprises more than

⁶ These claims made by Metavisie can be found on their website www.metavisie.com. We have not contacted the companies on the website to validate whether they indeed contracted Metavisie to provide in-company trainings.

two hundred national and international companies and institutions, among them many of the major Dutch banks and insurance companies (ABN Amro, ING, Generale, Rabobank, Aegon, Amev, De Amersfoortse, Centraal Beheer, Interpolis, Zwitserleven and Delta Lloyd) and IT-companies (Cap Gemini, CMG, Compaq, Getronics Software, High Tech Automation, IBM Nederland, Oracle and Baan Software). Internationally renowned Dutch multinationals such as Ahold, Heineken and telecom company KPN are also on the list, as well as remarkably many government-sponsored institutions such as the national welfare organization UWV-GAK and the University of Amsterdam, and the Ministries of Finance, the Interior, Trade and Industry, Justice, Agriculture and Fisheries, Transport and Public Works, Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, and Housing, Regional Development and the Environment. This is, indeed, convincing evidence that New Age is penetrating the public sphere. More than that, the list indicates that especially organizations producing immaterial services rather than material products provide their employees with spiritual in-company trainings. Especially the post-industrial service sector seems hospitable towards New Age, then. What is the goal of the spiritual in-company trainings in all of these organizations?

The interviews with trainers of New Age centers that specialize in spirituality in business life and those centers' websites reveal that their courses aim primarily at deconstructing the typically modern separation between the private and public realms, by trying to impose the logic of the former upon the latter. This complies, of course, with the ethic of self-spirituality: the centers aim to make the rationalized environments less alienating and more open to 'authenticity' and 'spirituality'. By doing so, it is argued, they seek for a win/win situation or, in the terms of Heelas (1996) "the best of both worlds." In the following accounts, 'authenticity' is held to result in both well-being *and* efficiency and 'spirituality' in happiness *and* profit, while 'soulful organizations' are portrayed as successful:

Organizations are in movement. The pressure increases. People want dedication. There is a call for a new sort of leader. A leader that takes business results *and* human potential into account. (...) Metavisie helps to create these leaders of the future. Together we cause a paradigm shift in society. A society that is not primarily obsessed with money and profit but a society that celebrates the quality of human life. Where it is the highest goal to be your most authentic self (www.metavisie.com).

The mission of Being in Business is to build a bridge between organisations and spirituality to make businesses more successful. Success, then, is not primarily defined as making more profit, but also as increasing well-being for you and your employees. Being in Business shapes this spiritual dimension in your organisation by providing services that will increase consciousness, vitality, fun, pleasure and energy. Spirituality is profit. Because profit is nothing more than materialised energy. The more energy your organisation generates, the higher the profit. And spirituality in your organisation is of course much more (www.beinginbusiness.nl).

People who develop personal mastership steadily become more capable to live their authenticity. In such a situation, one can put all one's natural talents in the world and do what one is really good at. The more authentically one lives, the more effective one's actions. Authenticity therefore has a large impact on productivity within organisations (www.soulstation.nl).

Firmament strives towards unlocking, developing and reinforcing the unique potential and inspiration of individuals. By doing so, they bring back the soul into your organisation. It is our experience that vital and soulful organisations, where employees recognise their personal goals in the goals of the organisation, operate powerfully on the economic market (www.firmamentbv.com).

Although bureaucratization may pose all sorts of practical obstacles to the introduction of spiritual practices in the workplace (Grant et al. 2004), this should not blind us to the fact that it also paradoxically underlies attempts to bring 'soul' back to work – to break with 'alienating' bureaucratic organizational structures and pre-given work roles. As we have seen, this seems to apply especially to organizations in the post-industrial service sector, probably because the highly skilled and specialized work in this sector is much more difficult to rationalize and control from without, and because attempts to nevertheless do so are likely to meet with fierce professional resistance.

Indeed, the 'best of both worlds' approach that dominates the concomitant discourse suggests that tensions between bureaucratic demands on the one hand and opportunities for spiritual practices on the other may in fact be less severe than typically assumed. Organizational goals are typically taken for granted and remain strictly instrumental, after all, while the 'inner lives' of employees are considered valuable assets that enable firms and organizations to strengthen their positions in highly competitive and demanding environments. Although it is hard to deny that spirituality has entered the public realm of work, then, what is badly

needed is good ethnographic research into whether and how tensions between bureaucratic demands and spiritual practices emerge and, if so, how those are dealt with on an everyday basis.

Self-spirituality in action: 'Grow or I'll shoot!'

We finally present the findings of a case study of a company that has to a large extent institutionalized the ethic of self-spirituality. This case is not typical of contemporary business life, but is theoretically instructive. Whereas people enter the spiritual milieu freely and voluntarily, driven by problems of identity caused by alienation, as we have seen, the employees of this particular company find themselves in a setting in which the ethic of self-spirituality is more or less imposed upon them. Its functioning as a binding social norm – as a 'social fact' in the classical sense of Emile Durkheim – thereby becomes more visible and easier to study, precisely because not all employees are equally enthusiastic about such an imposition of a spiritual regime. As such, this case study enables us to further illustrate the claims made above about the existence and nature of a coherent spiritual doctrine of being and wellbeing and about the dynamics of socialization into such a spiritual discourse about the self.

The company in case is Morca, a producer of bathroom equipment with branches in various countries in Western Europe.⁷ Geert, its president-director, is deeply involved in New Age and provides in-company trainings for his employees. On a personal level, Geert is motivated to implement spirituality in business life because of his own biography. The development he went through exactly matches the analysis in the previous section: he went through an "enormous personal crisis," made contact with his current spiritual coach, followed various New Age courses and increasingly embraced the ethic of self-spirituality. He discovered – in his own words – that he is both "the question and the answer" and "the painter and the canvass."

Marcel, his coach and spiritual mentor, takes care of the courses at Morca. Marcel works with various religious traditions (Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism), embraces the 'perennial philosophy' and emphasizes the primacy of self-spirituality: "The spiritual leader knows that

⁷ To safeguard anonymity, the actual name of the company and names of the president-director, the spiritual trainer and the employees interviewed are changed into pseudonyms.

self-knowledge is the source of all wisdom.” Three questions are at the heart of his courses: ‘Who am I?’, ‘What do I want?’, and: ‘How do I get it?’ The president-director explains the goal of the courses as follows:

I want to provide the opportunity for employees to find themselves in their jobs. And it is my conviction that if you ‘follow that path,’ you’ll end up encountering your inner spirituality. And when people get inspired they are inclined to make beautiful things. And we all profit from that.

Like the New Age centers, then, Morca aims for the ‘best of both worlds.’ It aims to transform the public realm of the organization into a private sphere where employees can express themselves fully because “authenticity is the most important thing in the world.” By doing so, Morca expects its employees to be more happy and, hence, more effective, so as to increase productivity and profits.

It is important to note that participation in the courses is *formally* a free choice. Geert claims to have abandoned his former missionary attitude “Grow or I’ll shoot.” Having learned that people cannot be forced into a spiritual lifestyle he now argues (like his coach): “Pulling the grass will not make it grow faster.” As we will see, however, employees in Morca are in fact subject to social pressure to participate in the in-company trainings, producing mutual distrust, critique and a divide between participants and non-participants.

Participants: ‘It takes guts!’

All of the interviewed who have participated in the trainings are people in mid- to top-level management positions. They are extremely positive about the trainings, because those have given them the opportunity to solve personal problems (“stones in your backpack”) and to grow spiritually. They emphasize the influence of Geert and Marcel in making them participate. In the words of Mark, an assistant group controller: “I am doing it because someone gave me a kick in the butt to participate. That’s how it feels. That one is Geert.” The latter’s influence is perceived as stimulating. Originally, they were skeptics and thought it was all “vague” and “irrational.” In compliance with the analysis in the previous section, they now label these forms of skepticism as “psychological resistance” or “fear of growth.” Beforehand, they were just not aware of their problems in private and working life, thinking “Private is private, don’t bother me about that!” This attitude changed while

participating. Arthur was the first to “break through his resistance” during the courses. He explains:

A lot of shit from the past entered my consciousness. When you become emotional and start to cry in front of the group – and not just a little bit, but letting loose completely... That takes guts! You need that guts. If you don't have those, well, then it gets tough. Everybody thought: 'I am sitting here with my colleagues, I have to work with them tomorrow, I am not going to cry!' So there was this mechanism of resistance: 'I don't want this.' I was one of the first who dealt with a serious emotional problem. (...) Once I did it, others showed the courage to follow.

This statement exemplifies the legitimations discussed in the last section. 'Opening up' to colleagues and showing emotions is now understood as a sign of 'guts,' while defending the boundary between private and working life is understood as a symptom of fear. Frank is another participant who entered the world of self-spirituality through the courses:

I am very rational and before I started the course I told Marcel this: 'What I know about myself is that I have the feeling that I don't really have emotions.' However, the first session we did, I was filled with tears, overwhelmed by emotions. In a certain situation Marcel told me: 'I thought you had no emotions?' Then I thought: 'Well, I obviously have them but they are normally hidden somewhere where I cannot reach them.'

In short, the stories of these employees exemplify the breakdown of the modern separation between private and public life produced by the shift towards self-spirituality in the organization. They are convinced that this approach works: it helps them to solve personal problems and to be more open and expressive at the office. This in turn, they argue, stimulates a sense of fellowship and community: “We have become much more open towards one another. We have become a group. We really trust each other.” Under the influence of the president-director and his coach, then, self-spirituality has become an organizational asset. But how do those who did not participate in the courses evaluate all of this?

Non-participants: 'I don't feel like doing that!'

The interviewed who have not participated in the trainings are mainly people who occupy lower positions in the organizational hierarchy (production, administration and the like). Moreover, they are supervised by the participants discussed above. Their accounts mirror those

of the managers who have participated and who have become involved in spirituality in the process. They experience the influence of the president-director not as stimulating, but as pressure. Taking a more conventional stance, they reject the privatization and spiritualization of public organizational life and wish to preserve the divide between private and public. Personal issues, Johan argues, are out of place in a working environment:

I think courses like this are disturbing. I mean: I am not against it, but I would never do such a thing with colleagues. I've heard that it revolves around showing your personal feelings and emotions. That frightens me. (...) To really let yourself go, you need to know people very well. You need to trust people. (...) In this respect, I really want to keep my private life private.

Martijn tells a similar story:

At a certain moment it was explained what the course was all about. How you had to act, what you had to do and how you had to open yourself up to others. Then I thought: 'Do you really have to do that in front of your fellow-workers?' Actually, I don't feel like doing that. It's not that I have to keep everything as a secret, but it 'runs deeper,' they say. And then I think: 'Do I want that?'

These employees paint a completely different picture of spirituality in business life: they defend the modern boundary between private and public and perceive the sharing of emotions with co-workers (especially superiors) not as courageous, but as frightening; the influence of the president-director not as stimulating, but as pressure. Moreover, they disagree with the participants that the courses result in a stronger sense of unity. On the contrary:

In a company like this you get two camps, because there are people who participate and those who do not. And, to be honest, I think that the people who participated have changed. How do you say that? These were people who already had high self-esteem. That became stronger during the course. Maybe that is the power of the course: 'Believing in yourself.' But it's not nice to feel better than others and treat them that way.

The other interviews confirm that there are two camps in the company. The spiritual group argues that the others would better join in, because otherwise "They'll miss the connection." The secular group "feel(s) less than the others," feels that they "don't fit in" and "are not respected." These quotes nicely illustrate the tension that has built up around the courses and, more generally, around spirituality in the organization.

In her critical study on 'New Age spiritualism' in business life, Nadesan (1999: 19) claims: "Those who reject the (spiritual) discourse or those who fail to achieve success get labeled as unwilling to take care of themselves or, worse, as reaping their karmic rewards".

As we have demonstrated, spirituality is widespread in Dutch company life and is considered a valuable asset to enhance both meaning *and* effectiveness. We are not dealing with a mere hype or the latest management fashion. After all, the discussed developments began already in the late 1980s, blossomed in the 1990s and have remained salient ever since. More substantially, our data indicate that especially organizations in the post-industrial service sector are hospitable towards self-spirituality. Highly educated professionals working typically in mid- to top-level management are, in comparison with production workers, more oriented towards intrinsic motivations, goals and rewards. They give priority, Mitroff and Denton (1999a: 212) demonstrate on the basis of their survey, to "interesting work" and realizing their "full potential as a person." Indeed, from an organizational perspective, this makes it profitable to break with alienating bureaucratic structures and incorporate issues like self-understanding, identity and self-spirituality in corporate culture. This elective affinity between the post-industrial service sector and New Age spirituality further strengthens our conviction that spirituality in public organizational life cannot be dismissed as a mere hype or the latest management fashion.

The case of Morca, again, is not typical of spirituality in the public realm, but it does demonstrate convincingly that substantially more is at stake than individuals exploring their own spirituality. More specifically, it demonstrates that self-spirituality is a well-defined doctrine with a strong potential for socialization: people at this company learn the importance of rejecting external authorities and making contact with their 'deeper selves.' Although exactly the same occurs in the spiritual milieu, as we have seen above, it easily remains unnoticed there. This is because participants who enter voluntarily to work on their personal problems are likely to experience this process of socialization as a strictly personal and authentic delving in the self's deeper layers.

Conclusion and discussion

In his defense of secularization theory, Steve Bruce (2002) criticizes authors such as Rodney Stark (1999; see also Stark and Bainbridge 1985)

and Grace Davie (1994), who argue that secularization is *by definition* accompanied by religious innovation. Stark, Bruce explains, makes *a priori* assumptions about religion as a universal human need, while Davie argues from a similar perspective that there will always remain a “believing without belonging.” We agree with Bruce that such claims about humans as ‘essentially’ religious beings are “nonsociological” (2002: 104). More than that: they are metaphysical, we would argue.

We also agree with Bruce that much research into spirituality is sociologically naive and immature. This not only applies to the research of those who are overly sympathetic to spirituality and hence cannot resist the temptation of ‘going native,’ as our colleagues from anthropology say. Perhaps surprisingly, it equally applies to the work of those who are highly critical of it (see Woodhead 2005, for examples). Because of his own tendency to criticize other people’s ideas about spirituality as ‘nonsociological’ (2002: 104) or ‘bad sociology’ (1998), Bruce himself perhaps provides the best example. Attempting to hammer home the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu, he writes (2002: 83):

Findhorn, one of Europe’s oldest centres of New Age thought and teaching, *requires* of those who take part in its various forms of group work that they confine their talk to ‘I statements.’ The point of this is to establish that, while each participant has a right to say how he or she feels or thinks, *no-one has a right* to claim some extra-personal authority for his or her views (emphasis added; SA/DH).

To be sure, those observations do much to underscore the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu. But simultaneously, and ironically, they do more than that. They also demonstrate how this very individualism operates as a socially sanctioned obligation of personal authenticity, revealing precisely the social significance of spirituality that Bruce denies. Arguing that allegedly ‘diffuse beliefs’ such as those cannot and need not be transmitted (2002: 99), Bruce’s failure to capture and satisfactorily theorize this ambiguity of the spiritual milieu’s ‘individualism’ causes him to overlook that people are socialized into compliance to the doctrine of self-spirituality.

What Bruce has on offer, then, is a mere sociologically naive reproduction of New Age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity rather than a mature and critical sociological analysis. The assumption that people all by themselves develop their strictly personal and

authentic spiritualities is obviously sociologically naive, since “as good sociologists, we all know that there is no such thing as an isolated individual” (Besecke 2005: 194). Besecke also criticizes the received conception of ‘privatized religion’, arguing that it results in a conception of religion “as almost an exclusively psychological phenomenon, with very limited and indirect social consequence” (2005: 187). As we have demonstrated, spirituality is in fact less unambiguously individualistic and less privatized than most sociologists hold it to be.

The conception of spirituality as embraced by Bruce (and, to be sure, most other sociologists of religion) inevitably coincides largely with the self-image of the spiritual milieu. It is hardly surprising, after all, that the spiritual practitioners interviewed by Heelas et al. (2005: 27) also deny in every possible way that the doctrine of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced: “Time and time again, we hear practitioners rejecting the idea that their relationships with their group members or clients have anything to do with pre-packaged (...) ways of transmitting the sacred”. But even if spiritual practitioners do not “(tell) their group members or clients what to think, do, believe or feel” (2005: 28), they do tell them that they should take their personal feelings seriously, that a one-sided reliance on thinking at the cost of feeling is detrimental and that one should follow one’s heart.

The task to be taken up in the years that lie ahead, in short, is a radical sociologization of research into New Age and spirituality. What we need is research that critically and systematically deconstructs emic rhetoric to document how precisely spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced in the spiritual milieu and how, why, and with what consequences it is introduced at the workplace.⁸

⁸ Obviously, it is important to study whether normal participants in the spiritual milieu, just like the spiritual elite studied here, also adhere to the doctrine of self-spirituality. Furthermore, it is preferable to study the process of socialisation by means of participant observation. An obvious drawback of the methodology used for the current paper – i.e., interviewing those who have completed the full process after the fact – is that biographical data thus obtained are inevitably coloured by the newly acquired spiritual identity. It should however be noted that, given the nature of this identity (self-spirituality, primacy of authenticity, anti-institutionalism, etcetera), the approach used here seems biased *against* the finding that processes of socialisation do occur. Another drawback of our approach here, and hence another advantage of participant observation, is that only the latter enables one to study the role of resistance to socialization into a spiritual discourse as a reason for abandoning a course.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

SILICON VALLEY NEW AGE

THE CO-CONSTITUTION OF THE DIGITAL AND THE SACRED¹

Dorien Zandbergen

Introduction

In the early 1990s in the San Francisco Bay Area, the utopian and spiritual dreams of the 1960s and 1970s spiritual movements made a comeback in the public scene through the realm of the digital (Rushkoff 1994; Dery 1996; Hanegraaff 1996: 11; Davis 1998). The rise and popularization of digital technologies such as Virtual Reality and the Internet in this period was accompanied by the hopeful expectation of spiritual seekers that these would make permanently available the utopian worlds and the altered states of consciousness sought after by a previous generation of hippies. As one of the spiritual gurus of the 1960s, Timothy Leary (1994: 5) put it: “spiritual realities for centuries imagined” could perhaps now “finally be realized” through the “electronic-digital”. An example of a digital-spiritual dream that surfaced in this period was the hope that immersive Virtual Worlds would make the use of verbal language obsolete, and facilitate instead direct, total and spiritual communication between people using communication methods such as colors, sounds and body movements (e.g., Barlow 1990). Another expression of cyber-spirituality in this period was the idea that through the accumulation of knowledge on the Internet, cyberspace itself became the instantiation of the collective higher consciousness that spiritual seekers had envisioned

¹ This paper is based on research conducted in the context of the project ‘Silicon Valley New Age’, one of the three research projects belonging to the ‘Cyberspace Salvations’ project. This project is funded by the NWO as part of their ‘Future of the Religious Past’ program and is supported by the University of Leiden, University of Rotterdam and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR). I would like to thank NWO and the University of Leiden for funding this project and the Cyberspace Salvation team and the LOBOCOP group at the Erasmus University for providing valuable comments on this paper.

for decades. In the 1970s, spiritual seekers had referred to this collective consciousness as Gaia. This term was coined by the bio-chemist James Lovelock in the 1960s who developed the idea that the earth is a self-organizing system in which all living matter functions as a single organism. In the following decades, this assumption became incorporated in the worldview of spiritual seekers as the idea that the earth actually *is* a living organism with a higher consciousness. In the early 1990s, as Rushkoff observed (1994: 5), spiritual seekers in turn conceptualized the Internet as the “final stage in the development of Gaia, the living being that is the Earth, for which humans serve as neurons.”

In his book on the New Age movement, Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) referred to such expressions of cyber-spirituality with the term “high-tech New Age” or “New Edge” and dubbed it a “trend too recent to put into clear perspective” (1996: 11). While scholars such as Hanegraaff abstained from analyzing the New Edge in such an early stage, spokespersons of the New Edge produced their own reflections on the affinity between spirituality and digital technologies. These reflections often simply depicted the affinity as “natural”. Timothy Leary provides the prime example of such narratives. In his book “Chaos and Cyberculture” (1994) Leary sketched an “Evolution of Countercultures” in which he described the 1965–1975 hippies as “anti-high-tech”, whereas the 1990s hippies are a “super high-tech New Breed” (1994: 81). This “super high tech” orientation of the New Breed can easily be accounted for, according to Leary, because of the “inherent spiritual characteristics of digital technology”. According to Leary, some of the “traditional attributes of the word ‘spiritual’; mythic, magical, ethereal, incorporeal, intangible, nonmaterial, disembodied, ideal, platonic” also define “the electronic-digital”.

As should be clear, Leary’s reflection on the phenomenon of high tech spirituality is tautological and *a priori* confirms the assumptions on which the discourse of New Edge is based. It is furthermore grounded in a reductive and deterministic notion of the spiritual as well as of ‘the digital.’ However, as an explicit New Edge proponent Leary can be forgiven for affirming the New Edge message while reflecting on it. Yet, tautological and deterministic reflections on the affinity between digital technology and spirituality also colored various early academic texts. Many of the so-called ‘first generation’ of scholars of religion and (cyber) technology (Hojsgaard 2005) adopted the premises of the New Edge discourse in equal measure by explaining cyber-spirituality as a natural outcome of supposed intrinsic spiritual characteristics of digital

technology. Because of the supposed inherent disembodied nature of cyberspace, some scholars argued in the 1990s that cyberspace has become the “Platonic new home for the mind and the heart” (Heim 1995), a “new Jerusalem” (Benedikt 1992), or a “paradise” (Stenger 1992). Being based on the assumption that digital technology and spirituality are mirrored into each other, such explanations don’t take issue with the question as to why certain people, in a certain social-cultural context came to take this New Edge idea seriously. As Talal Asad has pointed out (1993: 54): “The possibility and authoritative status [of religious practices and utterances] are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces.” Following Asad, as I attempt in this paper, religious interpretations of the Internet cannot be deduced to the simple assumption that the Internet has spiritual characteristics. Instead, it needs to be understood as a specific expression of a social-cultural climate that has a longer history of celebrating spirituality through high tech, and in which science and technology have become natural forces of life. If we look at the New Edge in this way, it becomes clear that this form of religion breaks with, what Michael Saler has called “a cliché of our times”, which is the idea that science and technology are disenchanting forces in society (2004: 138). Instead, the New Edge’s celebration of the sacred through science and technology (and vice versa) points to other ways in which the sacred is evoked in contemporary Western society.

The social-cultural home of New Edge is ‘Silicon Valley’ – the area between San Francisco and San Jose at the West Coast of the United States. In the 1960s, this area witnessed the mutual emergence of the New Age movement and the computer technology industries. The spiritual New Age movement that emerged in the context of a larger counterculture, is generally known as a technology-rejecting movement. Yet, this paper shows how since the 1960s various processes of ‘brokerage’ can be traced between New Age spirituality and Silicon Valley ‘high tech culture’. While the term ‘New Edge’ has been coined in the late 1980s,² this paper treats the term somewhat anachronistically to refer to this New Age-high tech brokerage since the 1960s.³ Early traces of

² This coinage occurred in the context of the magazine “Mondo 2000”, to which I will turn later in the paper.

³ This of course, also implies using the term New Age anachronistically since it was only since the mid 1970s that the movement ‘became aware of itself’ as New Age (Hanegraaff 1996).

this phenomenon can be found in the documentation by Tom Wolfe of the psychedelic group the Merry Pranksters; in the pages of the 'back to the land' periodical "Whole Earth Catalog" (1968) and in the pages of the later cyberculture magazine "Mondo 2000" (1989). In a discussion of these textual sources and the social scenes in which they were embedded, I hope to illustrate some of the mechanisms through which high tech in general and computer technology specifically, became symbolic for technological and scientific progress as well as for spiritual evolution. Starting out with a short depiction of the central beliefs and practices of the New Age – a spiritual current generally perceived to be essentially anti-technological (e.g., Ross 1992) – I will subsequently focus attention on the ways in which particularly the psychedelic movement expressed New Age ideologies through technology.

The New Age movement: beliefs and practices

In "The Making of a Counterculture" (1969), Theodore Roszak used the term 'counterculture' to describe the rise of several overlapping movements of young, white, and middle class Americans in the 1960s, who protested against issues such as the war in Vietnam, discrimination against women and people of color, and environmental pollution. As Roszak describes, the countercultural youth blamed the values and lifestyles of preceding generations for these social and ecological problems. The countercultural protest was, generally, expressed in two different ways; some chose a political trajectory whereas others were more drawn to spiritual renewal. The so-called 'New Left' emerged from the Civil Rights and Free Speech movements and voiced its protest through demonstration and debate. The most well-known variant of the spiritual type of protest – introduced by a small group of artists and writers who called themselves 'Beats' in the 1950s – was informed by the 'Age of Aquarius' movement in the 1960s, and 'established' itself in the course of the 1970s as the New Age (Heelas 1996: 1). This movement was characterized by a focus on 'inner spirituality' and a desire to 're-enchant' a rationalistic and materialistic Western society. Although the frequently-used term 'New Age *movement*' suggests the existence of an organized and coherent social group with clear boundaries, according to anthropologist Pels "it is impossible to demarcate New Age" and it should rather be understood as a "discourse (...) that produces its own social practices as much as it penetrates into others" (Pels 1998: 266). It is, however, a discourse with characteristics over which various scholars have reached general agreement.

In the first place, New Age is characterized by a high degree of anti-authoritarianism. New Age ideology is founded on the idea that authorities in mainstream society have, in the words of Paul Heelas, “indoctrinated – or, in the New Age sense of the term, ‘brainwashed’” (1996: 18) human beings – into seeing and understanding reality in restrictive ways. In line with the countercultural emphasis on ‘Doing It Yourself’, the New Age adage therefore became ‘create your own reality’. The philosophy behind this was, as Wouter Hanegraaff (1996: 125) points out, that “the nature of our reality is a direct reflection of our conscious and unconscious beliefs. Because most of us hold limiting and restricting beliefs about the world, the universe confirms these convictions. If we nevertheless change our beliefs, we will find that reality changes with it”. Therefore, the New Age message is that “there are no limits to the realities we can imagine and “make real” if only we believe they are possible”. New Age practices and discourse therefore are predominantly concerned with reversing mainstream ideas and beliefs as a way to overcome social brainwashing and to restore an awareness of the ‘authentic,’ ‘original’ and ‘real’.

The prime area in which New Age seeks to overcome the brainwashing forces of mainstream authorities is the domain of religion itself. In a critique of ‘dogmatic and traditional’ Christianity, and particularly the Christian belief that God is a power separate from man to which contact can only be established through belief and the mediation of church authorities, New Agers emphasize individual, unmediated experiences of the divine. This also implies, what Aupers and Houtman (2008) have called, a “relocation of the sacred” communicating the idea that God becomes a force located inside the self, making each person, in essence, spiritual. Paul Heelas has coined the term ‘self-spirituality’ to describe the New Age idea that “To experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God’” (1996: 19).

Besides ‘self-spirituality’, another defining New Age doctrine is a belief in ‘the ultimate wholeness of reality’ or ‘holism.’ The idea of holism, like the idea of self-spirituality, implies a critique of mainstream society and culture. As Hanegraaff (1996: 517) points out, holism is based on a rejection of “reductionistic and dualistic tendencies within mainstream society”. The dogmatic Christian separation of man and nature, mind and body, spirit and matter, and scientific reductionism are, by New Age adherents, “held responsible for the current world crises”. The New Age answer to this is, according to Hanegraaff, “a quest for ‘wholeness’ at all levels of existence” (1996: 516). This quest implies that conceptual distinctions in mainstream dichotomies are erased in New Age

philosophy, such as those between mind and body, humans and nature, past and present and even life and death.

New Age salvation implies the full realization of the principles of self-spirituality and holism; the full realization of one's inner spiritual potential and the progress towards greater and greater wholeness. Whereas in Christian cosmology salvation only takes place after one's death, salvation in the New Age philosophy is thought of in terms of spiritual evolution, a process that can take place within one's own life but may continue after death; it can span several generations or even centuries. The term 'evolution' hereby refers to a movement towards an 'original' state of reality, or, in the words of Hanegraaff (1996: 520), to a "primordial state of perfection". New Age 'self-growth' groups allude to this idea by helping the "individual self unfold", or *actualize* (Heelas 1996: 31), allowing human beings to attain salvation by becoming what they already "are by nature." It also implies the optimistic belief that "the whole world will be transported into a higher octave" by progressively moving towards a New Age of "greater and greater wholeness" (Hanegraaff 1996: 118, 158).

As Wouter Hanegraaff points out, the New Age movement sprang forth from the psychedelic movement but – particularly since the early 1980s – it was more and more characterized by a strong discouragement (or even prohibition) of psychedelic means as part of its religious practices. Instead, New Age emphasized the use of 'natural means' to attain salvation. This implied, according to New Age researcher Andrew Ross (1992: 539), a widespread rejection, not only of psychedelics but of all 'external technologies', and an emphasis on the self-healing capacities inherent in the 'natural system'. As a result, in the past few decades the New Age philosophy has been stereotypically known as anti-technological and as emphasizing 'natural' and 'primitive ways of life.'

High tech New Age in the 1960s: the merry pranksters

While the anti-technology discourse of New Age confirms the "cliché of our times" (Saler 2004) that the domain of the sacred and that of technology are oppositional, different expressions of the New Age philosophy can be found in the history of Bay Area counterculture – some of which are very high tech. One of the early traces of the celebration of New Age ideas through technology has been documented by the American author and journalist Tom Wolfe in "The Electric Kool-Aid

Acid Tests" (1969). Because the later New Edge culture is rooted in the psychedelic community described in this book, it is insightful to have a look at the ways in which these hippies expressed and reworked New Age ideologies in explicit technological settings.

In his book, Tom Wolfe sketches the daily life of the psychedelic group 'the Merry Pranksters,' that formed around the author Ken Kesey, famous for his novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1962). After Kesey obtained some wealth and success through the publication of his first book, he and his Pranksters moved into a house in the woods of La Honda, a place south of San Francisco. As becomes clear from the book, the group was very expressive of the ideas and practices that were to be popularized a few decades later as 'New Age.' In line with the general sensibility of the spiritual counterculture, the Pranksters were inspired by the desire to overcome the brainwashing forces of mainstream society, perceived by the Pranksters as a prison that conditions people into conformity. As Wolfe reported Kesey to have said: "in the course of life, mainstream culture causes a social lag between mind and emotion: your mind wants to go one way, but your emotions the other, because of training, education, the way you were brought up, blocks, hangups and stuff like that" (132). As documented by Wolfe, the group was particularly inspired by the writings of the novelist Aldous Huxley. In his essay "The Doors of Perception" (1954), Huxley had written down his experiences with the psychedelic substance mescaline. In the essay, Huxley agreed with the "eminent Cambridge philosopher Dr. C.D. Broad" that the type of theory put forward by Bergson about the connection between memory and sense perception should be taken more seriously. This theory states that:

The function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. (...) According to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. (...)

Huxley furthermore defined the human brain and nervous system as a "reducing valve" which only allows a "measly trickle" of consciousness. This "reduced awareness" is taken by most people to be the one and only reality. Humans have invented elaborate "symbol-systems and implicit philosophies, which we call languages" to "formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness." This language "tricks" and "bedevils" people into believing that the "reduced awareness is the only

awareness” and that words are “actual things” (Huxley 1961[1954]: 21, 22). For Huxley, self-transcending experiences such as mescaline-induced ones, make people conscious of the “totality of reality (...) of the Mind at Large”. For him, this awareness is most clearly religious in nature. What it reveals is “the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event. In the final stage of ego-lessness there is an ‘obscure knowledge’ that All is in all- that All is actually each” (Ibid.: 24). This experience entailed true salvation since it delivers from “the world of selves, of time, of moral judgments and utilitarian considerations, (...) of self-assertion, of cocksureness, of over-valued words, and idolatrously worshipped notions” (Ibid.: 31). Instead, an “inner world [that is] self-evidently infinite and holy” can be discovered (Ibid.: 38).

As reported by Wolfe, the Pranksters took such cosmologies to heart. During their LSD trips, they reported a “bottled-up God inside of us that is whole, all-feeling, complete and out front” (Wolfe 1968: 133). Unlike the later New Age community, which would seek to get in touch with their inner Gods through ‘natural’, non-technological means, the Pranksters sought to create a divine connection *through* technology. A crucial idea that underlies this technology-orientation is the belief that the unassisted human body has lost its ability of accessing higher states of awareness. Inspired by the writings of Huxley, the Pranksters lived with the idea that social brainwashing has ‘materialized’ in the body and had turned the brain into a ‘reducing valve’ and the body into a ‘sensory lag system’. In other words, the human body and brain have been ‘de-formed’ in such ways as to obstruct immediate and direct experience of the authentic and the divine. One ‘technology’ through which the Pranksters used to restore this connection was LSD. In addition, electrical technologies were used as ways to overcome the ‘faulty body interface’. The aim was to bring people into the present and to create a direct experience of the now. One of the technological designs of the Pranksters was a high tech geodesic dome, described by Wolfe as:

(..) a geodesic dome on top of a cylindrical shaft. It would look like a great mushroom. Many levels. People would climb a stairway up to the cylinder (...) and the dome would have a great foam rubber floor they could lie down on. Sunk down in the foam rubber, below floor level, would be movie projectors, video-tape projectors, light projectors. All over the place, up in the dome, everywhere, would be speakers, microphones, tape machines, live, replay, variable lag. People could take LSD or speed or smoke grass and lie back and experience what they would, enclosed and

submerged in a planet of lights and sounds such as the universe never knew. [it was] a fourth dimension (Wolfe 1968: 206).⁴

The dome was realized at the various all-night parties hosted by the Pranksters. By inviting people to immerse themselves in interactive environments with camera's, sound recorders and stroboscopes, the Pranksters sought to create direct feedback loops between inner signals and outer ones, in complete synchronization, while thus bypassing the impulses of the physical body and to create a full experience of "a higher level of reality [and of] the supreme now [and of] cosmic unity" (Wolfe 1968: 205).

Making the computer countercultural: the hacker ethic

As can be seen in hindsight, the Prankster's high-tech-spirituality pre-udes the New Edge celebration of computer science and technology a few years later. The fusion of spirituality and computing that would characterize the New Edge in the decades to come, has been initiated and narrated by people who were part of the Prankster group and who were in close social and cultural proximity of this scene. As such, clear resonances and affinities can be discovered between the ways in which the Pranksters used electrical technologies and the way in which later New Edgers embraced computer technologies. "The Whole Earth Catalog" was one of the first periodicals that introduced the concept of computing to spiritual seekers in the late 1960s. It was founded in 1968 by one of the organizers and participants of the Prankster parties, Stewart Brand.

According to communication scientist Frederick Turner, "The Whole Earth Catalog" (also 'The Catalog', or the 'Whole Earth' from now on) can be considered "one of the defining documents of the American counterculture" (Turner 2005: 488). It catered to the thousands of communes that arose all over the United States in the late 1960s, would appear biannually for four years, "ballooned to more than 400 pages and sold more than a million and a half copies" (Ibid.). Characteristic for the counterculture at large, the Catalog was cast in terms of an ambivalent,

⁴ According to Wolfe, the idea of such systems went beyond what would later be known as mixed-media entertainment, and what later became a standard practice in 'psychedelic discotheques'.

simultaneous hopeful and fearful anticipation of the future. What had caused the hippies to move 'back' to the land in the first place, was a complete dissatisfaction with the mainstream social and political system, in combination with a fear for future social and ecological disasters. Concerns about issues such as overpopulation, global starvation and ecological pollution colored the pages of the catalog. Holistic world-views were presented as solutions to this problem. Books reviewed in the Catalog, such as "So Human so Animal" (1968) or "Subversive Science" (1969), argued that "we humans are not separate from nature but a part of it" and that we need to "rediscover our partnership with nature." (WEC, Spring 1970: 7) Besides 'holism,' another pervasive New Age theme in the Catalog was that of 'self-spirituality.' Each Catalog contained a section in which topics were discussed like 'meditation,' 'trance-dance,' psychedelic drugs and 'self-hypnosis' as techniques for dealing with social brainwashing and for getting 'back in touch' with the self (e.g., The Updated Last WEC, May 1974: 415–422).

The subtitle of the Whole Earth, "Access to Tools", reflected the main purpose of the Catalog: to present knowledge, tools and technologies to support a self-reliant life-style. Addresses of tool-distributors were listed alongside practical advices on how to use the tools. As Stewart Brand recalls, "The catalog in 68 was partially a response to what I thought was one of the limitations of the hippies. The thing I was trying to deal with was that all these educated young people were heading off to start colonies and reinvent civilization and they didn't know anything. They had all English majors basically."⁵ For Brand, who participated in the high-tech environments of the Merry Pranksters, it was natural to use tools and skills as the keys to spiritual and political self-empowerment. With the Catalog, Brand sought to introduce these to spiritual seekers.⁶

Among the tools and technologies discussed for self-reliant living in the Catalog, were rustic tools such as wooden stoves, spades and tents, but also high-tech products such as radios, calculators and computers. Stewart Brand realizes that the presentation of computers in the "Whole Earth Catalog" might seem surprising: "Computers were seen as this power-device that would undermine us. I didn't see it that way." As Brand rightly comments, many participants of the counterculture perceived computer technologies as instruments of political power.

⁵ Interview with Stewart Brand, Sausalito (California, US) December 2005.

⁶ Interview with Stewart Brand, Sausalito (California, US) December 2005.

Computers were, in the words of Frederick Turner, depicted as the “weapons technologies of the cold war and as (...) emblems of a malevolent and ubiquitous technological bureaucracy” (Turner 2005: 488). This became all the more evident when in the 1960s and 70s as part of peace-activist demonstrations various computer science centers were attacked (e.g., Levy 1984; Moore 1996).

While resistance against computers was thus part of the countercultural critique, people such as Stewart Brand provided an alternative discourse of computing by announcing the new generation of (personal) computers and the mind-set of its designers *as* countercultural. The technological backdrop of this discourse was the fact that until the early 1970s, mainstream corporations did not develop computers for personal, individual use. Yet, facilitated by the arrival of small and relatively affordable chip technologies, computer hobbyists started to design and create their own personal computers in hobby clubs outside corporate settings. For many free speech activists and sympathizers of the counterculture, including Stewart Brand, the hacker and hobbyist creation of these ‘personal computers’ outside the institutional domains, suited the overall countercultural call for individual independence over the mainstream and fuelled the dream that computers could be used for consciousness-expansion.⁷ In 1972 Stewart Brand wrote an article for “Rolling Stone” in which he announced: “Ready or not, computers are coming to the people. That’s good news. Maybe the best since psychedelics.”⁸ In the article, Brand presents the creation of the personal computer as a countercultural act. According to Brand, the popularization of computer technology “owes its health to an odd array of influences [such as] the youthful fervor and firm dis-Establishmentarianism of the

⁷ This resulted in projects such as Jude Milholn and Lee Felsenstein’s Community Memory Project, a project in the early seventies that presented a mainframe computer to Berkeley students to use for ‘community building’; books such as Ted Nelson’s self-published “ComputerLib” (1974), arguing the control over computer design and use by “people who dream (‘lunatics, idealists and dreamers’)” rather than by the “profit-hungry companies and unimaginative clods”; computer centers, such as the ‘People’s Computer Company’, a non-profit computer space in Menlo Park, founded by math-teacher Bob Albrecht, where kids could freely explore the computer; and hobby clubs, most famously, the ‘Homebrew Computer Club’, a group of computer hobbyists brought together in the early 1970s by Berkeley free-speech activist Fred Moore as a space where hobbyists could swap information and help each other build their own ‘personal’ computers. The Homebrew Computer Club spawned the first personal computer companies, such as IMSAI, PET, and the most famous of all, ‘Apple’.

⁸ www.wheels.org/spacewar/stone/rolling_stone.html

freaks who design computer science”, thereby depicting computer hobbyists as well as their products as part of hippie or ‘freak’ culture. According to Brand, true personal empowerment would not come through rejection and avoidance of computer technologies, but instead through direct and unmediated access to it. In the “Whole Earth Catalog”, Brand expressed this desire in an article on the book “Music by Computers” in which he wrote: “Music by Computers. Goddamn right. When can we get our hands on them without having to tiptoe around some 18th century Department Chairman?” (WEC, Fall 1969: 77) Such language would become typical for the Whole Earth and as a result, the Catalog became popular among “San Francisco’s bohemia and the back-to-the-land movement (...) scientists and computer technologists from the Bay Area, East Coast artists and engineers, environmentalists, and, ultimately, even do-it-yourself suburbanites” (Turner 2005: 488, 489). Through this catalog and other publications and events, Stewart Brand became one of the main brokers between the psychedelic community and the computer industry.

R.U. Sirius and Mondo 2000

The “Whole Earth Catalog” was an important vehicle for computer-counterculture brokerage at the time when the personal computer was, materially and conceptually, still in its early stage⁹ of development. The cyberculture magazine “Mondo 2000” (from now on also referred to as ‘Mondo’) became a new medium through which the psychedelic community and computer culture were brokered in the different technological and cultural settings of the late 1980s. Ken Goffman, who uses the pseudonym ‘R.U. Sirius’, founded Mondo in 1989.

Goffman grew up in the context of the 1960s and ‘70s countercultural ‘turmoil’ in New York and came to California in 1982 to start, as he now recalls, a “neo-psychedelic movement” and to create a magazine for it.¹⁰ This first became “Reality Hackers” in 1984, then “High Frontiers” in 1988, which, in 1989, changed into “Mondo 2000”. According to Mondo-historian Jack Boulware, “High Frontiers” started out with a circulation

⁹ In the period mid 1970s-early 1980s various attempts have been made to create and market a personal computer. The first successful attempt of popularizing a personal computer was in 1981 with the IBM PC, followed by the Machintosh in 1984.

¹⁰ Interview with Ken Goffman, Mill Valley, California, US. September 2005.

of 1,500 issues, which grew out to 15,000 to nearly 100,000 circulations in the context of “Mondo 2000”. Similar to the Whole Earth, Mondo attracted a mixed audience of computer engineers and countercultural activists and it found a “nationwide audience in the hip computer culture.”¹¹ The magazine, to which Goffman related the Whole Earth as a “respectable older cousin” (Rucker et al. 1993: 16) presented ‘edgy’ and barely comprehensible technologies and innovative technological concepts, such as virtual sex, smart drugs, virtual reality and cryptography. The editors of “Mondo 2000” soon adopted the term ‘New Edge’ to articulate a simultaneous embrace and rejection of the New Age movement and to ally it with ‘edgy’ developments in the world of high-technology production.¹²

Throughout his countercultural career, Goffman had become both a sympathizer and a critic of the New Age movement. Particularly psychedelics had made him sympathetic to the New Age questioning of the nature of reality: “Psychedelics gives you a sense of the existence of another quantum reality where you can almost stick your hands and brain in and slip into infinity, a place that has less limitation than the apparent physical world that we live in (...) there is this sense that you can tap into eternity somehow.” Goffman however, did not like the currents within New Age that idealized primitive life and that were based on a nostalgic idea of naturalness. He comments:

I don't like to sleep in a tent, I am not vegetarian and I don't reject technology (...) I was always open to tech-culture (...) Everybody talked about ‘Edge’ and ‘Edgy’ and all that, and it became, and still is, the cliché for anything that was experimental. We were applying that to New Age (...) throughout our publishing history we became a funnel for a lot of things that were expressed also by very New Agey people and very idealistic people (...) but we also wanted to distance ourselves from the New Age thing.¹³

The resulting New Edge sensibility of the magazine was expressed in their adage: ‘hack your own reality’; a technophile transformation of the New Age idea that we create our own reality. According to Rudy Rucker,

¹¹ http://www.totse.com/en/ego/literary_genius/mondo2k.html

¹² According to Ken Goffman, both Queen Mu and John Perry Barlow claim to have coined the term ‘New Edge’ (Interview 2 with Ken Goffman, San Francisco, California, US, September 2008).

¹³ Interview with Ken Goffman, Mill Valley, California, US, September 2005.

mathematician, science fiction writer and a prime contributor to *Mondo*, the central message of the magazine is:

a) there is a better way and b) I Can Do It Myself. The way that Big Business or The Pig¹⁴ does things is obviously not the best way; it's intrusive, kludgy, unkind, and not at all what you really want. (...) Now, thanks to high tech and the breakdown of society you are free to turn your back on the way "they" do it, whatever that may be, and do it yourself. You can make (...) – most important of all – your own reality.' (Rucker et al. 1993: 10)

According to Goffman, *Mondo* "is about this idea that we can hack reality, that we can get more out of reality and maybe ultimately escape the limitations of this particular reality."¹⁵ For Goffman, tools were essential in this process, as he had heard a computer hobbyist say: "if you want to change the rules, change the tools. I was never a Geek, but I saw that too."¹⁶

The New Edge

Preceded by the high tech spirituality of the Merry Pranksters and elaborated further in the pages of the "Whole Earth Catalog" and "Mondo 2000", the decades in between the 1960s and the late 1980s witnessed the emergence of a New Edge culture. Central to the New Edge culture as it developed in the early 1980s, was a particular understanding of the computer as a vehicle for a spiritual experience. This understanding was expressed in various ways. In the first place, it became quite common to compare interaction with the computer to a disembodied, psychedelic trip. The development of computer graphics since the 1980s reinforced this narrative even more. As Stewart Brand recalls, one of his earliest and most profound experiences with computers was when he recognized a similarity between the psychedelic experience of disembodied knowing and the mental immersion in the graphical world on the computer screen. In the early 1970s, when Brand visited the Stanford

¹⁴ Using the term 'Pig' to refer to political authorities had become common among those who were familiar with and sympathetic to the so-called YIPPIES (Youth Internation Party), a theatrical political party founded in the US in 1968 by Abbie and Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and Paul Krassner. The YIPPIES believed in 'media revolution', and in 1968 they announced that they were nominating a pig ("Pigasus the Immortal") as candidate for President, and "once it got elected, they were going to eat it" (Goffman 2004: 291).

¹⁵ Interview with Ken Goffman, Mill Valley, California, US. September 2005.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Research Institute, he witnessed a few hackers playing a game they had designed. The game was called “Spacewar” and is known to be one of the first games that worked with a graphical interface. Brand describes:

Rudimentary Spacewar consists of two humans, two sets of control buttons or joysticks, one TV-like display and one computer. Two spaceships are displayed in motion on the screen, controllable for thrust, yaw, pitch and the firing of torpedoes. Whenever a spaceship and torpedo meet, they disappear in an attractive explosion.¹⁷

According to Brand, in the way these hackers played Spacewar resided proof that:

something – sort of – psychedelic was going on with the computer. (...) There was an intensity and a glee and an engagement that was as full as if they were playing a really intense game of basketball or football, except that they were just sitting like this [Brand moves only his thumbs] and their bodies were not engaged, it was their thumbs and their eyes (...) in that sense an out-of-body projection was going on. This was just psychedelic in the sense that, with psychedelics, you could just lie under a tree and experience all kinds of things, whole universes and cosmic things (...) the body isn't doing much.¹⁸

Besides Stewart Brand, other prominent spokespersons of the New Edge saw the development of the graphic capacities of the computer as a way to make permanently available the out-of-body, non-discursive, higher state of awareness that can otherwise only be experienced through psychedelic drugs or meditation.

Within the New Edge scenes, a linkage between New Age imaginary and computer technology was also forged without explicit reference to psychedelics. Since the early 1970s various publications drew a relationship between computing and spiritual liberation in general. A major metaphor borrowed from the domain of computing to describe spiritual liberation, for example, was ‘programming.’ In “Programming and metaprogramming in the human biocomputer” (1972), discussed in the “Whole Earth Catalog”,¹⁹ consciousness-researcher and countercultural guru John Lilly, for example, draws a very literal comparison between the workings of the human mind and that of the computer with the main similarity that they are both ‘programmed’ by outside forces. Lilly refers

¹⁷ www.wheels.org/spacewar/stone/rolling.html

¹⁸ Interview with Stewart Brand, Sausalito (California, US) December 2005.

¹⁹ Updated Last WEC, May 1974: 313.

to the human body as the “human biocomputer” and speaks, in a mixed ‘New Age-computer language,’ about the need to search for “self-directed programs in the complete physical absence of other external computers.” As Lilly states: “[in the absence of external computers] the self-directed and other-directed programs can be clearly detected, analyzed, re-computered, re-programmed [since] in solitude, a maximum speed of re-programming is achievable by the self.” Conveyed in this ‘techno-spiritual’ language is the general New Age message that we should distinguish between ‘inner authenticity’ and ‘external brainwashing.’ According to Lilly, the ultimate goal is to “make the computer general-purpose.” This means that “we need to rid ourselves from external computers and programs and to ‘reprogram’ the human biocomputer by the self.”

In depicting the human mind and body as a ‘biocomputer,’ and in presenting internal, spiritual processes as ‘programs,’ Lilly modeled the human body and mind after the computer. By furthermore describing the New Age process of “restoring inner knowledge” as a process of becoming a “general purpose computer”, Lilly furthermore presented spiritual liberation as a feature of this model. Already in the Catalog, such writings were self-consciously presented as both belonging to and different from (better than) ‘conventional’ writings on spirituality. As he wrote in his commentary on Lilly’s book for example, Brand rendered it “the best internal guidebook” he has seen – “far more practical and generalized than transcendent Eastern writings or wishful Underground notes.”²⁰ Also in the New Edge scenes that emerged in following decades, the concept of ‘reprogramming’ remained a common metaphor for referring to spiritual liberation.²¹

Biofeedback and virtual reality

Narratives that linked computers to New Age ideas gave rise to practices that, in turn, affirmed the idea that computer technology was capable of restoring awareness of the authentic mind, and of generating higher experiences and states of consciousness. One of the practices that affirmed this idea was biofeedback. Since the 1960s, the practice of

²⁰ Updated Last WEC, May 1974: 313.

²¹ In the early 1990s various mailing-lists emerged that discussed spiritual reprogramming techniques. One of these was the so-called ‘Leri-list.’

biofeedback had become part of the fields of psychology and medicine as a way to investigate the extent to which one could control the autonomous processes of the body. In a biofeedback setting, electrodes attached to people's body parts sense signals from the so-called autonomous system, after which an output is created on a computer screen.²² In this way, people can become aware of various types of physical activity, such as heart rate, blood pressure and brain waves.²³ As becomes evident from various biofeedback manuals and theory books at the time, biofeedback researchers and practitioners were most concerned with situating the practice of biofeedback in the domain of legitimate science while trying to keep it from, as formulated by one editor, "fad-panacea exploitation" (Barbara Brown 1974: xi). In such manuals, authors thus seem to struggle with the terminology they should choose in order to accurately describe the process that is being measured; they were debating about the use of terms such as "consciousness", "awareness", "intent", or "will" (Schwartz and Beatty 1977: 105). Other manuals (e.g., Null 1974) however, did not hesitate to present biofeedback, in characteristic New Age terminology, as a technique for obtaining a "real knowledge of the self" – a knowledge that "has been lost by humanity over centuries by civilization" (Null 1974:188). In such manuals, biofeedback was embraced as a powerful 'objective' and scientific legitimacy for the spiritual claims of the New Age.

As explained by Sarah Trump, Whole Earth reader, computer activist and in the 1970s and 80s very much steeped into the general countercultural atmosphere, the New Age community was particularly interested in the ability of biofeedback to measure 'alpha waves', a low-frequency type of brain wave understood to correspond with 'altered states of mind', or 'altered consciousness'. Already in the early 1970s, in characteristic 'Do It Yourself' ways, Trump and her friends first used biofeedback to "measure[d] the physical activities of the body", but, as she explains: "Soon, of course, we moved on to the alpha waves which represent altered states of consciousness."²⁴ In the way in which the New Age community adopted biofeedback as a practice, technologies were used in a hopeful way, to establish *immediate* contact with those parts

²² In older biofeedback settings the output was provided on paper.

²³ See for early explanations of biofeedback "New Mind New Body" by Barbara Brown (1974) and "Biofeedback, Theory and Research" by Gary E. Schwartz and Jackson Beatty (1977).

²⁴ Interview with Sarah Trump, Scotts Valley, California, US. November 2005.

within the body that are normally beyond grasp – in the New Age terminology defined as the ‘self’, the ‘spiritual’, the ‘authentic’ or ‘real’. Biofeedback would, according to one biofeedback manual advertised in the *Whole Earth*, “produce the same effect as meditation but at a considerably accelerated pace.” The technologies of biofeedback are thus presented as more efficient than those of the natural body and as more ‘in tune’ with the demands of the modern, hasty, time (Null 1974: 87).

A decade later, in a different technological setting, similar expectations cloaked the technologies of Virtual Reality. As explained by Virtual Reality developer, entrepreneur and ‘techno-hippie’ Brenda Laurel (1993[1991]), Virtual Reality is “a medium in which the human sensorium is surrounded by (or immersed in) stimuli that are partially or wholly generated or represented by artificial means, and in which all imagery is displayed from the point of view of an individual participant, even as he or she moves around” (Laurel 1993[1991]: 199). The first VR systems required people to put on a lot of gear, such as gloves, and goggles or a suit with position-sensing devices (Ibid.: 184). The technology was pioneered by researchers at NASA, Autodesk, and VPL Research, and popularized through VPL Research-founder Jaron Lanier. Although the image-quality was poor and lots of people experienced ‘motion-sickness’ because of slow frame rates,²⁵ Lanier and others with him had high expectations of the technology. According to Lanier, VR was “the first medium that doesn’t narrow the human spirit” and that would “elevate people to a new plane of reality.”²⁶ This idea was quickly picked up by Timothy Leary, who introduced it, in turn, to Mondo founder Ken Goffman. As Goffman recalls: “Tim Leary called and said that I really had to pay attention to this guy, Lanier, that he was the smartest guy around. (...) I heard from Jaron about Virtual Reality, he told me what it was.”²⁷

Hyped as “electronic LSD”²⁸ and as the next medium with high potential for spiritual liberation, Virtual Reality became one of the main topics of “Mondo 2000”. Around the same time, Brenda Laurel discussed Virtual Reality in her book “Computers as Theatre” as a potential tool for “consciousness expansion, personal liberation and a transformation

²⁵ The frame rate is the number of frames (images) that are displayed every second, measured in frames per second (fps). The higher the frame rate, the more realistic the movements will seem.

²⁶ Lanier in *Mondo 2000*, Summer 1990.

²⁷ Interview with Ken Goffman, Mill Valley, California, US. September 2005.

²⁸ Barlow in “Mondo 2000”, Summer 1990.

of one's relationship with the world" (Laurel 1993[1991]: 195). Laurel mourns the loss of magical places in our contemporary world and argues that VR can bring back the powerful experiences of divine presence as traditionally evoked by ancient rituals and theatre (Ibid.: 196-197). In order to fulfill the highest potential of VR, she comments, we need to "reinvent the sacred where we collaborate with reality to transform it and ourselves."²⁹

New Edge salvation

Salvation in the New Age milieu is imagined as the final point of spiritual evolution where all living beings are integrated into a greater whole of spiritual awareness. Salvation in the New Edge current is slightly different: it is imagined as an evolutionary process towards spiritual awareness through a full integration of human beings and their technologies. Through this imaginary, the idea is expressed that technology is better capable than the 'unassisted' body to overcome social brainwashing and to 'restore' spiritual perfection.

In the "Whole Earth Catalog", the idea of spiritual evolution through human-technology symbiosis can be recognized in the writings of Buckminster Fuller. Fuller, one of the major heroes of Stewart Brand, was a visionary, designer, architect and inventor and was popular in the New Age counterculture. As stated in each Catalog, Fuller's ideas had initiated the catalog and each edition started with a few pages on his ideas and inventions. Fuller was concerned with the future survival of the human race and with the ecological problems that threatened this survival. For him, Nature and God were one, which implied that Nature was a creative force with infinite powers, capable of dealing with 'every and all problems.' In his mind, the ecological problems were not due to shortcomings in nature. Instead, Fuller believed that ecological problems were due to shortcomings in the cognitive capabilities of humans to live in accordance with Nature. Fuller believed that the 'brainwashing' influence of mainstream culture and society had caused cognitive defects in humans. As he argued in his characteristic intricate language:

We could, of course, hypothesize that all babies are born geniuses and get swiftly de-geniused. Unfavorable circumstances, shortsightedness, frayed

²⁹ Interview with Brenda Laurel, Santa Cruz, California, US. November 2005.

nervous systems, and ignorantly articulated love and fear of elders tend to shut off many of the child's brain capability valves.³⁰

For Fuller the solution resided in science and technology. As he wrote in his "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth" (1969), nature had thus far been sufficient "to allow us to carry on despite our ignorance." However, "just as a bird inside of the egg is provided with liquid nutriment to develop it to a certain point" also our "nutriment is exhausted." According to Fuller, we need to "locomote on [our] own legs" and we must act like a bird who must "step forth from its initial sanctuary and forage on its own legs and wings to discover the next phase of its regenerative sustenance."³¹ For Fuller, science and engineering were the "wings and legs" that people would need to find their next phase of "regenerative sustenance." Fuller considered himself to be a person who was "lucky enough to avoid too many disconnects during his upbringing" and set himself the task of leading the (scientific and technological) way. By equating 'technical inventions' and 'physical innovations' by humans, with the development of wings and legs by birds, Fuller thus understood technology to be part of a natural evolutionary development. This evolution was, for Fuller, part of a divine plan. One of his statements, reprinted several times in the Catalog, made this faith in the divine powers of technology clear. Fuller saw "God in the instruments and the mechanisms that work reliably, more reliably than the limited sensory departments of the human mechanism."

The idea that technology development is part of a natural as well as of a spiritual evolution is widely shared within social networks surrounding the Catalog and "Mondo 2000". Brenda Laurel uses the term "sybiogenesis" to refer to the co-development of humans and technology. In using this term, Laurel argues in the first place that technology development is as natural as biological development. Laurel: "technology is like hands, like tools, it is as much a part of the biosphere in my view, as I am, so I think that the boundary that people tend to draw [between technology and the biosphere] is impossible."³² Secondly, in using this term, Laurel refers to the work of microbiologist Lynn Margulis, who had cooperated with James Lovelock on the development of the Gaia theory and created in 1966 her own theory. In this theory, she charges natural evolution with moral and spiritual intention, proclaiming that

³⁰ Fuller in WEC, Spring 1969: 4.

³¹ WEC, Spring, 1969: 3.

³² Interview with Brenda Laurel, Santa Cruz, California, US. November 2005.

symbiosis – rather than competition – is the driving force of evolution.³³ In the same way, Laurel thinks, human-technology co-symbiosis is an evolutionary development with moral and spiritual implications.

While the idea of human-technology symbiosis as both a material and a spiritual evolutionary development was expressed in the “Whole Earth Catalog” with reference to science and technology in general, it became more manifest and specific in later years with respect to computer technologies. The idea of human-computer symbiosis as both a material and a spiritual development was one of the main themes in *Mondo 2000*. It became apparent in the celebration of the science fiction genre of ‘cyberpunk’, science fiction set “in a near future, dominated by high technology including computers, computer networks and human/machine hybrids.”³⁴ According to *Mondo* contributor Rudy Rucker, cyberpunk really is “ABOUT the fusion of humans and machines.” By making it the main focus, *Mondo 2000* presented this fusion as inevitable. Various psychedelic gurus and developers of digital technologies fantasized about this development in the magazine whereas some of them mused about it as a process leading to spiritual salvation. Regular *Mondo* contributor John Perry Barlow’s following statement, written in 1992, provides the prime example of this reasoning:

Earlier in this century, the French philosopher and anthropologist Teilhard de Chardin wrote that evolution was an ascent toward what he called “The Omega Point”, when all consciousness would converge into unity, creating the collective organism of Mind. When I first encountered the Net (...) it took me a while to remember where I’d first encountered the idea of this immense and gathering organism.³⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter I analyzed New Edge as a set of discourses and practices that emerged through brokerage between the sensibilities of the New Age movement and high tech culture in the San Francisco Bay Area.

³³ Margulis in Hanegraaff 1996: 155.

³⁴ Butler (2000: 9). According to Butler: “The technology provided the *cyber* part of the label; the street life of the stories and novels offered the *punk* part. The most visible of cyberpunk novels was William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), which depicted a ‘near-future world dominated by computer networks and Japanese corporations.’ It was editor and critic Gardner Dorzois who first linked Gibson with Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, and Lewis Shiner as a ‘cyberpunk’ author.

³⁵ Barlow in *Communications of the ACM*, 1992.

Various brokers of this fusion, such as Ken Kesey, Stewart Brand and Ken Goffman, consider New Age ideologies and the potential of high tech to be mutually re-inforcing. In the social domains of the Merry Pranksters and the periodicals founded by Brand and Goffman – “The Whole Earth Catalog” and “Mondo 2000” – the New Edge thus emerged as a field of thought and practice that is stereotypically New Age in its embracement of self-spirituality, holism and spiritual evolution, but less so in the ways in which salvation is imagined. As we have seen, one of the main refrains of the New Edge is a lack of faith in biological nature and the human body. It is in this devaluation of organic nature that we can recognize the crucial difference between New Age and New Edge: whereas the New Age expresses the faith that the human body has the inherent capacity to overcome social conventions and material restrictions, the New Edge has no faith in unmodified human biology. On the contrary, the human body is a ‘flawed sensory apparatus’ and a ‘reducing valve’ and becomes thereby defined as the locus of mainstream pollution. Digital technologies are believed to be able to ‘fix’ this biological defect and to restore ‘natural perfection’ by leading people towards their second stage in evolution. In this perception of modern technologies as ‘natural’ extensions of the human mind that evolve towards spiritual awareness, digital technologies become perceived as equally natural as the human body and as ‘better than nature’³⁶ in its spiritual capacities.

Early traces of this type of high tech New Age can be found in the specific appropriation of electric technologies in the psychedelic communities of the 1960s. In focusing on the early developments of what would later be called the New Edge, I attempted to counter the determinism that dominated early interpretations of Internet-spirituality. In contrast to deterministic explanations that the affinity between spirituality and the Internet is natural, this study showed that different technologies have, at various moments in time, been imagined as natural environments for the expression of spirituality. In assessing New Edge in relation to technologies as diverse as electric technologies, biofeedback, Virtual Reality and the Internet,³⁷ it could thus be argued that New Edge

³⁶ Hence, one could speak of the emergence of the idea of digital technology as being humanity’s “second nature”, a term that has been used in comparable ways by Sean Cubitt (1996), Michael Taussig (1993) and which is similar to Donna Haraway’s (1991) construct of the ‘cyborg’.

³⁷ While the spiritual discourses of the Internet seemed to be characteristic of the time period in which the Internet popularized in the 1990s, a similar discourse can

follows the technological *hypes* of its time. Although advocates of New Edge – at least those presented in this paper – associate themselves with the countercultural (psychedelic) domain, the phenomenon of New Edge is thus constructed in a constant dialogue with institutionalized science and technology. In this dialogue, mainstream celebrations of technologies interact with countercultural celebrations of independence; modern fantasies about unlimited technological progress meet New Age fantasies about unlimited spiritual growth.

As such, one of the arguments that this paper has sought to make is in support of the claim made by various scholars that the religious realm is not isolated from other fields of social practice and discourse (e.g. Asad 1999; Meyer 1998; Pels 2003). In the case of the New Edge it becomes evident that religious imagery can be inspirational for technological development and can frame experiences of technology-use. In the New Edge imaginary of digital technologies the sacred and the technological are being co-constituted in each others' image. This co-constitution implies a simultaneous secularization of the sacred and a sacralization of technology. For example, in John Lilly's depiction of the authentic mind as being like a 'general purpose computer' and in modeling the mechanisms through which one can access the authentic mind on the workings of the computer by using the term 'reprogramming' for this process, the sacred self is secularized and imagined as a function of the computer. At the same time, sacralization of digital technology occurs through the belief that it is possible for these technologies to 'bypass' the 'corrupting' material and social forces of everyday life. In the narratives

currently be discerned around the development of small-scale computer technologies. This discourse is led by engineer Ray Kurzweil through the publication of his popular book "The Singularity is Near" (2005). In this book Kurzweil argues that, powered by very small-scale (nano) computer technologies, a human-computer symbiosis is at hand which will lead us to a point of 'singularity'. As expressed in his book as well as in his many public presentations, typical New Edge ideas can be recognized in Kurzweil's search for liberation, both physical and spiritual, through the merging of nanotechnologies with the human body. Kurzweil who is sympathetic to New Age thought and to the New Age ideas of transcendence, does not believe in the natural capacities of the human body to obtain this. In his book he writes: 'Our version 1.0 biological bodies are (...) frail and subject of a myriad of failure modes, not to mention the cumbersome maintenance rituals they require. (...) much human thought is derivative, petty, and circumscribed. (...) The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology. (...) The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains.' (Kurzweil 2005: 9) This singularity, as Kurzweil explains later, will lead us to a transcendent level of reality (...) and will infuse the universe with Spirit (Kurzweil, pp. 388–389).

surrounding the technologies of biofeedback, Virtual Reality and the Internet, this is expressed in the idea that such technologies can bring about New Age salvation; through getting people 'back in touch' with the self, through 'reinventing' sacred spaces or through a 'hard-wiring' of Gaia. In such narratives, digital technology is sacralized by conceptually grounding it in a primordial, transcendent realm of existence.

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CHAPTER NINE

SCIENCE, FICTION AND RELIGION

ABOUT REAL AND RAELIAN POSSIBLE WORLDS

Carly Machado

Introduction

Human cloning, nanotechnology¹, GM foods, transhumanism², cyborgs, internet, and electronic democracy: such themes are related to real scientific projects, but simultaneously fuel the contemporary imagination and dreams about technology. Themes such as these have provoked innumerable debates over the limits of *humanity* and scientific development: debates that reach far beyond the research laboratories, spreading through the media and having a variety of effects on culture. Concerned above all with the *future*, this area mixes elements that are now within our grasp and others that *still* – ‘still’ being the operative word – remain out of our reach.

Since 1973, these elements were all put together as a *real world* proclaimed by a prophet named Raël. He describes a place where biotechnological advances allow humans to live to be 700 years old, while some *chosen* ones are able to live forever by cloning their bodies and *downloading* their minds. In this other reality – or, better, this other planet – there are biological robots, human bodies without ‘personality’ ready to serve their masters, releasing them from physical effort or any kind of work and setting them free to indulge in the arts, pleasure and sex. From

¹ Nanotechnology is the potential to create objects at the smallest scale (a nanometer – nm – is 1 billionth of a meter) using tools and techniques that are now being developed for putting each atom and each molecule in the desired place. The concept was described for the first time by Feynman in his classic 1954 lecture, “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom” and has been thoroughly analyzed by Drexler in “Nanosystems”. <http://www.universia.com.br> (25-01-2006).

² Transhumanism is a movement advocating the use of technology to expand human capacities. This movement supports the development of and access to new technologies that enable everyone to enjoy, in its words, better minds, better bodies and better lives. <http://www.transhumanism.org> (25-01-2006).

a moral point of view, marriage is non-existent on this planet and everyone is free to have the relationships they desire, always preserving the freedom of the partners. Women no longer become pregnant since reproduction through cloning is the norm. The purpose of sex is simply and exclusively pleasure, which could be experienced with another person in an affectionate relationship or equally with a biological robot that can provide full sexual satisfaction.

After contacts with Extra-terrestrials from this other planet,³ Raël – *nom de plume* of Claude Vourilhon – became responsible for the revelation of their “Message” all over the world⁴ and presented this scientifically perfect world as a model for humanity. Claude, a young middle-class Frenchman born in 1946, had been a racing driver, journalist, singer and composer until the age of 27. He had attempted all these careers, trying to fulfill his dreams and earn a living, but without much success or recognition. After 1973 Raël actively started to spread the Message of the Elohim⁵ and created a transnational religious movement⁶ – the International Raelian Movement which publicly cries out science as the core of its religion.

The object of this article is to analyze the elements that make up Raelian cosmology, considering that these elements are derived from “real” scientific developments on the one hand and science fiction on the other hand, thereby blurring the distinctions between real and virtual.

³ Raël describes two encounters with the Extra-Terrestrials in his message. In the first one (in 1973) they had come to the Earth and revealed the teachings recorded in his first book. In the second encounter (in 1975) Raël claims to have visited their planet and, based on what he saw and experienced, wrote his second book “Extra-terrestrials Took Me To Their Planet”.

⁴ According to its official figures, The International Raelian Movement, founded by Raël in 1973, has 60,000 followers and representatives across all five continents – America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania. Followers can choose to participate in the actions of the movement or opt to be part of its “structure.” Members of the structure receive a level (from 1 to 6) and carry out functions aimed at diffusing the message with progressively greater responsibilities, from apprentices to national and continental guides. According to data from August 2005 there are 2373 members in the structure.

⁵ Elohim is the biblical term that in the Christian tradition means ‘God.’ According to Raël, the word Elohim means “those that come from the sky”, and refers to the extra-terrestrial creators who were mistakenly confused with gods.

⁶ Throughout this article I use the label ‘religious movement’ in discussing the Raelian movement. Aware of the debate about categorizing such movements as ‘sects’ I have opted for the broader concept ‘religion’, so as to encompass characteristics related to sects. I wish to make it clear, however, that I do not consider the notions of religion and sect to stand in any hierarchical position. The second reason for the choice is that ‘religious movement’ is the term the Raelian Movement uses to define itself. I therefore maintain this classification, and reflect upon it where relevant.

A ‘technological imaginary’ – which is embraced by the Raelians, but is not exclusively theirs – is driven by the modern idea of rational mastery of humans over nature, including their own nature. This article provides evidence of how narrowly the Raelian cosmology is tied up with the modern project when taken to its ultimate consequences.

Science fiction and raelian truth: where did we come from and where are we going to?

Extra-terrestrials, interplanetary travel, flying saucers, technologically assisted human reproduction – numerous elements of the fictional genre based on science and its imagined developments can be found in the Raelian message. Science fiction is an area that shares questions with both science and religion, above all those about the origin of humanity and its future. Fiction assumes the discourse of free imagination, associated with what “is not true” (at least not at the present moment)⁷ while science bases itself on statements postulated as “true”.

The assertion that science is one of the building blocks that gives rise to science fiction is not new. A good part of the studies on these literary works show how the models created in this genre emerge from an imagination full of scientific reasonings and references. The Raelian movement is also a part of this landscape. Science fiction is a core element in the Raelian Message and, more generally, it is interesting to see how science fiction and religions are more linked than we may think at first glance. Sturgeon (quoted in Fiker 1985: 13) affirms that “a science fiction story is the one structured upon human beings, with human problems and a human solution that would not be available without its scientific content”. So we might say that science fiction deals with “human problems” in terms that bring us closer to religious questions. Both deal with human anxieties, looking for possible answers to existential human insecurities and dreams. Sam Moskowitz (quoted in Sobchack 2004: 19), affirms that “science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ on the part of its reader”. This assumption of a “suspension of disbelief” offers

⁷ “Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovations in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extraterrestrial in origin” (Amis, cited in Sobchack 2004: 19).

an interesting frame to make sense of this apparently unusual relation between sci-fi and religion: both invite people to “believe”, or, at least, give up the disbelief in some way. Like with other ‘scientific religions’,⁸ Raël’s prophetic claims allege to be based on science and the “kind of belief” they achieve are from a different order than belief in a traditional sense. It comes closer to the way sci-fi readers “believe” when they “suspend their disbeliefs” than to the beliefs of adepts of traditional religions, that is: religions not related to scientific aspirations. This specific way of believing is related to the social phenomenon described as “technoscience spirituality” (Battaglia 2005), a controversial but useful concept in this field. Raelian cosmology thus stands closer to science fiction models than to traditional religious movements – it includes themes and questions related to science and there are similarities in the way sci-fi adepts and Raelians believe.

Science fiction’s approaches of the future, however, stick between utopian and dystopian arguments.⁹ The ambivalence pervading this genre is related to the limits of a scientifically advanced world: is technology synonymous with human freedom and happiness or is it in fact its deepest prison? From Huxley’s “Brave New World” to the Wachowski brothers’ “Matrix”, science fiction seems obsessed with warning us about the emergence of a society whose technological development allows the creation of a totalitarian world controlled by humans, non-human species or machines. Raël’s prophecy, on the other hand, makes use of a technological imaginary of complete success and perfection in which all developments free human beings from their ancient ‘burdens’, especially those of work and pregnancy. It constructs a new realm of behavioral patterns regulated by new ethics of freedom. This Raelian model of freedom takes the concept of the modern, rational and autonomous individual to the extreme. Proclaiming his truths in the religious arena, Raël makes use of a science fictional imaginary,¹⁰ attempting to remove it

⁸ Scientology, founded by L. Ron Hubbard, is one of the most expressive scientific religions nowadays.

⁹ Analysts and science fiction commentators classify the works of the genre into two main camps: the utopian – which creates perfect models of fully functioning technological development, and the dystopian – emphasizing the risks and problems of this development.

¹⁰ Moisseff (2005) postulates that works of science fiction correspond to a kind of “contemporary occidental mythology,” and that the study of these works can, according to the author, illuminate contemporary representations in different representational fields.

from the domain of fiction and replant it in the domain of a scientifically probable – but not “yet” proven – religious truth. While science fiction creates its hybrids out of humans and aliens, or humans and machines, Raël sketches his own creature – his ‘Frankenstein’¹¹ – as a hybrid of science fiction, science and religion. Unlike science fiction, however, which anguishes over the hybrids it creates and their consequences, Raël sacralizes his creation (or ‘creature’), stripping it of tensions and conflicts. By divinizing the consequences of scientific development, Raël distances himself from the tumultuous world of fiction – however strange this may seem – to write his message in the utopian religious field.

Raelian cosmology thus points to a perfect future, with no conflicts between human beings and machines, or among human beings themselves. Whereas in science fiction the relationship between humans, machines, aliens and cyborgs is rarely defined in pacific terms¹², in Raël’s prophecy there is a complete absence of tensions, conflicts or wars. In order to sustain this “conflict-free” reality, Raël formulates a cosmology based on a controversial morality of freedom, and an even more complicated sociology. To better understand Raelian ideas, let’s highlight two of the key concepts related to science fiction literature: the theme of biological robots and questions of reproduction and sexuality.

The planet of the Elohim is home to species other than human: it is inhabited by ‘biological robots’ or ‘cyborgs’ without a personality that cater to every desire of the human population. These biological robots are considered sub-human but are at the same time completely subjected to the control of their human masters who created them. Raël expresses in his book what he claims to be Elohim’s concerns about the biological robots (1998: 150)

They have been limited and are absolutely submissive to us.

They are also incapable of acting without orders from us, and they are very specialized. They have no aspirations of their own, and no desires

¹¹ The history of science fiction brings together different readings and re-readings concerning its ‘beginnings’, with “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley, published in 1818, a near unanimous choice as the inaugural work of the genre. Still in the 19th century, the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells also stand out as central references in this initial period of science fiction. Works of Jules Verne are “Journey to the Center of the Earth” (1864), “From the Earth to the Moon” (1865) and “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” (1869); famous works by Wells are “The Time Machine” (1895) and “The War of the Worlds” (1898).

¹² “The War of the Worlds”, written by H. G. Wells in 1898, is a significant example of this conflictive imaginary between “races” and species.

for pleasure, except certain ones that their specialization require. (...) They are incapable of feelings and suffering, and can not reproduce themselves.

According to Moisseff (2005), the wars between species found in science fiction embody political tensions in the contemporary world; they represent real conflicts lived in the present that are projected on an imaginary future. The different 'species' symbolically represent racial differences by depicting physical and/or sociological differences between different human groups.¹³ Raël's description of the relationship between humans and biological robots on the Planet of the Elohim fulfils the same function: it presents a model through which Raël conceives the relationship with the Other (at least, some "others"). The concept of being human and the associated ideas of liberty are pushed to extreme – and extremist – limits by Raël. The spectrum follows an evolutionary pattern from trans-human (virtual and fully free) to sub-human (material, biological, enslaved).

Moreover, a central theme in European history reverberates throughout this Raelian cosmology: the projects of slavery and colonialism with their relations between humans and beings deemed to be sub-human and therefore subjected to servitude and submission. This, of course, occurred under the western ideological heading of progress and development. Raelian cosmology re-invents this colonial model in a post-colonial world; a situation that is biotechnologically legitimated through the creation of serfs by their masters and through granting the latter biological ownership of these sub-human beings.

In order to achieve "complete autonomy", the Raelian project of individuality also postulates its own ideas about reproduction. Reproduction is traditionally perceived as a mode of connection and dependence and such ideas are obviously opposed to Raelian values of individual liberty. In December 2002, Raël diffused his message worldwide after his TV announcement of – as he claimed – the first human clone birth: a girl he called Eve. On the one hand, this international announcement represents an important marketing strategy of the movement's leadership. On the other hand, cloning presented itself as yet another theme to be enlisted among the polemical strategies of this controversial group. Cloning can be conceived of as a project that reinforces the Raelian

¹³ About this topic, see also Roth (in Battaglia, 2005) "Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult".

dreams of full autonomy, of uncommitted connections between people and an eternal life made possible through science. Raël projects an imminent world where pregnancy will no longer be necessary, and sex will be completely detached from biological reproduction. Indeed, as pointed out by Strathern (1992), new models of reproduction – of “making babies” – point to new concepts of individual and social relations.

Moisseeff (2005) exposes the evolutionist outlook found in works of science fiction and extracts from this a particular motif: namely, the idea that the more biologically advanced the species are, the less it procreates. When applied to the species as a whole, freedom is taken to mean surpassing the ‘traditional’ form of reproduction. Thus, in science fiction, more evolved societies move towards the extinction of traditional reproductive methods and, as a consequence, a reduction in demographic growth. This model is replicated by Raël, who likewise views pregnancy and birth as features dispensable to the free and evolved human being. The Raelian idea of freedom asserts itself in the biological dimension; Raël creates a model of free and liberated subjects whose bodies bear witness to this freedom. Like the Elohim, Raelians must have few children, anticipating a future when they will not need to have any. Pleasure must be the central dimension of all bodily experience. The freedom attained by surpassing the reproductive model is accompanied by the pre-eminence given to sexuality as a way of living and exercising this freedom.

Just as in many fictional settings found in the history of Science Fiction¹⁴, Raël’s cosmology thus projects a world in which “sex” raises issues about freedom and restriction. Raël’s appeal, as always, is for unrestricted freedom, presenting the Elohim’s planet as a “new” world of values where sex is exclusively reserved for pleasure, and families will no longer exist. For Raël, free sexuality is a synonym for individual autonomy:

Respect the freedom of choice of all people as to their partners and their tastes; be fully conscious that no human being can belong to us in a sense of ownership; and always seek the happiness of those we claim to love.

¹⁴ In Huxley’s “Brave New World” (1932), only promiscuity is socially acceptable. Farmer’s “Strange Relations” (1960) presents a collection of five stories about human/alien sexuality. Disch’s “334” (1972) describes flexible sexual relationships, but compulsory contraception. Asimov’s “The God Themselves” (1972) suggests aliens with three sexes and practices of co-penetration. “The Female Man” (1975), written by Joanna Russ, describes four parallel universes, one without men, one with male sex slaves.

On this basis, everything is possible, couples, threesomes, foursomes, and 'more-somes' of raelians living in harmony whether they be homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals (Raël 1998: 72).

But whereas many science fiction authors aim to denounce outlooks they find worrying, pointing out what they perceive to be the political dangers inherent in the ideal of unrestricted freedom, Raël creates a high-tech version beyond politics, morality and traditional ethics thereby turning ambivalent sci-fi in the utopian/Religious Raelian message.

In search of immortality: cloning and eternal life

Raelian cosmology is "in between" themes of science fiction, religious desire, scientific innovation and contemporary social questions. In its own development it adapts to the changes in these fields, trying always to be "updated". In addition to the discussed sci-fi imaginary, Raelian cosmology is also closely related to real scientific and technological developments and each new discovery in these fields are, as soon as they appear in the public sphere, in some way appropriated by Raël. In this section I will therefore focus on the embeddedness of Raelian discourse in scientific and technological developments and its sacralization of modern (techno) science, especially biotechnology.

Initially, Raël spoke about achieving *eternal life* through the method of cloning. This was his most ambitious project and his announcement in 2002 of Eve, the worlds' first cloned baby, was his most pronounced media success. Cloning, Raël argued, was the way to eternity and his first books from the 1970s pleaded how we could live much longer – and even forever – as a result of biotechnological advances.

In 1974, I released *The Book which Tells the Truth*, which described my contact with the Elohim, the extra-terrestrials who created us scientifically in their laboratories who were mistaken for 'God' or 'gods' by our primitive ancestors who were too ignorant to understand the truth. By the time, it was the public enthusiasm for the 'UFO phenomenon' that made my books and the conferences I held around the world a success.

Nevertheless, when I explained that we would soon be able to do the same thing ourselves and live forever, thanks to cloning, many laughed. However their laughter was tinged with the empty sound of those who has always been too short-sighted to see beyond their noses and foresee the fall of their own paradigms.

Now, after 27 years, and a few sheep such as Dolly, the realization that my predictions have become reality has wiped the smile from their faces – and the time has come to shift into a higher gear and reveal what the future holds for us (Raël 2001: 09).

According to Raël's prophecy, the Elohim can live for hundreds of years, and some of them – the chosen ones – can live forever. This immortality is possible because they have reached the last level of cloning technology – not just creating another person with the same DNA (as a twin), but subsequently transmitting the *information from the personality* of the old body to the new one using an accelerated growth process (AGP) capable of producing an adult body in seconds or minutes without the need to wait for years to pass by.

The Raelian Message effectively plays with the modern “techno” imaginary of “possible worlds”, focusing precisely on the intersection between what is current and potential, what is scientific fact and religious assumption. In this strategy, human cloning is an important case since it is a category in which the boundaries between “real” and “possible” are quite unclear to the general public. According to Debru (2003), biotechnologies show us to what extent the possible gets closer to the real, and also in which ways imaginable and realizable are perfectly aligned to each other. As Debru writes (2003: 07): “À la fois proche et distinct du réel, le possible donne tout son sens à la connaissance du réel lorsqu’il est pris avec le réel dans un modèle d’ensemble. Le réel ne peut être véritablement compris que s’il est saisi dans le possible”.¹⁵ In addition, Medawar (quoted in Debru 2003) affirms that scientific research always starts with the invention of a possible world, or a fragment of a possible world.

Boia (2004) contextualizes the Raelian cloning project in a mythological, scientific and religious genealogy in search for longevity. According to this author, different religious traditions have always provided their “solution” to death but, since the 19th century, the longevity myth has been more and more secularized, turning itself into a scientific project. Religious ideas were once the only way for achieving eternal life. Nowadays, however, scientific and biotechnological developments

¹⁵ “Simultaneously close to and distant from the real, the possible lends all of its meaning to our consciousness of the real when it is combined with the real in a global model. The real can only be truly comprehended when it is combined with the possible” (Debru 2003: 7).

are also addressing this possibility and, as a consequence, they become religiously invested by movements such as the Raelian. The dream of immortality is a main topic in the Raelian cosmology, and as such probably represents their deepest belief in science. A “possible world” inhabited by humans who live forever – depicted by Raël in the language of prophecy *and* by scientists with the status of prevision – is an image infused with elements of reality and not only a matter of faith. Brigitte Boisselier, biochemist responsible for the Raelian human cloning project, is the strongest personification of this mix: Raelian and scientist, she claims to have cloned the first human being (Baby Eve) and moves rhetorically forward to the present of a religious realm – a realm that is in the field of science still something for the future. According to Battaglia (2005: 173) “the multi-mediatised story of the divinely engineered Baby Eve puts a finer point on this cultural ambivalence, revealing the dimensions not so much of a global media culture of copy as of a ‘landscape of point-to-point ad hoc settlements’ brokered by specific interests in science, sacred or secular”.

By cloning, achieving immortality becomes synonym of creating life. Cloning differs fundamentally from techniques produced to postpone death: it is a way to renovate life eternally by creating new human beings, preserving the DNA of an individual and thereby symbolically preserving the soul. The creation of life takes scientists to the level of “god”. Since god doesn’t exist for the Raelians, to become “what people understand by god” is to become like the extra-terrestrial creators. This is their goal. Brigitte Boisselier comments:

Playing God, Hubris....

Depending on the cultures and religions, different approaches have been taken. While Christians, in their majority, believe that we shouldn’t head in that direction, Buddhists have expressed no concerns and some Jewish Rabbis have declared that if God has given us the brain to imagine it, then this is how it’s meant to be.

This last attitude is very close to Raélians’, who believe that life on Earth was the result of the creativity of advanced and brilliant scientists. These creators were mistaken for Gods in ancient times and today, we ourselves are on the verge of also becoming creators... or Gods. Is this hubris? I believe it is only a natural cycle of creations.¹⁶

¹⁶ <http://www.Raël.org/int/indonesian/news/news/article3.htm> (1-4-2005).

Designing life, becoming gods

In 2005, the Raelian movement made some interesting changes in the terminology used on its website. In the English version, where we used to read “The Message given by the Extraterrestrials”, we now read “Message from the Designers”. This text is introduced with the explanation that “The Messages given to Raël by our human Creators from space contain the world’s most fearlessly individualistic philosophy of love, peace, and non-conformism: a beautiful combination of spirituality, sensuality, and science.” The Elohim, “our human creators from space”, are now termed *designers* by Raël, and his first book “The message given by the Ets” now has an electronic version – an e-book – named “Intelligent Design”.¹⁷ Although its content remains identical, by changing its name Raël reveals a number of interesting facets about his way of interpreting the world.

Nowadays, virtual reality has an important appeal to Raelians. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, Raël embraced biotechnological developments while after the 2000’s the cybernetic model became the main reference. Raël discusses the possibility of *downloading* human memory and personality into a computer. His concept of the human being is an informational one: everything that defines the human being is inscribed as codes, data and information that can be downloaded to other *hardware* – a computer – separate from our bodies. Thus in Raelian cosmology the cybernetic model not merely explains certain aspects of reality through *codes* but becomes itself the source and matrix of reality by the act of programming/designing. Rather than being just explained through *coding*, humanity is created from it. And to become god now means to manipulate or ‘program’ this reality. The scientific model that first

¹⁷ Intelligent Design is a divisive polemic in the scientific field; in direct contrast to the Darwinist model, it supports the idea that biochemical systems were planned. Behe (1997: 195) says: “they were designed not by the laws of nature, by chance or by necessity, in reality they were planned. The designer knew what appearance the systems would have when completed, and afterwards took measures to make them real. Life on Earth, at its most fundamental level, in its most important components, is the result of intelligent activity.” Behe even insists that the conclusions about Intelligent Design follow “naturally from the data themselves – not from sacred books or sectarian beliefs.” Raël appropriates this debate, claiming that the Elohim are the designers of this life on Earth. He makes a point of reaffirming his status as a prophet by demonstrating his prophecies – his anticipation of scientific developments. He now makes similar claims concerning the theory of Intelligent Design to those he has made with cloning – which according to him had been foreseen in his message since 1973.

emerged as a mean to understand reality now becomes the very “material” from which the real is made:

So we could continue to exist and communicate with our environment indefinitely in a computer after our physical body dies, especially if this computer is fitted with sensors such as cameras and microphones. We could even talk to our friends through loud-speakers and recognize our old schoolmates and reminisce about old times. We could even play with them in a virtual world.

We might even wish to be temporally downloaded, or rather uploaded into a computer just to acquire knowledge or to learn something in a virtual training ground, so that when the computer downloads us back into our original body a short time later, we retain the added skill of information. (Raël 2001: 36)

Creating life now becomes an act of virtual design. The extraterrestrial designers first created human life on the basis of *material design* choosing the best shapes for their creature. This was the era of cloning and genetic manipulation. According to Raël, there were different teams of designers that tried to produce the best possible shapes for *their* version of a human being. Scientists and artists worked together, combining efficiency and beauty in their projects. This, Raël claims, is the origin of the different human races. The term ‘design’ is intriguing since it implies various issues relating to structures and systems, but also implies aesthetics. Raël’s ideas always emphasize both aspects: the former accentuating the ‘informational’ logic of human beings – their DNA (in a biological form) or their memory and personality data (in a cybernetic model) – and the latter accentuating aesthetics, simultaneously underlining the importance he attaches to beauty (as an expression of perfection and evolution) and attitudes, since behavior also comprises an aesthetic issue for the Raelian movement.

Raël describes this behavioral lifestyle when he writes about the “Keys” to open the locks that currently close human minds. These Keys are philosophical concepts and ideas relating to humanity, birth, education, self-fulfillment, society and government, human justice and family, as well as practices such as telepathic contact with the Elohim, sensual meditation, and so on. They must be experienced in everyday life and comprise a way of identifying a Raelian through his attitudes *for* and *against* things Raël indicates in the Keys. More than that, the Keys provide the individual with the means for complete self-control. Like self-directed exercises, they nurture the idea that each person can liberate him or herself from the ‘chains’ of tradition. The Raelian movement thus

offers a utopia that provides a blueprint for self-creation in everyday life and promises complete freedom. First of all, it promises biological freedom: the Raelian person no longer needs to understand him or herself through the bonds of blood relationships. The reproductive model that supports the bonds between parents and offspring has become obsolete in Raelian cosmology. Flesh, blood and soil are outdated and dispensable elements for a humanity whose basic ‘stuff’ is a code – DNA. Cloning implies the possibility of the individual reproducing herself from herself alone, while virtuality implies the possibility of transporting, programming and recreating oneself beyond one’s own body, extending one’s existence and options for self-creation. In addition, Raelian cosmology promises psychological freedom through the ‘Keys’ to liberation.

As such, the Raelian individual *becomes* a code, a program capable of being continually updated and above all, a program that can be self-programmed. Virtual Reality, as understood by Raël, is not just a mean to immortality but also a fundamental way of rebuilding the world and creating life. To become such creators is to become like the Elohim - to become like gods.

Fiction, science and religion

Picking up references from the scientific field from the 1960s to the year 2000, Raël builds models and weaves his cosmological web firmly anchored within the ‘religious field’ of modernity. As pointed before, his way of prophesizing about the future is a utopian one, shaped by a deep belief in all scientific and technological achievements. Raelian ideas may seem “exotic” or “deviant”, but it’s important to notice that they are – to a large extent – similar to those in a “modern” and “scientific” discourse.

Writings of researchers seeking to popularize scientific themes tend also to retain a utopian viewpoint, excluding ethical contradictions of the extreme consequences of modernity from their reflections. Here we can highlight the book “Digital Life” (1995) by Nicholas Negroponte, one of the founders of the Media Lab at MIT and author of a column in *Wired* – one of the most important magazines in cyber culture. Negroponte makes predictions about the digital future, outlining the profile of the world that lies ahead:

At the start of the next millennium, our cuff-links and earrings will be able to communicate with each other via low-orbiting satellites and will have

more processing power than current PCs. Our telephones won't ring indiscriminately; they will receive, classify and perhaps even reply to calls, like a world-wise English butler. Mass communication media will be redefined as systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment. Schools will change, becoming more like museums and playgrounds where children are able to develop ideas and communicate with other children anywhere in the world. The digital planet will seem more like a pin-head, and this is how people will perceive it (Negroponte 1995: 12)

Wertheim (2000 [1999]) collates testimonies from a variety of scientists working on the development of cyberspace technologies. She notes that many of them use religious terminology in describing their expectations for the future. Michael Benedikt, for example, in the scientific volume "Cyberspace: First Steps" – edited by himself – writes: "the impetus toward the Heavenly City persists. It is to be respected, indeed it can flourish – in cyberspace. (...) If only we could, we would wander the earth without and never leave home, we would enjoy triumphs without risks, and eat of the Tree and not be punished, consort daily with angels, enter heaven now not die." (cited in Wertheim 2001: 18). In a similar vein, Kevin Kelly – executive director of "Wired" – comments: "You will be surprised with the amount of soul data we will have in this new space." And Michel Heim likewise states (Ibid.: 17): "Our fascination with computers is (...) more deeply spiritual than utilitarian". Or we can turn to Nicole Stenger, researcher on virtual reality at the Human Interface Technology Laboratory of the University of Washington (Ibid.: 18): "On the other side of our data gloves we become creatures of colored light in motion, pulsing with golden particles. (...) We will all become angels, and for eternity! (...) Cyberspace will feel like Paradise."

The dream of transcendence that fills cyberspace according to Wertheim, merges with the theme of immortality, and on this subtle boundary between technology and religion, some scientists occupy the place of prophets:

Dreaming of a day when we will be capable to download ourselves into the computer, Stenger has imagined that in cyberspace we will create virtual doppelgängers who will remain youthful and gorgeous forever. (...) According to Stenger, 'the eternal present [of cyberspace] will be seen as the Fountain of Youth, where you will bathe and refresh yourself into a sparkling juvenile.' As we are 're-sourced' in cyberspace, Stenger suggests, we will all acquire the 'habit of perfection' (Wertheim 2000: 257).

The theorists of cyberspace sometimes become prophets of an eternity attainable through science and technology; the hope of immortality they

express evokes principles easy to find in religious discourses. According to Dovey (1996), one of the rhetorical characteristics of popular writing about the new media is a profusion of terms and assertions that seek to transcend rather than define. The author states (1996: xiii) that the seemingly exponential rate of technological developments makes any precise definition of what is occurring difficult to determine. The problem, says Dovey, is knowing where to stop, how to draw the lines that would give us a framework to examine the process. He furthermore asks: "Are we merely experiencing a further dose of the vertiginous effects of progress which characterised modernism, or is this something else again?"

Indeed the very way some experts speak about their work is enchanted: a sacred atmosphere surrounds their words turning them into prophecies. These scientists thus become contemporary magicians and prophets, creating a "pseudo science" (Parsons cited in Verrips 2003: 225) mixing up what the project of modernity identifies as the contradicting realms of rationality and belief. While the cyberpunk scene gave birth to "The Matrix" (1999), with its dystopic world of digitalized humans ran by real machines, Negroponte foresees a world where atoms convert themselves into bits, in a post-information age where technology dissolves into a daily life of digital butlers and wearable media. While science fiction authors question the modern production of science and the model (or models) of society made possible by its applications and impacts, some researchers are working in the opposite direction: in the name of the legitimate voice of science they are writing popular scientific works in which they promote an exclusively positive and redemptive vision of the impacts of 'their' science on the present-day world.

On this interface between science and fiction, Raël's values come closer to those of these kind of researchers – and thus to "science" – than to the fiction. Despite propagating the extreme models of science fiction in the montage of 'scenery and characters' that constitute his message, he immerses himself in the same utopian values that suffuse an expressive number of 'scientific' works.

Raelian movement as a religion of modernity

Raelian ideas take modernity to its ultimate consequences. Through the sacralization of science, Raelian cosmology shapes a totalitarian version of modernity, emptying it from all tensions and conflicts. The individualist project is entirely realized. Human beings gain the malleability of

self-creation and self-programming by cloning and *virtual design*. However, taking anything to its ultimate consequences means encountering limits, and the most pressing limits in Raelian cosmology concern the ethical questions and political projects involved in their assertions and defenses. Raël demands new ethics – or perhaps it is more appropriate to say that he demands an *ethic of no ethics*. His discourses are filled with appeals to review ethics, while he also claims that by acting beyond ‘human ethics’ (and bioethics) the individuals move closer to the ‘post’ – or maybe it is better to say – ‘most’ human: the Elohim. This tends to scare many people, who accuse this group (usually in this sense negatively addressed as a ‘sect’) of destroying any notion of ethical limits among young people.

The main question that raises from this study, however, concerns the relation between Raelian cosmology and the ‘modern’ project: are they really so different, forming polar opposites or are they intrinsically related – even speaking in the same voice about dreams, the future and moral changes? Are the Elohim complex enemies of modernity, or their ‘bastard children’? Is the virtual life just a ‘crazy dream’ of a self-styled prophet or a scientific project in which some people believe, including the Raelians?

The image of a prophet of the scientific age is an interesting icon of modernity that, in its predominantly positivist slant, turns its projects into a ‘declaration of faith’. Raël’s ideas are clearly related to science and its modernist projects and provide a perfect expression of what Pels (2003) labels the “magic of modernity”.¹⁸ As a new religious movement, Raelianism could point to modernity as its signal of failure by asserting the presence of religion where it was not supposed to be. But by claiming *science as his religion*, Raël constructs a religious argument in which almost all his beliefs are in defense of scientific development. Modernity, in this context, is much more than just a new *environment* for religion – evoking new uses of modern products in developing

¹⁸ Pels (2003), suggests that magic should not be seen only as a counterpoint to modernity, but as inherent to and a product of modernity itself. The author contends that (2003: 3), “Modernity not only constitutes magic as its counterpoint but also produces its own forms of magic.” In his discussion, Pels analyzes how magic (defined as a conceptual field) is represented historically as the antithesis of modernity. However, he shows that on rare occasions magic was theorized as being explicitly *of modernity* – not simply tolerated but culturally *at home* in the practices and institutions that we associate with the western world.

traditional religious practices. For Raelianism, modernity – specifically in its scientific and technological interfaces – is the source of beliefs, suggesting that modernity is not only informing religion. It has itself become the object of religious imagination.

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CHAPTER TEN

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN SCIENCE FICTION NARRATIVES

A CASE OF MULTIPLE MODERNITIES?

Adam Possamai and Murray Lee

Introduction

Joss Weedon's 2002 cult series "Firefly" (and the big screen spin-off "Serenity") is a science fiction western that lasted only one season. Set 500 years into the future the series does not deal with aliens *per se* and does not represent a single ascendant trajectory from the enlightenment project. Here the cultures of the West (largely the US) and China have been the evolutionary winners as a result of, what is called, the 'Sino-American Alliance'. Interestingly however, these dominant socio-cultural forms coexist with a multiplicity of religious and spiritual beliefs. The narratives of this series deal with diverse groups (including religious ones) and could be interpreted as more post/late modern than modern since its peopled Universe is made up of an array of communities, from the very advanced to the decidedly pre-modern with one group or race¹ – the Reavers – being post-apocalyptic and having reverted to base instincts of violent, cannibalistic hunters.

The main protagonists are members of the crew of the space-ship 'Serenity'. They are essentially a band of rebels and thieves which are made up of *inter-alia*, a religious 'Shepherd' named 'Book' and a 'companion' – a sort of high class prostitute or geisha. What is significant about these two characters in particular is that they epitomize the post-secular multicultural world the series' characters inhabit. 'Book' brings his post-Christian musings to the service of most of the crew at one time or other and even the atheist and pragmatic 'Captain' finds some solace in his teachings. On the other hand the 'companion' displays a sensual

¹ The answer to their existence being revealed only in the later Serenity film of 2004.

spiritualism based on firm values, beliefs and traditions of her 'order'. Here everything old is new again – not the least religion itself.

As a cultural text the example of "Firefly" might well exemplify the turn of western societies towards a cosmopolitan celebration of religious visibility and diversity – a development that includes atheism as a belief system as well (Possamai 2009). On the face of it, this seems to contrast enormously with the origins of the science fiction genre which is generally seen as wedded to the modernist ideal. Original science fiction narratives principally dealt with the impact of actual or imagined science upon a society and/or its individuals. As the birth of this genre coincided with the development of the modernist ethos and its secularist underpinning, it is not surprising to discover that commentators on the genre, at least before the 1970s,² saw this form of narrative as dealing with the victory of science and reason over religion (Renard 1980). J.G. Ballard even claimed in 1971 that science fiction was totally atheistic (Woodman 1979: 110).³ The modernist project proposed in the majority of these stories was one in which science was taking over religion.

Moreover, before the 1970s science fiction narratives attempted to discredit religion by claiming that extra-terrestrial beings are in fact the original gods, or by speculating about theology in a science fiction setting (e.g. reflecting on what can happen to religion when meeting another race, or if all men were to acquire divine powers). Some stories were offering a type of contra-modern view of the future and even supported religion (e.g. M. Miller's "A Canticle for Leibowitz" (1960) which narrates the effort of a Catholic order to preserve humanity from post nuclear holocaust effects (Sterling 2008)).⁴ However, these were more the exception than the rule and they were not offering a setting common to that of "Firefly" in which the diversity of religion and spirituality is celebrated in a technological advanced society.⁵

² The New Wave in science fiction appeared around that time and moved the narrative from a hard scientific discussion to a softer one by including more of the human sciences approach rather than the hard sciences one. This included the insertion of themes connected to eastern spiritualities.

³ A key figure of this perspective was H.G. Wells who followed Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and who foresaw a rationalised technocratic society that had no place for religion.

⁴ For a detailed analysis on this topic, see Jean Bruno Renard (1980).

⁵ Authors such as Landsman (1972) and Blish (1970) even claim that the birth of modernity and its logocentrism, has created such a void in people's need for mythology

As the case study that introduced this chapter illustrates, it appears that a science fiction narrative dealing with faith issues no longer needs to justify the existence (or lack thereof) of religion against a backdrop of atheism. Rather, religion is often presented as a regular and visible narrative prop. In recent science fiction settings, religion *and* atheism seem to be celebrated and are even given a relatively narrative importance.

A quick note on methodology

To understand this possible shift and to focus the object of our study, the following analysis focuses on case studies of science fiction on the big and small screen, and in mainstream comics.⁶ We do emphasize the fact that works of popular culture, even if they are pure scientific fantasy, reflect the time and form of the society from which they emerge. As it is argued:

The goal of every producer is to create the difference that makes a difference, to maintain an audience with sufficient reference to the known and recognized, but to move ahead into something that distinguishes the producer's show for the program buyer, the scheduler, and most importantly, for the mass audience. (...) Choices by producers to work in certain generic forms, to express certain political, moral, and ethical attitudes, to explore certain sociocultural topics, all affect the nature of the ultimate "flow text" of television seen by viewers and assure a range of variations within that text (Newcomb and Hirsh cited in Gregg 2004: 655).

The following selective case studies assess science fiction narratives that deal with the evolution of key characters and their stories (e.g. "Doctor Who", "Star Trek" and "Superheroes") over a long time period. These series and their characters provide something of a 'constant variable'

that science fiction narratives offer a type of surrogate mythology themselves. Scientism, in science fiction narratives, can even be seen as a new religion which provides salvation in an imagined future and brings benefits that 'old' religions have failed to do (Woodman 1979). Mörth (1987) also sees a strong link between religion and science fiction as they both explore the transgression of the boundaries of knowledge, experience and behaviour.

⁶ This analysis does not specifically focus on other possible religious interpretations or 'readings' in the sub-text of the narrative, as is often found in the literature of structuralism, cultural studies or semiotics. For example, Kreitzer (1996) discovers in the "Star Trek" series the Bible, Greco-Roman mythology, the works of Shakespeare, and other literary works from the west as a sources of inspiration. The author is keener to argue that the first series is a clearer purveyor of western culture and its cultural heritage, rather than a story that supports a religious discourse.

(e.g. same character, crew, or concept) and cover a time frame from at least the 1950–60s. The cases were not randomly selected and cannot represent the whole field of science fiction. Our case study approach to social inquiry therefore follows Flyvbjerg's (2001: 77–78) point that:

When the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon, a representative case or a random sample may not be the most appropriate strategy. This is because the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied.⁷

This chapter is thus an exploration in the study of this change but cannot claim to be representative of the whole science fiction genre as more work would need to be done.

Doctor Who

The “Doctor Who” series started in 1963 and was driven at the start by a secular scientific paradigm. As Spence (2008)⁸ puts it, “with mankind blinded by superstition and worshipping what it cannot understand, it is our hero's [Doctor Who] place to dispel the myth with a rational, and indeed scientific, explanation”. And so it was in early incarnations of the series that religious uncertainties – images of the devil in art and culture and the like – were explained by the rationalist Doctor(s) by reference to science and alien life-forms.

Atheist Russell T. Davis of “Queer as Folk” was given the job to reinvent “Doctor Who” for a new audience in 2005. While fans were not disappointed, the new “Doctor Who” signaled a major change in aesthetic. It was obvious from the first peek inside the TARDIS⁹ – the Doctors' space and time ship and perhaps the most recognizable prop on the series given that it takes the shape of a British Police Box on the outside – that things had changed. Gone was the Spartan sterile ‘laboratory’ interior design along with the very mechanical (and cheap) looking switches and dials; in its place was born an organic, part-machine

⁷ Well known case studies that have managed to get a point across are Freud's “Wolf Man” and Foucault's “Panopticon”.

⁸ <http://misterspence.blogspot.com/2007/05/theology-of-doctor-who-introduction.html> (22/06/08).

⁹ Time and Relative Dimension in space.

part-nature, interior. This holistic system played up an idea articulated in early series suggesting that the TARDIS had a mysterious ‘heart’. The TARDIS was in effect alive – a living entity not only travelling in time and space but *of* time and space; time and space were intimately connected and interwoven into its very fabric.

While The Doctor always was a ‘Time Lord’ these new Doctors¹⁰ appeared to have altogether more messianic pretences. It is in the series 2, episode “The Satan Pit” that this messianic metaphor becomes embodied. Here The Doctor finds himself in a struggle with what is essentially the devil itself. Trapped in a pit on an ‘impossible planet’ the massive Satan-like beast pursues freedom via a final showdown with The Doctor. The Doctor suggests at one point: the “Devil crops up on so many planets in so many religions—perhaps that is what the Devil is, in the end: an idea.” Indeed, The Doctors’ lack of a completely rational explanation appears to disrupt the rationalist ideal. In the pit he finds depictions on the walls of the story of an ancient battle against the Beast, his defeat and subsequent imprisonment. He eventually finds the demon itself chained to the cavern wall, complete with caprine head and humanoid body. The Doctor realizes that while he confronts the body of the beast that its mind, the ‘idea’ of the devil is taking hold of his companions on the close by ship. This fight between good and satanic evil is no one-off.

In the “Doctor Who” spin off series “Torchwood”, the hero Captain Jack Harkness fights a similar beast, named Abaddon “the great devourer”, as referred to in Daniel 12:8–9. There are multiple cross references to the Doctor Who’s “Satan Pit” episode. Jack, who also happens to be essentially indestructible, must sacrifice himself to save the world – or in this instance Cardiff at least. His life force should, he figures, be too much for the beast. In the battle that follows both Abaddon and Jack are ‘killed’. With most of his companions resigned to the reality of his death, the trusty Gwen refuses to move from his side as three days pass. Finally, Gwen picks up Jack’s hand before kissing his lips. She stands and walks away, finally giving up before hearing him gasp a breath. After three days he had risen.

These obvious biblical references – death for our sins and resurrection – again signal something of a shift and illustrate a new willingness to ‘play’ with and indeed deploy religious themes while never dispensing with

¹⁰ Christopher Eccleston in series 1 (2005) and David Tennant in series 2–4 (2006–2008).

the secular scientific underpinning of the series. More recently, Church leaders at a UK conference on religion watched clips of “Doctor Who” with topics like resurrection and they were encouraged to use these in sermons in order to explore themes difficult to communicate to the public – particularly to young people.¹¹ Andrew Wooding of the Church Army noted:

There are countless examples of Christian symbolism in Doctor Who, which we can use to get across ideas that can otherwise be difficult to explain. Clergy shouldn’t be afraid to engage with popular culture as for many young people television plays a large role in their thinking.⁷

While Davis himself – who reinvented “Doctor Who” in 2005 – makes no explicit reference to religious imagery he is on the record when suggesting: “I think religion is a very primal instinct within humans, a very good one, part of our imagination.”⁷

That said, the world renowned advocate of the merits of atheism, Richard Dawkins, was at the time of writing this chapter announced to make an appearance as himself on the show, which demonstrates that there is a place for both religion *and* atheism in these recent episodes.

Star Trek

On the blog “TheoFantastique”, which is “devoted to the enjoyment and exploration of the imagination and creativity as expressed through Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror”¹², John Morehead recently posted a conversation he had on the 12th of October 2007, with Dr. James McGrath from Butler University. The American academic made an interesting comment about “Star Trek” which forms one of the ideas behind this book chapter:

TheoFantastique: With the cultural changes in the West in the shift to late modernity or postmodernity do you think there has been an increase in religious or spiritual topics discussed or incorporated within science fiction?

James McGrath: Absolutely. The best example (to preempt your next question) is to trace the “Star Trek” series in its various incarnations. The original series took a modern outlook. There was no one with any publicly-visible

¹¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/1925338/The-church-is-ailing—send-for-Dr-Who.html#continue> (25/06/08).

¹² <http://thefantastique.blogspot.com> (5/11/07).

religious beliefs on the Enterprise. They may have had them, but this was a secular enterprise, if you'll allow the pun. On their journeys they encountered two kinds of civilizations: ones that were enlightened and secular like themselves, and ones that were primitive and in which religion was mere superstition that was used to manipulate people and/or keep them from progressing. If we fast forward to "Deep Space Nine", we find that postmodernism has radically altered the outlook of the show. On this space station, everyone (except for most of the humans, interestingly enough) has a religious tradition, and everyone participates in each other's traditions and rituals, with plenty of room for putting together one's own eclectic smorgasbord of beliefs. Sci-fi certainly speculates about the future, but it also reflects the present, and because it is the future as seen from the present, it provides plenty of opportunities to reflect on our present values and our aims.¹³

This comment is backed up in Kraemer et al. (2003) who claim that Gene Roddenberry's original "Star Trek" series (1967–1970) negatively depicted religion, as it tended to be an attribute of the pre-scientific 'other'. With "Star Trek: The Next Generation" (first aired in 1987), episodes became more concerned with religious themes. It is however with the two "Star Trek" spin-off series, "Deep Space Nine" (1993–1999) and "Voyager" (1995–2001), that the series started to pay more direct attention to religion, as if the writers and producers were having a kind of religious revival (Kraemer, Cassidy et al. 2003: 11). However: "Despite the more serious treatment of religion in 'Next Generation', 'Deep Space Nine', and 'Voyager', 'Trek' scrupulously avoids endorsing any religious claim in particular or religious sensibility in general, apparently preferring to keep its options open" (Kraemer, Cassidy et al. 2003: 7).

Although the underpinnings of the "Star Trek" franchise offer an endorsement of the myths of progress and a belief in the triumphant development of science and technology, the show has thus developed into one that is able to incorporate religious diversity in its narrative, as if to support the claim that scientific progress does not preclude the religious quest for knowledge of some ultimate reality. That is, as in the later "Doctor Who" series, but contrary to the early episodes of "Star Trek" and "Doctor Who", science and religion are not depicted as mutually exclusive. Beyond the narratives of "Star Trek", Jindra (2000) even claims that the series itself has acted as a type of 'civil religion' for its

¹³ <http://thefantastique.blogspot.com/2007/10/james-mcgrath-on-religion-in-science.html> (5/11/07).

fans; a religious void is filled through the fictional world of “Star Trek” and through the community solidarity that the series fosters.

Superheroes

Super-human power in pre-industrial societies was generally believed to be acquired by divine intervention – you were assumed to be born a hero or a half-god. If it was achieved, the hero had to go through an ascetic initiation to earn it – as was the case with Ulysses and Hercules. However, in the superhero mythos, superpowers tend to come to be possessed by accident. Superpowers are depicted as the result of non-ascetic self-transformation (as is the case with ‘Spiderman’, ‘Superman’, the ‘Fantastic Four’ – an exception being ‘Batman’) or they are acquired without a divine intervention (for instance mutants like the ‘X-Men’). Instead of divine intervention, there is a secular usage of modern technologies in the early superhero comics. Sometimes the use of technology is willingly embraced, other times the superhero is created by accident through unintended involvement with chemicals, atomic energy or high-tech machines (examples are the ‘Hulk’ and ‘Flash’). In the large majority of these early superhero stories, science was used as an alibi for magic (Reynolds 1992).

Most of these mentioned characters were first created during the industrial period, and although many religious underpinning can be found in these narratives (see for example Reynolds (1992), Savramis (1987), Gabilliet (1994), Oropeza (2005) and Locke (2005)), these stories supported the belief in progress, and backed up with theories of evolution; human beings could evolve into more perfect physical and mental specimens.

Since the 1980s, however, mutations and bad scientific experiments still happen in super hero narratives but more often characters such as ‘Hellboy’, ‘Constantine’, the ‘Sandman’ and the ‘Preacher’ “have been endowed with supernatural and occult powers, or fight against such powers; hence the magic motif plays prominently in the new era [of comics books] (...)” (Oropeza 2005: 15). Parham (2005) also studied comics since that time period and suggests that science no longer holds a privileged position in these narratives, as readers seem to be willing to also explore religion and spirituality in superheroes comics. This sometimes creates a tension between the scientific and religious world as expressed in the relationship between ‘Iron Man’ (a type of modern-day

knight in a powerful armor who is a leading scientist) and ‘Thor’ (a Scandinavian god) who are friends and fight in the same team. As Reynolds (1992) points out, ‘Iron Man’ is often troubled by the existence of this supernatural being because of his rationalist and atheist beliefs. Although science dominates the super hero universe, magic and religion persist, and live side by side with atheism.

In 1975, Chris Claremont revamped the ‘X-Men’ team and gave it a globalized flavor. Members of the mutant team were not only Americans but came from various parts of the world. Two of these characters were the German and Christian ‘Night Crawler’ (who paradoxically looks like a demon and acts as a priest for a funeral in one issue) and the Russian and communist ‘Colossus’. In these stories, they are more than members of a superhero team and are depicted as close friends. They go out together on double dates with their girlfriend. However, in these early stories, they keep their religious and atheist beliefs to themselves and do not enter in an open discussion about their different vision. Both Night Crawler and Colossus re-appear in the movie adaptation of “X-Men 2” (2003) which focuses on the strong Christian beliefs of Night Crawler but not on Colossus’s communist background. For some reason, ‘Night Crawler’ does not appear in the third movie, “X-Men: The Last Stand” (2006) but ‘Colossus’ is given a more central role; however, still no reference to his communist past from the comics is made. This demonstrates that the representation of the Christian faith might be more relevant (or acceptable) in these current narratives than the secular Marxist one.

The multiple modernities thesis

The case studies illustrate that religion and spirituality have been increasingly incorporated into science fiction narratives in comics and on the small and big screen in recent years. Early science fiction stories mainly promoted a central western ideal of modernity – or a largely homogeneous modernization thesis. When these stories integrated religion, they often generated tension between opposed ways of believing rather than co-existence. However, in recent decades, as western societies are said to become less secularist, notions of religion and spirituality enter the texts thereby representing or re-enforcing new visions or versions of modernity that are no longer purely atheist. These recent stories portray religion and atheism in co-existence; neither one is in tension with the other

and has to justify its existence. While the multiple modernities thesis will be of analytical utility in understanding this development, let us first discuss the notion of secularization.

In many parts of the world religion has re-entered the public sphere to such an extent that it has undermined the 'hard line' secularization thesis predicted by the founding fathers of sociology – it confounds the functionalism of Durkheim or Parsons and indicates that Weber's articulation of modernization was too simplistic. Since the classic modernization thesis that saw science as replacing religion, views on secularization have been revised. Some argue that secularization is still advancing but in a much less straightforward evolutionist manner than first foretold (e.g. Bruce 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Bruce 2006). Others argue that secularization is losing momentum (e.g. Richardson 1985; Hadden 1987; Brown 1992; Warner 1993; Kepel 1994). In accordance with this de-secularization thesis, recent theories in the sociology of religion (Martin 2005; Casanova 2006; Davie 2006) have refined the debate through applying Eisenstadt's (2000) 'multiple modernities' paradigm. He suggests that modernity is first and foremost a multiplicity of cultural programs.

The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world – indeed to explain the history of modernity – is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views of what makes societies modern (Eisenstadt 2000: 2).

Following Eisenstadt, Preyer (2007) suggests that belief systems continuously modify and that their implementation is always a process of translation. Cultural and structural change is paradoxical, full of "tensions, conflicts and revolutions that cannot be controlled as a whole and in their continuation" (Preyer 2007: 6). Likewise, different 'civilizations' will produce different modernities and these in turn will be differentially influenced by cultural and structural forms including religion (Schmidt 2006). While we do not wish to apply the entire 'multiple modernities' thesis here, we do wish to borrow certain analytical dimensions from the model to help account for the appearance of religious narratives in science fiction. To illustrate this we draw on Martin's (2005) recent work.

Martin emphasizes the diverse dynamics of secularization, rather than simply assuming a single teleological process. The fundamental argument in his latest work is that secularization is not a clear cut process that happens in all western societies homogenously or that will inevitably happen to all westernized developing countries. Indeed, as the author argues in relation to Christianity: "(...) instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process, one might rather think in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils. Each Christianization is a salient of faith driven into the secular from a different angle, each pays a characteristic cost which affects the character of the recoil, and each undergoes a partial collapse (...)" (Martin 2005: 3). Along with this multilateral view of the processes of secularization and de-secularization, the suggestion is that this process would not only be different between, say, North America and Europe, but is also distinctive in regard to each region within these cultural areas (e.g. California and New York State, Belgium and Norway). There is, in short, not one teleological secular end point to our history but rather various phases of secularization and sanctification.

This theory is of help in understanding this shift in science fiction narratives. Early modernist views promoted a monolithic view of society dominated by science over religion. If religion had to persist, it had to be silent and in tension with atheism. The recent theory of 'multiple modernities' helps us to understand that there are different views of what a modernist project can be, and one of this includes a perspective that sees science and religion as being in co-existence. In this view, religion does not slow down progress; it just gives it another tangent. Since we hold that science fiction narratives mirror the real world (whatever the quality of the reflexion may be), it can be concluded from these case studies, that religious and spiritual diversity increasingly play a part in contemporary science fiction narratives and are as such part of a new and current project of modernity.

Could these finding based on specific case studies be generalized to the wider genre? Mendlesohn (2003) admits that it is not possible to create a clear chronology which traces the rise and fall of religious thinking and themes in science fiction. This links with Locke's (2005: 42) research in science fiction narratives in regard to the sciences itself: "Science and the scientist are never simply one thing (at least, not in the wider scheme of continuity), but multiple, mixed, and moveable (...) science neither simply disenchant nor enchants. Rather these are two alternative ways of thinking about science that have common currency in our society."

Even if it is difficult to delineate a clear chronology of the place of religion and science in science fiction narratives, it can nevertheless be argued that such narratives tended to portray religion and atheism in tension during the heyday of the monolithic view of modernity. While we recognize that we are not in a position to claim any absolutes, we are confident in claiming that religion occupies quite another, more prominent place, in recent science fiction visions. These changes in science fiction seem to be a reflexion of the changes in contemporary society, as theorized in the multiple modernity thesis. Accordingly, there is an open space in late/post modern conditions for the exploration of religious themes at the same level as the scientific one. Contrary to the earliest modernist project that saw the future as a more technological advanced place in which religion would not have a place, and which was reflected in the large majority of the earlier science fiction narratives, today, some mainstream science fiction stories project a different view of modernity which still support scientific inquiry and progress but, at the same time, embrace the celebration of religious, spiritual, and atheist diversity.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

“WHERE THE ZEROES MEET THE ONES”

EXPLORING THE AFFINITY BETWEEN MAGIC AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

Stef Aupers

Introduction

More than a decade before the emergence and widespread application of the Internet, the mathematician and computer scientist Vernor Vinge published his influential science fiction novel “True names” (1981). Like other authors in the so called ‘cyberpunk genre’ – William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Rudy Rucker and others – he envisioned a computer mediated, disembodied space called the “other plane”. Although this other world was the product of science, Vinge described it as a deeply enchanted world inhabited by mysterious monsters, god-like creatures and wizards. “The wheel has turned full circle”, Vinge comments (2001[1981]: 241). Society returns from an “age of reason” to an age of “magic” in his book: the protagonists fall back on magical means, models and rituals to control their digital environment:

Sprites, reincarnation, spells, and castles were the natural tools here, more natural than the atomistic twentieth-century notions of data structures, programs, files, and communication protocols. It was, they argued, just more convenient for the mind to use the global ideas of magic as the tokens to manipulate this new environment (Ibid.).

According to many social scientists from the 19th century, such as Frazer, Tylor and Levy-Bruhl, magic can essentially be understood as a ‘primitive’, ‘irrational’ and ‘premodern’ method to control the natural world – a world, they argued, that thoroughly mystified the ‘premodern’ mind. Modern ‘rational’ science and technology would logically replace these worldviews and methods. One of the first authors to de-construct such stereotypical, typically modern and evolutionary schemes was the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. In “Magic Science and Religion” (1954[1925]) he criticizes Levy-Bruhl, who supposes that ‘the

savage' – as opposed to modern man – was completely immersed in a mystical frame of mind, filled with superstition, mystic participations and magic. On the basis of his ethnographic fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski opposed that pre-modern people used both magic *and* technological knowledge. For mundane activities such as building canoes, fixing a fence or sowing, cultivating and harvesting the land, Malinowski argued, pre-modern man relied primarily on past experience and technical knowledge.

Malinowski's position, in short, differentiates the stereotypical image of pre-modern man as being completely immersed in a magical frame of mind. In this chapter I will use a reverse strategy. Not only will I demonstrate that contemporary 'technological society' (Ellul 1967[1954]) is not devoid of magic and enchantment, but, moreover, that we are witnessing an 'elective affinity' between modern computer technology and magic. This affinity counters the modern assumption that magic and technology are mutually exclusive and that the influence of the latter instigates a progressive "disenchantment of the world" (Weber 1948[1919]: 139). I will therefore first assess such an affinity and will furthermore explain the convergence of magical and digital models by focusing on a group of ICT specialists in Silicon Valley. They refer to themselves as 'technopagans'.

Magic and computer technology: an elective affinity

Pre-eminent evidence that magic hasn't disappeared from Western society is the emergence and growth of the neopagan movement since the 1970s (e.g., Adler 1997[1986]; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann [1991]:1989; York 1995). Consisting of many branches, sub-currents and communities, neopaganism is essentially an animistic and polytheistic 'nature religion'. Nature, the clouds, mountains, trees and sea, is seen as a vitalizing and essentially living environment. In addition, neopagans worship various gods and goddesses, like the goddess of fertility and her male counterpart, the horned God, in Wicca. An even more prominent place occupy magical practices, since, as one of Adler's respondent says: "It's a religion of ritual rather than theology. The ritual is first, the myth is second." (1986: 170). The neopagan movement is motivated by a critique on modern society, especially scientific and technological 'progress' that has alienated modern man from himself and his natural environment (Berger 1999). Through magical rituals

neopagans seek for a ‘re-enchantment of the world’ since, as Hanegraaff notes, “neopagan magic indeed functions as a means of invoking and reaffirming mystery in a world that seems to have lost it” (1996: 84).

Given the goal of pagans to re-enchant the western world through their magical practices and beliefs, it is remarkable that science and technology are predominantly positively valued in the milieu. These were already the findings of some of the first academic studies on neopaganism. A survey by Adler in 1985 among American neopagans showed that “a surprisingly high percentage” was employed in the scientific and technological branches. No less than 16% of the respondents was working as a programmer, software engineer or was otherwise employed in the computer industry (Ibid.: 446). Luhrmann, who conducted her research in Great Britain, notes that about one out of five of the neopagans she interviewed was working with computers in some way or the other (1989: 106). Aside from professional occupation, both Adler and Luhrmann found that neopagans are great fans of science fiction literature. In the United States there is even a large community, ‘The Church of All Worlds’, basing its existence on Robert A. Heinlein’s science fiction novel “Stranger in a Strange Land”. This group refers to science fiction as “the new mythology of our time” and as “religious literature”. Adler (1986: 285) therefore concludes that “science fiction and fantasy probably come closer than any other literature to systematically exploring the central concerns of Neo Pagans and Witches”.

More recent studies indicate furthermore that neopagans are more active on the Internet than other religious groups (Brasher 2001). According to Erik Davis we are dealing here with “one of the first religious subcultures to colonize cyberspace” (1999[1998]: 184). Other researchers state that neopaganism “is the fastest growing religion in North America with the Internet being the prime means of proselytizing”.¹ And indeed: many pagans form communities and covens online to exchange information and to affirm and strengthen their pagan identity. A quote of one pagan that I interviewed illustrates this function of the internet:

The Net: there is a large community out there. A very active pagan community. The only way to get to them is on the Net – they are all over the world. So now your society expands again, it takes a big jump. You talk to

¹ Quoted in “21st Century Challenges to Separation of Religion and Government”, Jefferson 21st Century Institute. www.j21c.org/challenge.htm

people who work with different traditions, are from different countries. There is something spiritual about that. A feeling of support. Of mutuality. Like: I may be crazy but I have a lot of company.

The Internet, another pagan commented, is “a ‘church,’ for lack of a better word” whereas yet another writes about pagans consequently as “people of the web” (Nightmare 2001). That their affinity with computer technology and the Internet goes further than instrumental motivation and practical use is expressed in many pagan books. One encounters titles like “The Cyberspell Book: Magick in the Virtual World” (Knight and Telesco 2002), “The Virtual Pagan: Exploring Wicca and Paganism through the Internet” (McSherry 2002), “Witchcraft and the Web: Weaving Pagan Traditions Online” (Nightmare 2001) and Penczak’s “City Magick. Urban Rituals, Spells, and Shamanism” (2001). Whereas magic is generally performed in nature – in face-to-face gatherings, many of these authors write about the performance of online magic and rituals. The advantage of such online rituals lies primarily in their scope: pagans around the globe can easily log on and participate from behind their computers. By doing so, however, pagans turn the Internet into a sacred space – in online rituals they transform the medium into a magical message:

We create this circle across the Web to protect us from all forces coming to do harm. We ask that only those energies coming in perfect love and perfect trust, in complete harmony with our magical intentions, enter this circle. We create a sacred temple beyond time and space, between the worlds, where our magical intentions will manifest. (...) Visualize the circle of light moving across the Web that connects all. Feel yourself connected by the ring of light, stretching across the world to envelope all members, stretching across the world (Penczak 2001: 269).

That we are indeed dealing with an elective affinity is furthermore reinforced by the fact that many of today’s specialists in the technical field are interested in magic. Notwithstanding the fact that they are generally depicted as standing at the frontier of processes of rationalization, secularization and disenchantment (e.g. Wilson 1976) contemporary ICT experts are often referred to as ‘magicians,’ ‘wizards’ or ‘the sorcerers apprentices’ (e.g., Levy 2001[1984]). On this subject, the sociologist William A. Stahl conducted a content analysis of 175 “Time Magazine” articles on computer technology, demonstrating that 36% of these used explicitly magical vocabularies. He concluded: “Magical discourse seems alive and well in industrialised North America” (1999: 80). This referral to technicians as magicians and to their creations as magical is even

very common among technicians themselves. Regarding this as characteristic of contemporary computer culture in Silicon Valley, Kevin Kelly calls it “nerd theology” (1999). John von Neuman, Norbert Wiener and Marvin Minsky – three pioneers in the field of Artificial Intelligence – consider themselves the heirs of Rabbi Low, the medieval alchemist who, as the story goes, created a golem, by breathing life into dead matter (Noble 1999[1997]: 173).

Probably the most clear-cut example of the affinity between pagan magic and digital technology is a group of ICT specialists who explicitly refer to themselves as ‘technopagans’. Although American journalists such as Erik Davis (1995, 1998), Mark Dery (1996) and Douglas Rushkoff (1994) have written about these technopagans, very little is known about them. In his article “Technopagans: ‘may the astral plane be reborn in cyberspace” (1995) Davis – who calls himself an ‘observing participant’ – describes technopaganism as “(..) a small but vital subculture of digital savants who keep one foot in the emerging technosphere and one foot in the wild and woolly world of Paganism (...) they are Dionysian nature worshippers who embrace the Apollonian artifice of logical machines.” On the Internet various websites can be found that explain in an ironical fashion what a technopagan is or does. One example is the following fragment of a website text:

Signs that you may be a technopagan

If the address of your covenstead begins with <http://...>

If you calculate the phases of the moon with software...

If you do most of your correspondence by email and sign off
with Blessed be...

If your Book of Shadows is online...

If you participate in online rituals...

If you’ve ever invited the God and Goddess to come online...

If your patron deity has a homepage...

If you tap into the collective unconsciousness using newsgroups...

If your altar has a keyboard...

If your daemons collect news for you...²

² [http://3.avatarreview.com:8081/dragoncave/stories/storyReader\\$68](http://3.avatarreview.com:8081/dragoncave/stories/storyReader$68)

It can, in short, first be concluded that magic and technology are not as incompatible as modern theories about a progressive rationalization, secularization and a 'disenchantment of the world' account for. On the contrary: the studies and empirical illustrations discussed indicate an unacknowledged elective affinity between magic and digital technology. This development is in line with the theoretical framework developed by Bruno Latour (1993[1991]): the carefully constructed "modern divide" between 'irrational' magic on the one hand and 'rational' technology on the other, seems to be haunted by proliferating "in-between" categories, "hybrids" or "monsters" that defy such dichotomous thinking. The worlds of magic and modern science are not mutually exclusive (if they ever were) but instead overlap, converge and even feed on one another. The paradigm case here is technopaganism. For as one technopagan explained to me in an e-mail interview "(...) A technopagan not only uses technology like many pagans do, but also integrates it into and with their belief system as a coherent whole". In the next section I will therefore study the worldviews and practices of technopaganism in more detail and, by doing so, try to explain the by now assessed affinity between magic and computer technology. The analysis is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with approximately 20 technopagans – mostly ICT-specialists, programmers and software engineers employed in Silicon Valley (US, California) at the time of the interviews (2001).

Enchanting digital technology

Probably the most influential and vocal technopagan in Silicon Valley is Mark Pesce. Pesce is an MIT 'drop out', a programmer, a filmmaker and writer and has developed Virtual Reality Modelling Language (VRML) in the early 1990s – the first computer language to design three dimensional images on the Internet. Inspired by the work of cyberpunk writers like Vernor Vinge, Neal Stephenson and William Gibson, he made it his personal goal to turn the emerging Internet into a parallel universe with sheer unlimited possibilities. Pesce grounds his worldviews in a historical-sociological perspective: he is convinced that after a period of three centuries of rational, technical and analytical thinking, we are re-entering an age of magic. According to Pesce, mechanistic models of modernity are no longer applicable to the new digital realities of the Internet and Virtual Reality. Until further notice, our rapidly emerging digital environment can only be captured and understood through the

use of ancient magical concepts and vocabularies. Technological and magical ontologies thus converge in his worldview.

It is important to note that Pesce did not start out as a pagan and – guided by this worldview – interpreted technology as enchanting. It was rather the other way around: Pesce comments that it was mainly his interaction with computer technology that set him on the trajectory of technopaganism. He was, as it were, converted to paganism by the machine itself:

I went to San Francisco and started working in Virtual Reality. This is a weird thing and it is very hard separating elements right now. But thinking about Virtual Reality and now starting to work in it as a programmer and designer and trying to create it, I now start to see correlations between what we would call “magical thinking” and what we would think of it as the designer: the ontology of cyberspace. (...) And it starts changing the way I think the world is constructed. This starts to have an influence on my technical practice. It starts to feedback on my ontological understanding of the world. And that just became a feedback. Until I ended in this place which you can call technopaganism.

Pesce’s story of ‘conversion’ to technopaganism is no exception. Many of the respondents argue that their interaction with digital technology transformed their ontological understanding of technology – they often speak of a gradual, but unmistakable shift from understanding their technological environment in technical terms to perceiving it as deeply mysterious and enchanted. How, then, can this technopagan view on digital technology be characterized? And what, according to the interviewees, exactly contributes to its enchantment?

“Where the zeroes meet the ones”

Modern pagans generally see their natural environment as imbued with mystery and spirituality. The interviewed technopagans in Silicon Valley, however, consider our digital environment as a fundamentally mysterious realm. Most respondents agree that there are various elements in contemporary technology that contribute to its mysterious nature. They point out, to begin with, that technology is rapidly becoming smaller, less tangible or even invisible. Working on hardly tangible material such as complex computer programs, electromagnetic waves or microchips apparently forms a fertile breeding ground for interpreting and framing it as a mystery. “Software”, one respondent says, “is completely symbolic. It doesn’t exist.” Another states that “the program itself is an abstraction; it doesn’t exist in any form anywhere”.

Often in this context reference is made to the ‘technology of the future’ that is currently being developed in laboratories around the world, such as nanotechnology and quantum computers. Both developments – grounded in the field of quantum physics – are indicative of technology becoming smaller and smaller and yet more powerful: quantum computers promise to bypass the ‘crude’ binary 0-1 logic of today’s computer and supposedly yield endless possibilities in the analysis of data. Nanotechnology raises the promise of full control over the material world on an atomic and molecular level. The mystery of technology is therefore not only fed by small technology already developed, but also – and maybe even more so – by not yet ‘domesticated’ technologies that pioneers in the field are working on. Such technicians, one respondent claims, are “working on a mystery” and this turns them into “magicians” or “wizards”. As one technopagan and renowned specialist in the field of Virtual Reality argues:

Unexpected transformations occur. I mean it approaches alchemy. There are a lot of parallels here. There are only a few people who understand the deep ‘arcana’ of the frontiers of for instance computation from cryptography to nanotechnology. These are wizards to the rest of us. (...) There are gigantic transformations involved, transformations that are much less clear to the person than industrial transformation. It is the Arthur C. Clarke thing: far advanced technology can no longer be distinguished from magic.

This quote of the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke that “advanced technology can no longer be distinguished from magic” is expressed by many technopagans. The word magic, in this context, is not applied to magic as a ritual but mainly used to express the mystery of intangible, opaque, digital technology. Particularly complex software and futuristic devices built on nanotechnology are mentioned by the respondents. But even the mundane Personal Computer, available in almost every western household, is sometimes the object of mystical speculations. As Jennifer – a female programmer – typically argued: “There are levels in computers that most people have never seen.” Others, such as Lorry Wood, point out the mystery of the ‘zeroes and the ones’ that meet each other in the deeper layers of the computer:

They put a silicon wave on top of it: now it became a lot harder to see the inside of it and see how it worked. When you don’t know how it works it gets the black box label. Magic! I can describe it in overview terms and I can describe it down to most of what’s going on inside your PC, but I can’t do it to where all the zeroes meet the ones. I have to stop several levels before that.

“Things greater than thou”

One development that breeds mystification of digital technology is technology becoming smaller and more intangible. Another, radically opposed development in the technical field brings our programmers to similar conclusions. Technological systems are also becoming larger and thereby literally transcend individual human beings. The Internet is, of course, the paradigm example here: since the 1990s it has rapidly grown into a worldwide digital realm that interconnects almost every personal computer on earth. Like Mark Pesce, many technopagans point out the similarities between magical realities and the ontology of the Internet.

Different varieties can be distinguished. According to most technopagans the Internet can no longer be understood in a typically modern, mechanistic fashion since it ‘grows’ and ‘behaves’ in an organic fashion. It should therefore be understood and studied as a natural environment. More arrestingly, they often hold that the Internet actualizes an ancient esoterical and holistic claim about the universe: like in the cosmos as a whole, everything and everyone is “connected” on the Internet. This holistic perspective on the Internet is illustrated by Gwenny:

I think that like me a lot of computer pagans view the internet as a model of the universe. That we are all connected on a spiritual level and that we are all connected on the internet level. That appeals to me very much: the idea that we are all interconnected. The internet is kind of organic, just like the universe is. And you can grow your little servers, realities and universes; they spring up all over the place. (...) The universe is ever-changing just like the internet is.

The Internet is thus depicted as a space where all is ‘connected’. Moreover, like the natural world, it is considered to be fundamentally complex and consequently out of control. The World Wide Web as a whole can therefore never be grasped nor mapped by humans in an empirical sense especially since it changes so rapidly. Technopagans hold that its chaotic nature undermines a rational, mechanical or technical perspective. The Internet, in short, transcends human understanding and control – imperatives that are at the heart of modernity and modernization. And yet: the mysterious nature of the Internet is fully welcomed and embraced by the technopagans as meaningful since it liberates the long repressed magical imagination. As the programmers Gwenny and K.C. Anton comment:

Just the idea! How my webpages link to others, because I have hundreds of links on my webpages and that means that they are linked to hundreds of others and it creates this huge multidimensional reality that you cannot

visualize because it is way too complex. That's why it resembles magic; magic is so multidimensional. It goes beyond the realm of our senses. We can't even begin to fathom how complex it is now.

Where there is too much information to be downloaded, so to speak, like when you hit a website and there are 600.000 pages on it and 22.000.000 links, you are just blown away. (...). Why it becomes magical is because you have the unknown quotient. Mystery. (...) Many pagans will say: the more technology you got, the more mystery you're going to have.

"A spirit of its own"

Finally, not merely the complexity of the Internet causes some programmers to regard it as mysterious but mainly its – apparent – autonomy. Though man-made, the Internet possesses its own, internal logic and dynamics, thereby escaping the control of human action. According to Erich Schneider, contemporary computer technology has a "spirit of its own". He writes:

Magic has long been associated with the making of precision tools, axes, swords, goblets, fire.

But the new techno-magic is different ... it no longer is simple, serving us in the fields or in battle. (...) The force is great, and especially the programmers, laser jocks, scientists, and silicon architects can feel it. The technology has a spirit of its own, as valid as the spirit of any creature of the goddess. This is the spiritual force we, those who are called technopagan, feel and must express. Not surprisingly, we find ways of bringing technology into our worship.³

Statements such as these seem to go a step further than vaguely portraying contemporary technology as mysterious; it raises a distinct animistic perspective on digital technology (Aupers 2002; Davis 1998). Inspired by premodern worldviews, contemporary pagans perceive of their natural environments as alive and sentient. Trees, rocks and rivers are not just objects, but are meaningful entities – sometimes depicted as having a 'soul' or 'spirit'. Technopagans project such animistic views not (only) on nature, but (also) on digital technology. They contribute subjective, life-like qualities to the Internet, software programs and computer viruses. René Vega comments about complex programs that he "(...) treat[s] it as a living entity"; Larry states "I give it life in my mind" whereas programmer André holds that "it has a scrap of a soul for me".

³ <http://technopagan.dhs.org/oldworks.html>

As with the Internet, mystifying statements like these are tied to the fact that devices transcend human understanding; they are man-made but ‘behave’ in complex, autonomous ways. Especially the rise of disciplines like Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Life and its manifestation in the contemporary world feed such animistic ideas and sentiments (Aupers 2002). As Deborah notes dramatically: “The ghost in the machine has made itself evident again.” Such developments seduce one technopagan called “Reason” to speculate about the future:

The future will look very much like the way our ancestors thought their world looked like. (...) Artificial Intelligences: those will be our spirits. Because once we’ve built them, they will be too complex for us to understand. And you will deal with an Artificial Intelligence, the same way you deal with a spirit. You make bargains. You talk to it. Try to understand it. But it will always have that greater advantage over you. These are things that are ‘greater than thou’.

To conclude, on the one hand technopagans point out that the artifacts they work with become smaller, intangible and opaque while on the other hand they emphasize the fact that our expanding digital environment becomes larger – a ‘second nature’ that is complex and autonomous. These are the main reasons for understanding computer technology as a mystery. By doing so, they turn the standard image in the social sciences on its head. Half a century ago, Jacques Ellul wrote in “The Technological Society” that “The mysterious is merely that which has not yet been technicized” (1967[1954]: 142). In our time, technopagans in Silicon Valley consider computer technology itself a thoroughly mysterious and enchanted realm.

The magical craft of programming

Beyond instrumental reason?

Enchanted perceptions of technology, as expressed by the technopagans, are not born in a vacuum. More than that: these abstract, philosophical speculations on the ontology of computer technology are firmly grounded in the experiences and practices of everyday life. Concrete experiences with technology bring these programmers to their worldviews and newly acquired worldviews, in turn, validate and strengthen the experiences. Luhrmann calls this gradual conversion in the religious field an “interpretive drift”: “Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological

involvement” (1989: 315). Worldviews can in the end thus be depicted as rationalizations and legitimations of concrete experiences in the field – experiences that are more fundamental. Hamilton notes therefore: “To understand religion one has to analyse first and foremost what people do and not what they believe. Practices are primary and beliefs secondary” (1995: 97). What, then, are the concrete practices and experiences of these technicians that have led them to their technopagan worldviews?

Almost all of the respondents point to their experiences with programming. Programming is, of course, a concrete setting where humans and computers interact and technopagans feel that the act of programming has in many ways been decisive in the perception of themselves as technopagans and computer technology as mysterious and enchanted. “The programmer”, one respondent summarizes, “is the magician of the modern age”. How do they come to draw such conclusions? First of all, many argue that programmers are, like magicians, involved in “arcane knowledge” inaccessible to laymen and that they demonstrate extreme control and power over the world. This line of argumentation links magic simply with strong feelings of scientific superiority: the technicians consider themselves the elite of the high tech industry in Silicon Valley and pride themselves by stressing their ‘deep’ knowledge and radical control over matter. In magic, Sigmund Freud (1999[1913]) commented, the ‘omnipotency of thought’ occupies a central place. The magician believes himself to be almighty and – by means of his thoughts, ideas and imagination – capable of influencing external reality.

Most technopagans, however, do not consider themselves and other programmers magicians because they are *fully in control*, but because they *lack full control*. These specialists point out that programming can no longer easily be framed in scientific terms. More arrestingly: they experience in the concrete practice of programming a breakdown of technical causality or instrumental rationality. Although one is trained as a scientist and knows exactly how to program, one is often surprised about how relatively minimal means (entering codes) can yield unpredictable, yet miraculous results: a computer screen brimming with vivid images, a virtual world, a digital life form. On this aspect of programming, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek rightly observes: “When we successfully produce an intricate effect with simple program means, this creates in the observer (...) the impression that the achieved effect is out of proportion to the modest means, the impression of a hiatus between

means and effect” (2001[1996]: 19).” In such instances, Žižek follows, “the computer as a medium of mastery and control (...) is countered by wonderment and magic” (Ibid.).

As will be demonstrated in the next two sections in empirical detail, this is exactly what happens according to the technopagan programmers.

“A delightful sense of elevation”

The breakdown of instrumental reason in their own practice is the main reason programmers give for their general point that programmers are magicians and that writing a program is like creating a spell. The activity of programming causes miraculous – and sometimes completely unforeseen – results. This unpredictability, in turn, raises feelings of ‘awe’ – a mixture of fascination, delight and excitement on the one hand and fearfulness on the other hand. After all, I was told, one never knows exactly what to expect. According to several respondents this already goes for creating quite simple websites using Hypertext Markup Language. Simplistic codes are ‘magically’ translated and transformed into images on the screen and this raises – even with such simple activities – feelings of fascination and bafflement:

When I write HTML codes, (...) I get a delightful sense of elevation, a ‘high’ when I open up the browser and my images, animations and links appear ‘like magic’. I can well see how primitive culture would view a higher tech culture as ‘gods’ for this reason (...). It’s the feeling of programming an action, casting a spell if you prefer, and the results coming to fruition on demand.

Programmers create change. You can create something from basically nothing. We put these little words together, these little characters together, and create these magical things. (...) I do webpage design. It’s magic to me: I tie these little characters in and this other piece of software translates it into this beautiful page with colors and words and ideas that I can share with other people; that’s very magical to me. It’s like saying ‘abracadabra’ and – poof! – it’s there, without having to have paint or paper or anything like that.

As the above quotes of two different respondents show, the feeling of creating advanced worlds with simple means, just like magicians do, is apparently already evoked by creating two-dimensional websites. They create “something from basically nothing” and this raises fascination, delight and excitement. This applies even more to the creation of three-dimensional, imaginary, virtual worlds. Experiences such as these were

especially noted by renowned specialists in the field of Virtual Reality, such as Mark Pesce, Bonny De Vargo, Brenda Laurel and Bruce Damer. Bonny de Vargo, for instance, who teaches at Stanford University and is an outstanding specialist in creating virtual worlds on the Internet, comments:

Every time you create something out of nothing, something beautiful, something powerful, it is the closest thing to a religious experience. I do develop worlds. I am a creator, and artist. I don't see that as secular. (...) There's this feeling of awe of your creation; that it's better than you thought; that it's bigger than you thought; that it's more autonomous than you thought. It will become something that you would never ever imagine. I have built websites. But it didn't feel the same. (...) For me, I love the god thing of creating and actually creating something that's as big as where we're sitting in. I mean, I built a virtual university [Stanton University]. And it feels just like the real thing and it looks just like the real thing.

De Vargo's remark that the result of her programming is always "better", "bigger" or "more autonomous" than she thinks in advance is indicative for the lack of control – the breakdown of instrumental reason in programming. Like with the practice of magic, an action can yield unexpected results that are better than expected. But it can also yield unexpected results and effects that are undesired. Hence this "feeling of awe of your creation" – which indicates both fascination *and* fear for something beyond our understanding and rational control.

"The Frankenstein fear"

Bryndis, a female programmer, dubbed this fear of undesired creations the "Frankenstein fear" – a sentiment that is, she argued, common even among the most skilled programmers in Silicon Valley. After coding, in a rational, technical and mundane fashion, the programmer experiences in one moment whether he or she designed a miraculous thing or a 'monster'. Bryndis comments:

There's the moment where you push the button and you wait to see what happens. You've done everything you can. Now all you can do is hope, is pray. Push the button. And is it going to work or is it not going to work? Is it going to spiral into a destructive mess, is it going to blue screen and lock up your computer? What is it going to do? (...) Of course there's always the Frankenstein fear. That you'll create a monster, a bastard child. You just don't know. All the time there are things happening and people say: 'wow, how did you make it to do that? It shouldn't be able to do that.' Or: 'I wrote

that but it shouldn't be able to do that.' You know. There's a lot of that. Then there's a feeling of 'awe' (...).

Another programmer adds:

You know, there's 10 % that we don't even know why it is happening. That doesn't matter. But we're getting to a point that program assemblages become far more than we intended. (...) There's so much that you're not going to be able to figure it out. You're going to have to step back. What is this thing I have created? This life form?

The fact, in short, that the result of programming is often unpredictable generates fascination and fear for the creation. This, in turn, leads to the interpretation that it's essentially a magical activity, a magical ritual or spell. There is, many of the technopagans argue, in such situations just no other frame of reference than a model of magic since scientific knowledge (based on instrumental reason, causality, logical connections) and technical skills are inadequate in this context. From this perspective, the programmers differentiate between simple technical acts where causality reigns and complex 'magical' practices when causality is blurred. Andre Mendes, a 'senior programmer' working in a company developing software, says for instance:

The less deterministic a device is, the more I think of it as a magical thing. Something that is mechanical and will operate the same way every time to me is very low magical. Something like the inner operation of complex systems, like the CPU, is highly magical. Because it's not predictable, you cannot always predict the outcome. (...) There are too many factors to exactly analyze what is going

René Vega, employed as a computer programmer at Apple, provides another good example of this contextual approach. Through his interaction with computer technology, he came to see himself more and more as a magician. The main reason for this, he argues, is the complexity and unpredictability of current computer programs: "My spirituality blossomed in the digital domain, where strange, complex things occur." "Fifteen years ago", Vega adds to this, "computer programs were still simple", whereas now far more complex programs are used in various combinations. In his technical practice he therefore combines the rational, technical approach with a magical one, because in some situations and contexts the latter is better suited to the complex, unpredictable and unfathomable 'behavior' of new technology. He supports this magical approach by saying: "It's not as precise in many cases as looking

at it mechanistically, but then again, looking at it mechanistically may just be too complicated.” Vega clarifies this statement in the following description:

There’s a point where I applied all these methodical, very rational efforts to something. Create this unit, this program, this thing. And there is a point where all these pieces just lying there, they are all tested; this works, that works etc. And then comes the integration of all these things where once the perfect interconnection software wise gets done. And then on its own it begins to work, it begins to react and to behave; I’m talking about the more complex sort of things. I created things which you make and it does this one thing and it’s done. Very simple. But complex systems where all these different things come together, it behaves in an extremely complex way. It reacts to its environment, its digital environment. When that happens, especially when it happens that everything just clicks. At that moment what I get is that experience that I created something. In its definition: it’s alive! It’s doing what it’s doing. Or what it’s not supposed to do. Really eloquently it’s behaving as what it wasn’t supposed to do in terms of the specification. It goes beyond that. At that point I say: that’s profoundly spiritual.

Magic and the opacity of latemodern machines

Technological progress is generally considered to be an important force in the erosion of mystery and magic or, in Max Weber’s famous terms the ‘disenchantment of the world’. But while technology is considered more effective than magic – in Weber’s view – he did not argue that modern technology itself was comprehensible for anyone. To the contrary: “the savage knows incomparably more about his tools” than modern lay people do, so that “intellectualization and rationalization do not (...) indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time” (1948[1919]: 139). Disenchantment thus assumes division of labor and specialization of knowledge: moderns lack the knowledge to fully understand how a streetcar, an elevator or a computer operates. To them, it might as well be ‘magic’ but they trust that the experts know. But do they?

The interviewed ICT specialists working and living in Silicon Valley paint another picture: they all emphasize the opaque and unpredictable nature of contemporary digital technology. Their stories converge strongly with contemporary theories about the transference from

modern *transparent* technology to post-modern *opaque* technology. Digital technology, Sherry Turkle (1995) holds, has surpassed the modern ideology of calculation and transparency, which was basically “analyze and you shall know”, and turned it into a “culture of simulation”. People nowadays interact “on the surface” of the screen with virtual realities, icons and images. This makes computers more user-friendly but paradoxically holds the “inner working” of the machine invisible to the user: “In contrast to a mechanical machine”, Slavoj Žižek comments in a similar vein, its internal action is “nontransparent, *stricto sensu* unrepresentable” (2001: 19). This apparently does not only apply to lay people but also to technical specialists and experts. According to Bruno Latour (2002) every new generation of technicians builds upon the creations of former generations – seemingly – without appropriating the original technical knowledge and know-how. Because of this, these specialists are increasingly dealing with an accumulation of “technical layers” that does not decrease but increases the opacity of our surrounding devices. Contemporary technology, Latour argues, is essentially a “black box” – even for technicians themselves. Erik Davis writes about the enchanting consequences of this increasing opacity of our digital environment: “The logic of technology has become invisible – literally *occult*. Without the code you’re mystified. And no one has all the codes anymore” (1998:181).

Other authors, like Kevin Kelly (1994) and Donna Haraway (2001[1985]), make similar claims but emphasize instead the autonomous character of post-modern high-tech, Artificial Intelligent programs, viruses and other forms of digital ‘life’. Whereas modern mechanic machines were still under human control, this may be different today:

Now we are not so sure. Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert (2001[1985]: 30).

Theories such as these turn the modern Weberian perspective up-side down: technology, supposedly a driving force behind the “disenchantment of the world”, can no longer “master all things by calculation” since it has become a “mysterious incalculable force” itself (1948[1919]: 139). Moreover, such ‘etic’ theories converge with the ‘emic’ accounts of the technopagans who point out the opacity, autonomy and fundamentally mysterious nature of computer technology.

In answering the question why programmers in Silicon Valley embrace distinct magical models and pagan rituals we can apply classical theories of Robert Marett (1914[1907]) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1954[1925]). They proposed that the rise of magic in premodern and ‘primitive’ society was not so much a primitive intellectual technique, but above all an emotional response to the riddling character of nature. The ‘primitives’, Marett held, were confronted with a natural environment they could neither understand nor control; it was therefore experienced as an overpowering, mysterious force (‘mana’) that invoked the basic religious emotion ‘awe’ – a combination of fascination and fear: “(...) of all English words *awe* is, I think, the one that expresses the fundamental religious feeling most nearly” (Marett 1914[1909]:13). This feeling of awe, then, is held to give birth to the first ‘nature religions’ (like animism) and magical rituals. The analysis in this chapter demonstrated that it is exactly this same feeling of “awe” – triggered by the unpredictable, mysterious results of programming, that brings these technicians to their animistic worldviews and magical claims.

An additional, more specific, explanation can be derived from the work of Malinowski. As noted in the introduction, he argued that the ‘primitives’ were not completely immersed in a mystical worldview. To control the natural environment people used magic *and* technical knowledge. Whether one uses the latter or the former, Malinowski states, is fully determined by context. In his study of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, he illustrates his contextual perspective on magic with the case of fishery. Fishing in the lagoon nearby, he demonstrates, is a pure technical matter: the waters are shallow, every possible obstacle is charted and fishermen therefore completely trust on their experience and technical skills. Fishing at open sea, however, is an activity suffused with magic: the deep ocean is unknown, literally nontransparent and obscure and technical skills are therefore inadequate. In such situations, Malinowski tells us, the ‘primitives’ fall back on magical models and means:

Man, engaged in a series of practical activities, comes to a gap; the hunter is disappointed by his quarry, the sailor misses propitious winds, the canoe builder has to deal with some material of which he is never certain that it will stand the strain. (...) Forsaken by his knowledge, baffled by his past experience and by his technical skill, he realizes his impotence (Malinowski 1954[1925]:79)

Magic, Malinowski holds, emerges primarily in situations where technical knowledge and skills lose their value. This is exactly what happens to

the technicians in this study – during the activity of programming they experience a breakdown of instrumental reason. Something unintended or undesired happens or there may be simply, as one programmer puts it, “too many factors to analyze what is going on”. At such moments, in such specific contexts were feelings of “impotence” emerge, magic substitutes technical knowledge. These concrete experiences, in turn, bring them gradually to a more generalized, philosophical pagan perspective on digital technology. For the technopagans our technological environment is a veritable mysterious world or – to elaborate on Malinowski’s example – a virtual ocean brimming with unknown and incalculable forces. The analysis in this chapter calls for a refinement of the all too bold theory of a progressive “disenchantment of the world”. Magic and (computer) technology are not mutually exclusive and, more than that, technological progress may paradoxically be responsible for the growth and flowering of mystery and magic in the late-modern world (e.g., Aupers 2002; 2004; Aupers et al., 2008). Jacob Nielsen, chosen by “New York Times”, “Business Week” and “Internet Magazine” as one of the most influential Internet specialists, is quite sure: “In the future, we’ll all be Harry Potter!”⁴

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⁴ <<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20021209.html>>

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CHAPTER TWELVE

DIGITAL APOCALYPSE

THE IMPLICIT RELIGIOSITY OF THE MILLENNIUM BUG SCARE

Karen Pärna

Introduction

In January 1999, in a special feature on the ‘end of world’, “Time” magazine paid attention to the millennial computer problem, also known as the ‘millennium’ or ‘Y2K bug’ (the acronym was composed of: Year, 2, and Kilo, thousand in ancient Greek). Because of an oversight in computer programming, it was anticipated that once the date changed from 1999 to 2000 it would return to 1900, thus possibly causing failures in computer systems and computer chips embedded in appliances. In marking a fault in computing as the agent of a possible apocalypse, the magazine voiced a feeling that had been hovering in the popular consciousness throughout the last years of the 20th century. The atmosphere of the era was charged with vague worries caused by a number of factors: among others, the conclusion of the Cold War and the imminent dawn of the new millennium. Some form of TEOTWAWKI (‘The End Of The World As We Know It’)¹ appeared as a logical and meaningful answer to these uncertain times. The notion of a ‘digital apocalypse’² – the meltdown of society brought about by an all out failure of computer systems – provided suitable content for contemporary eschatological fears. In short, “Time” acknowledged that the bug scare was giving shape to an unfocussed sense of insecurity. It translated an unspecified expectation of some form of millennial unrest into a crisis scenario caused by a problem in computer programming.

¹ The term (according to “Wired” magazine pronounced as ‘tee-oh-tawa-kee’ (Poulsen 1998)) was popular on websites devoted to the millennial problem and taken over by journalists writing on the topic. See for example: Lacayo (1999).

² For examples of the use of the term ‘digital apocalypse’, see Kirn (1999) or Spector (1999).

In the late 1990s the millennium bug enjoyed much publicity and 'millennial preparedness' was considered a top priority by governments and the corporate world alike. As awareness of its possible effects spread, concern about the millennial problem became a popular obsession that grew into a craze. I shall argue that this outburst of collective fascination with the Y2K bug was a knee-jerk reaction to troubled times. Rather than a mere technical inconvenience, 'the bug' formed a 'larger-than-life' point of focus in an implicitly religious quest for meaning. By that I mean that without necessarily being attached to any religious teachings or institutions, the popular craze surrounding the millennium problem nonetheless displayed facets that can be described as religious. This was a case of tacit religiosity, which manifested itself, among other things, in feelings of awe and fascination towards the bug and in the strong belief in its power as an agent of transcendence and salvation. In short, in the public discourse about it, the millennial problem provided a focus for making sense of the world. The bug with its fearsome potential and the anticipated digital apocalypse emerged as certainties to which (ultimate) meaning could be anchored.

The millennium bug hype deserves the title of a passing fad. By now it is almost completely wiped from memory and retrospective evaluative data on it is scarce. Many of those active as promoters of Y2K awareness have found new occupations. With the exception of Gary North, author of the web-based newsletter "Gary North's Y2K Links and Forums",³ most have been reluctant to comment on this phenomenon. This paper relies largely on manuscript research: discourse analysis of websites on the bug and related survivalism, self-help books and brochures published by the more prominent millennium bug activists and the many reports about it in the popular media at the turn of the century. The articles discussed were published in international news magazines ("Time", "Newsweek", "Economist", "New Statesman", "The New Republic", "Village Voice", "Salon", "Forbes" and "Money") as well as in the more specialized "Wired" and "PC World". The material dates to a period between 1997, when the first news of the Y2K bug appeared and 2000, the aftermath of the hype.

³ <http://web.archive.org/web/20001019080422/www.garynorth.com/y2k/>

Implicit religion

In the recent years, quite a lot has been published on the various ways in which religion and information and communication technology (ICT) intersect (Alexander 2003; Aupers 2004; Dawson & Douglas 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005; Kelly 1999; Mosco 2004; Wertheim 2000). Research in this area attests to changes in what is thought to be the 'proper' domain of religion. An interesting insight can be distilled from this work: not only is ICT put to use in attempts to evangelize and inform about existing religious beliefs, it can have religious and spiritual facets of its own. This means that a shift in religiosity has taken place from its traditional institutions to such bastions of modern rational thought as the world of computing and ICT.

The public discourse about the millennium bug is an example of such relocation of the religious to the secular domain of computer technology. Here, my understanding of religion is informed by Emile Durkheim's position that the defining function of religion is to cope with the uncertainties of existence (Durkheim 2001: 311). Religion provides order and guidelines, and it fixes and articulates the central beliefs of those belonging to religious communities. However, while Durkheim regards religion as an essentially social activity, he does not identify it with specific religious organizations. It follows that no particular institution or locus has a monopoly on the basically religious function of making sense of existence and that religion can 'nestle' anywhere in the social fabric, including secular phenomena. Precisely this development is taking place in contemporary Western society, where traditional religious institutions have to a great extent lost their earlier, dominant role in what Berger and Luckmann describe as 'universe-maintenance', or the process of ordering and explaining reality (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 105). This task is fulfilled by other kinds of 'conceptual machineries' (Ibid.): popular mythologies, consumer culture, philosophy, political ideologies, science, etcetera. Occasionally, one can detect more or less hidden or obfuscated manifestations of religion in these social phenomena, be it in the vocabulary, the veneration of certain ideas and objects or in the belief in radical changes to the world as we know it.

The Dutch sociologist Meerten Ter Borg refers to this kind of tacit religion as 'implicit religion' (Ter Borg 2004). He applies the term to secular phenomena that are ordinarily not associated with religious institutions but where charismatic feelings and hopes of transcending

day-to-day human experience are displayed (Ter Borg 2004: 116). His examples are instances of collective emotions such as the devotion to football, the mourning after the death of Lady Diana in England and road-side shrines for victims of traffic accidents. Phenomena of this kind can indeed contain analogies with official religions: certain rituals, vocabulary and rhetoric, or the status attributed to teachers, leaders and objects of worship. But what marks them as religious is not the use of established religious idiom or similarities with any institutionalized religion. Of primary importance is their significance as possible solutions to what Ter Borg calls the basically religious problem of human limitations and fragility (Ter Borg 1999: 410). From this functional perspective any phenomenon that is seen as a somehow transcendent opposite to humanity's essential vulnerability and serves as a source of meaning for its existence, can be described as implicitly religious.

That an object or person has acquired an implicitly religious significance becomes manifest when it is associated with charismatic feelings, when it invokes moments of collective exhilaration and when it motivates the belief that this object or person can somehow transform man's condition and facilitate transcendence to a new kind of existence. Such hope of radical changes can be built both on dreams of improvement of life (as is the case with many techno-utopian scenarios) and on dystopian visions where fear and anxiety are central. Of key importance is the construction of an object of awe and admiration that is attributed an elevated, even sacred status. Such a transcendent force can serve as an anchor and guarantee of a system of meaning and be the focus in universe maintenance. Implicitly religious discourses and beliefs are often propagated by (self-appointed) visionaries and teachers. Typically, such teachers and leaders gain prominence in the course of effervescent affairs, which can provide a sense of common cause. Finally, as was the case with the millennium bug scare, implicit religious sentiments can be articulated with the help of vocabulary and narratives derived from existing religions, without being aligned with official religious institutions.

The millennium bug scare

By the 1990s information and communication technology and the so-called knowledge economy had become subjects of great popular fascination. Hopes were pinned to new technologies such as the Internet as

omnipotent forces and, increasingly, ICT became the defining anchor of meaning for society. As a 1993 issue of "Wired" magazine indicates in its "Tired-Wired" list, the "Post-Cold War Recession" was being replaced by a "Wired Expansion" ("Wired" 1993). "Wired", a new specialist magazine devoted to the business of digital gadgets and ICT, saw a link between the recession of the late 1980s / early 1990s and one of the main sources of social unease at the time: the end of the Cold War. Its editors praised ICT and the Internet in particular as *the* solutions to the insecurities that dominated the period. New technology was enthusiastically welcomed as the path to a better future.

As news of the millennial computer problem spread, earlier promises of wealth and comfort were soon replaced by omens of destruction. But regardless of the disturbing news, ICT remained an all-important point of reference for making sense of the world. The computer virus specialist Nick FitzGerald has remarked that since the introduction of the Internet, "cyber-everything as the next big threat (...) [has become] the whipping boy of post-Cold War fear mongers after the Berlin Wall fell" (FitzGerald in Dancer 2002). That is, at the aftermath of the Cold War, ICT became a major vessel of social apprehension and disquiet. Anxieties were channeled into moral issues, such as the spread of pornography on the Internet, e-mail stalking, the harmful influence of the Internet on children or the continuous threat of computer viruses. The millennium bug was yet another vehicle for the fears of the time, giving them a particularly pessimistic form.

Although there were exceptions, reporting on the millennium bug by the press was dominated by anxious messages. In essence, the speculations tapped into the basic questions of man's vulnerability and purpose in the world. Indeed, countless aspects of society and the global economy were expected to be affected by the Y2K bug. The possible consequences of the bug ranged from minor inconveniences to the extreme version according to which there would be far reaching ripple effects causing society itself to collapse. It was suggested that in the bigger picture of the 'network society', where everything is linked, Y2K would leave nothing untouched. The possible failure of electricity supplies would not just cause complete blackouts but have the domino effect of cutting off all other supplies and severing communications and transport networks (Poulsen 1998). For the Y2K 'guru' Gary North, the post-millennium bug future would culminate in the collapse of the whole of civilization. North imagined scenes of chaos and disintegration: "a stock market collapse; the breakdown of most postal services, banks and credit

card companies; and a mass exodus of programmers leaving no one to fix things” (Penenberg & Gordon 1999: 52). In short, Y2K was a revelatory eye-opener about the fragility of the digital economy and the world in general. It was the definite negation of the promises of ICT and a reminder that technology could turn on its creators.

However, there was a hopeful and refreshing note to the doom scenarios. The millennium bug was sometimes seen as a purifying agent: some regarded the chaos that would ensue as a form of penance for the decadence and the quick money associated with Internet-related businesses. According to “Time”, a Y2K disaster would bring an end to man’s reliance on computers, reinstate basic manual skills and be “a long-awaited revenge against the nerds” (Kirn 1999) who had come to power with the rise of personal computers in the late 1980s. The magazine foresaw the downfall of the digital elite and articulated feelings of revenge as follows: “While formerly high-paid website designers are frantically distilling potable water from the radiators of their Lexuses, [manual workers] will be relaxing (...)” (Kirn 1999). In this version of the future a feeling of the ‘rise of the righteous’ comes to the fore. It reveals the belief that the millennium bug would teach a lesson to those who had shunned the so-called tangible economy and hailed the information age.

Schadenfreude with regard to the ‘digitalization’ of the world was mostly common among the more extremist millennium bug pundits but even the sober voices of such magazines as the “Economist” pointed out the dangers of an economy whose products have “no tangible existence” (“Economist” 1997). In March 1997 the magazine presented the scenario of a possible ‘attack’ of the millennium bug on a Boston bank and reminded its readers of the eventuality that the bug might wipe out records of their accounts and transactions. It transpired that the infrastructure of financial institutions was in fact vulnerable and that trust in computers may be bitterly betrayed. The underlying message of the “Economist” differed little from a statement by one American Y2K fanatic quoted by “Time”: “This Y2K thing might show people (...) how much they’ve been babied” (Kirn 1999).

Soon after the arrival of the year 2000, when it turned out that the date change had had no serious repercussions, it was the trend in the press to ridicule Y2K-worries, but in truth, TEOTWAWKI had been considered a reasonable prospect by the press, scientists, government officials and business leaders. It was suggested that, unlike many other doom-scenarios, the millennium bug was no imaginary threat. On *this* occasion the anxieties seemed to have real grounds – they were directly

related to the Western world's growing dependence on technology. As "Wired" magazine put it, "The Y2K bug is not simply a matter of myth (...) it is a tangible problem hardwired into the fabric of our industrial society" (Poulsen 1998). The bug was a logical consequence of modernity and a serious antagonist to be reckoned with. Judging by the reports in the media, it remained uncertain whether it lay within human powers to conquer this force. As "The Economist" concludes in its article on the Boston bank, "Even if Bank Boston does its best to be ready, no one can be sure what will happen when the clock strikes twelve" ("Economist" 1997).

A number of signs of implicit religiosity come to the fore from these narratives about the effects of the bug. Firstly, the doom-scenario's provided a well-defined set of beliefs. Secondly, the visions of the post-Y2K world, where the currently dominant technological culture would be undermined, reveal dreams of salvation and transcendence to a new kind of reality. A return to a simpler and more authentic way of life would follow the victory over machines. Y2K would establish a new and somehow more unaffected set of truths and values. Thirdly, the conceptualization of the millennial problem as an agent with a destructive will of its own that is somehow beyond the reach of human control and understanding indicates the attribution of a super-human quality to the bug. However, these were all relatively subtle tokens of religious sentiment present in the general, mainstream worries about the millennial problem. The more pronouncedly articulated manifestations of these and some other implicitly religious features are presented by the case of Y2K survivalism.

Y2K survivalism

The prospect of a (digital) disintegration of civilization and the apocalyptic scenarios of the post-millennial world in chaos inspired the rise of millennium bug-related survivalist movements in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Europe. Their preparations for the date change tended to be extreme and survivalism remained an exceptional reaction to the millennial problem. However singular, Y2K survivalism grants us access to the key features of the millennium bug scare in a concentrated form and it provides us with a magnified image of the implicitly religious facets of the more mainstream millennium bug scare. Granted, there were several prominent Christian activists, such as the above-mentioned

Gary North or the American television ministers Jerry Falwell and Jack van Impe,⁴ who associated the millennium bug with Biblical prophecies and interpreted it as a sign of divine rapture. However, the sort of religiosity that typified most of Y2K survivalist thinking was not consciously articulated in terms of Christian beliefs. The discourse involved remained on the level of implicit manifestations of religion, which can be identified as dreams of transcendence, allusions to a super-human force, a sense of belonging to a special group, collective excitement and the presence of priest-like leaders. This case of survivalism presented a common cause with a clear vision of the future, an ideology of the 'right' and the 'wrong' way, and practical instructions for managing life.

As will become apparent, the central survivalist belief was that there existed a transcendent destructive entity with salvific powers. According to some, after the initial devastation the bug was to eventually bring about a better world. In other words, the millennial problem was regarded with a mixture of fear and optimistic hopes, which has typified millenarian thought throughout history (Cohn 1957: 4). On the one hand it represented the end of the world as we know it, on the other it was seen as the agent of a new way of life that would, after initial struggles, be better than the status quo. Thus the millennium bug carried a paradoxical meaning that rhymes well with the twin categories of 'awfulness' and 'wonderfulness' that we encounter in Rudolf Otto's "The Idea of the Holy" (Otto 1954: 32). If, as Otto has argued, the *vita religiosa* is born out of the two contradictory sentiments of fear and fascination, then the religiosity present in the bug scare too was formed by both fearful thoughts and admiration. Let us now look at the various religious dimensions of this phenomenon.

Collective belief and dreams of transcendence

The first signs of implicit religiosity in Y2K survivalism can be recognized in its very clearly defined worldview where the millennium bug is conceived of both as a terrifying, harmful force and as a means of transcending the world as it is to a new way of life. The survivalist vision of the world was characterized by three sentiments: a belief that the *real* truth about the order of the world had been uncovered, a very strong

⁴ Both expressed the conviction that the millennium bug was a sign of the apocalypse in their sermons, on their websites, and in videos with titles, such as Van Impe's "2000 Time Bomb" and Falwell's "A Christian's Guide to the Millennium Bug".

conviction in the validity of the worldview that followed from this realization and a sense of urgency in taking serious protective steps against the (perceived) threats that one's environment poses.

According to the survivalists, the millennial problem revealed that man's security in the world was but an illusion. An article about the Oklahoma Y2K survivalist Scott Olmsted in "Wired" magazine expounds on the notion that the Y2K scare forced individuals to face up to a world that offers no securities:

Scott has turned his back on denial – the blind faith that allows people to live normal lives in the face of staggering complexity, risk, and uncertainty. Instead, he's chosen to acknowledge his own vulnerability... He, too, has been driven to act by the clarity and intensity of his vision. (Poulsen 1998)

There are unmistakable religious undertones to this account: it tells us that a member of the community has become privy to important insights about the world and grown into a believer who embraces a certain worldview with rigor. The story of Olmsted shows how individuals question the ontological security of the world and how they look for points of focus that can give meaning to their existence. The world as a dangerous and chaotic place is acknowledged as the norm with its own logic and rules, and a framework emerges wherein it is perfectly possible to make sense of life. The reaction to the disquieting discovery that one's sense of security has been false, is to cling on to a new vision (that of a digital apocalypse) and to act upon it.

The practical preparations for the expected disaster were central to the survivalist attempts to cope with insecurity and they formed the key point of focus in this new worldview. As Olmsted saw it, "taking action – doing something – really gets you out of that [sense of disorientation]" (Poulsen 1998). The international media paid much attention to survivalist measures such as the relocation of families to the desert and the equipping of homes with electric generators, sun panels, tanks of propane and weapons.⁵ For the masses that were expected to stream out of the cities there were plans for specially designed housing compounds, such as the 'Heritage Farms 2000' project in rural Arizona (Lacayo 1999). The British daily "The Guardian" reports on one family who, in anticipation of the worst case scenario, had moved to a remote

⁵ Lacayo 1999; O'Malley 1998; Poulsen 1998; O'Reiley 1999.

countryside house with no facilities, and prepared for the year 2000 by stockpiling food, medicine and water purification tablets. According to the article “they feared Y2K would bring food shortages, the accidental discharge of nuclear weapons, the breakdown of global capitalism and rioting on the streets” (Seenan 2000).

However, if the immediate concern of survivalism was coping with imminent Armageddon, then the notion that the world would soon undergo great changes also held a promise of salvation and spiritual revival. Despite the fears, to many survivalists a bug-related disaster was a blessing – a path to a better world. “Time” quotes a member of the New Age group Church Universal and Triumphant: “Civilizations rise to the level of their incompetence (...) but personally, I really believe there will be a new Golden Age afterward” (Kirn 1999). The return to a pre-computer era was an appealing outlook for those who found the root of contemporary malaise in digital technology: the millennial problem gave hope of regaining power over the destiny of humanity that some feared to have been seized by computers. It was a way out of “a civilization of intimidating global corporations, boundless personal gratification and unnerving manipulations of nature” (Lacayo 1999). As “Time” points out, survivalism appealed to the American pioneer’s mentality of independence and resourcefulness (Lacayo 1999). Like the historical pioneers, the survivalists were geared towards actively creating ways of coping with their own vulnerability and building a new world. In short, the millennium bug represented the sort of hope of radical changes that we can associate with religious thinking: according to the Y2K survivalists, it would facilitate the rise of those who had accepted the scenario of the digital apocalypse to a new kind of existence. After the initial destruction and mayhem, transcendence beyond the banal world of computers and commercial institutions would be possible. ‘A Golden Age’ would follow.

Common cause

In a time when uneasiness about the end of the Millennium and the post-Cold War period preoccupied the public, the bug threat fulfilled an essentially religious function: it provided the survivalists with familiar themes and strategies for coping with anxieties. As “Forbes” puts it, “This [Y2K preparations] is the most fun they’ve [Y2K survivalists] have had since the Cuban missile crisis” (Edwards 1999). The comparison rings true. If in the 1960s the threat of a nuclear attack had

kept the populace pleasantly busy with preparations for surviving an assault, then there was a similar element to the activities of Y2K survivalism. However doom-ridden the context, working towards a goal offered fulfillment, a point on which to project insecurities, and it was a source of collective excitement.

The impending doom also held a promise of a rejuvenation of social relationships and a more intense sense of belonging to a community. As the example of the Oklahoma survivalist Olmsted reveals, the typical conviction was that the millennial computer problem had opened a door to the truth about the state of the world to a select group of like-minded visionaries. Although the obsession with Y2K and survivalist preparations were frequently ridiculed by others (Edwards 1999; Saffo 1999; Kushner 1999) the movement cherished pretences of having access to 'special' knowledge. True to the image of misunderstood prophets, the realization that their efforts were not taken seriously was no obstacle for the survivalists. Rather, it was a sign that others had not yet opened their eyes to the threat of the millennium bug. The notion of themselves as a group of informed and prepared individuals versus the unprepared masses, was typical of survivalist thought. That some felt threatened by the latter gives an indication of the special status that was attributed to their own group. "I know I don't have to fear the future... I only worry about people who aren't prepared";⁶ says one Ohio survivalist whose family had taken extensive millennium-proofing measures.

The 'us against the rest' attitude came to the fore in protective measures that the survivalists took against possible looters. There were plans for defensive compound forming: families and small communities were to literally close themselves off from the rest of the world. For instance, in 1998 "Salon" magazine featured a list of plans to protect communities from "violent city refugees who may be hunting for food in the early months of 2000" (Brown 1998). These included \$7,000 especially designed, isolated "Survival Domes", purchasing property in remote, rural areas and setting up "covenant communities" of like-minded survivalists (Brown 1998). In anticipation of post-Y2K aggression many acquired guns – another Oklahoma survivalist is reported to have bought four firearms, including an M-16 assault rifle (Poulsen 1998).

⁶ Ohio survivalist Diane Eckhart quoted in Lacayo 1999.

In fairness, the threat of Y2K did not always provoke such measures but it typically inspired a strong group consciousness. Eric Utne, the author of “Y2K Citizen’s Action Guide” (1998) rejoiced in the sense of community that was reawakened by the preparations for a digital apocalypse: “As we prepare for Y2K something surprising and quite wonderful is going to happen. We’re going to get to know our neighbors.” (Utne 1998, quote from the introduction to the book’s online version).⁷ His enthusiasm reveals a sense of ‘togetherness’ and belief in deliverance through shared purpose. It was felt that the bug threat helped to rediscover intimacy and communal spirit. “Time” quotes the mother of one family: “this [planning for the millennium] has brought us closer together, we have a common goal” (Lacayo 1999).

The sense of belonging to a special group and sharing a goal are important facets of religious experience. Meanings and values are collectively confirmed and the group can offer its members the comfort and security of its confines. In the case of millennial survivalism one can observe this function in the formation of defensive ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups, in the newly-found togetherness and in the very clear prescriptions for how a responsible member of the group should act – prescriptions like one can find in Utne’s “Y2K Citizen’s Action Guide”. It is in the context of the close-knit group that the instruments for giving meaning to the world can be formed and legitimized: a shared worldview is created and elevated, sacred objects are defined.

Y2K: a charismatic and super-human force

The Y2K survivalist movement held the millennium bug to be the truth that guided its actions. Its destructive force stood as the guarantee of the validity of their worldview. Yet from the many articles on survivalism it transpires that the object to which the Y2K survivalist referred as his true north cannot be fully known. He must concede that there is no definite proof that the millennium bug will have any disastrous effects, let alone bring about TEOTWAWKI. As the above-mentioned “Wired” article on the Oklahoma survivalist Olmsted shows, this survivalist’s belief in the importance of his activities is blind and his main engine is an *intuition* that something overwhelming is about to happen, that “this thing is big enough to do something about” (Poulsen 1998). ‘This thing’

⁷ http://www.utne.com/web_special/web_specials_archives/articles/404-1.html

that he refers to – the millennium bug and its effects – had become powerful enough to warrant his faith. Such strong faith was characteristic of Y2K survivalism, as well as of the more mainstream Y2K scare. As the myth of the bug's capacity to destroy spread but the reasoning behind the problem remained obscure to most, the Y2K bug acquired a significance that went beyond the logic of computer programming. It seemed to be beyond ordinary human experience and understanding, and have become something closer to a deity.

Although much attention was paid to the subject, it was difficult to conceptualize the millennium bug. It had no material form and it seemed to be nowhere and everywhere at once. It could result in great problems yet, unlike computer viruses, no one had designed the millennium bug. It seemed more like an independent force than a man-made artifact. "Newsweek" described the problem as "the biggest time bomb in history" (Levy 1996) and it was apparently within no one's power to dismantle this bomb. Ultimately, the bug appeared to have control over the destiny of mankind. It had become an entity that radically differed in its ontology from anything in our own world and, apparently, it had the power to transform the world beyond man's capacity. In short, the bug had achieved a super-human status and now belonged to another order of things that need and could not be explained. Together with its obscurity and mystery, its reputation as a transcendent force added to the validity of the survivalist vision.

Here, in this special status attributed to the millennium bug lies one of the characteristics that define such secular phenomena as the Y2K scare as *religious*. In contrast to the relativity and finitude of the human condition, with its extraordinary powers the bug came to be regarded as a fixed truth. This transcendent force had an absolute value that was not subject to doubts and this elevated significance contributed to the charismatic allure that the bug had for the Y2K survivalists.

Ter Borg describes charismatic feelings as a 'combination of faith, fascination, gratitude and hope', which arise as a response to social anxieties (Ter Borg 1991: 88). Y2K survivalism approached the millennial problem with precisely these sentiments; charisma was an important key in the dedication to the cause of millennial preparedness. As an enigmatic entity that transcended human experience, the bug was embraced as a certainty in insecure times. Much unsupported trust was invested in its power to alter the state of the world: it would bring an end to life as we know it and undo all its laws and institutions. Quaint details,

such as the *Time's* story on a family who had stockpiled toilet paper as a potential bartering item for a time when money was no longer useful,⁸ indicate the emotional significance of the social changes expected. The collapse of such foundations of civilization as the currency systems would imply individuals finding themselves in an unfamiliar world. But it would also imply a reversal of the ruling social arrangements: a victory of the underdog on the current digital elite. To summarize, much like a deity the millennial problem had a strong grasp on the emotions of the survivalist. It both thrilled and frightened, for the bug appeared to have the power to bring chaos into the world *and* to install a new set of values and guidelines for existence.

Millennium gurus

To a great extent the excitement about the millennium bug fed on the prognoses made by different specialists and 'gurus'. Some, such as Gary North or Edward Yourdon, the author of several guidebooks on the millennium bug, can be described as the 'pioneers' of Y2K survivalism. On his website North predicted "worldwide disaster" and among other things advised the public to "stock up on gold and grain, and move to a remote location".⁹ Yourdon, whose relocation from New York to a self-reliant home in rural New Mexico was the subject of several articles in the press (Lacayo 1999; Penenberg & Gordon 1999; Zuidema 1999), envisioned a worst-case post-millennial scenario for the economy and society at large. In two books – "Time Bomb 2000" (1997) and "The Complete Y2K Home Preparation Guide" (1999)¹⁰ – he expounds on the possible effects of the bug and gives advice for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. While the Y2K preparations suggested by North and Yourdon could be dismissed as extreme survivalism, the possibility of a digital apocalypse was taken seriously by the authorities as well.

A number of the prominent Y2K activists were highly placed members of the government and the business community. For example, John Koskinen of the official United States Year 2000 Awareness Group, Charles Lickel of IBM and Edward Yardeni of 'Deutsche Bank' were

⁸ Interview with Arkansas survivalists Jerry and Carolyn Head in Lacayo 1999.

⁹ <http://web.archive.org/web/20001019080422/www.garynorth.com/y2k/>

¹⁰ Yourdon's book was just one of the many on the subject. A search on Amazon.com produces five other publications with the phrase 'The Millennial Time Bomb' in the title.

esteemed authorities. Yardeni was perhaps the fiercest (Sandberg & Kaplan 2000: 38). “Money” magazine calls him a “true believer” (Washington 1999) and the image that comes to the fore regarding him is indeed that of a passionate evangelist. Yardeni’s pronouncements were provocatively negative and his language excessively ominous. “We should prepare as though a war is coming. (...) There could be some very nasty disruptions to our lives...”, he says in an interview in “Fortune” (Kirkpatrick 1998: 173). To Yardeni, the bug threat was an emotional matter and many of his statements were charged with a sense of personal mission. But, much like a religious evangelist, Yardeni emphasizes the high value of his predictions, calling upon solid sources (Kirkpatrick 1998: 173). The lack of support from the business world for his vision made little difference. Yardeni saw himself as an insightful teacher in the midst of unaware non-believers.

Yardeni and others, who had no explicit ideological or religious agenda and were known as reputable specialists, functioned as reliable authorities of the Y2K survivalist worldview. With their special knowledge they mediated between a higher entity – the technology and the bug – and the public to whom they revealed the truth. Yardeni answers to a number of characteristics that Max Weber attributes to the priest (Weber 1978: 439–442). He is a professional functionary who claims to have knowledge of a transcendent entity (the bug) and to be able to influence it. There was a clear moral to his teachings, and, as is the case with a guru or priest, around Yardeni and others there emerged a specific collective that was drawn together by a shared belief. This group manifested itself in different degrees of intensity. Some, such as the Y2K survivalists, were an extremely close-knit group that followed the teachings of their ‘priests’ to the word. Others, the mainstream, may have approached the ‘gurus’ with skepticism. However, as the rise of topical merchandising (Y2K stationery, crockery, clocks, toys, etc.), Y2K-themed pop songs¹¹ and the great media interest may reveal, popular imagination was certainly captured by what they announced.

Furthermore, most Western governments set up task forces devoted to the bug and a telling indication of the commitment to Y2K on an official level were the many millions invested in fixing the problem. According to “Newsweek”, \$500 billion was spent worldwide (Levy 2000).

¹¹ Such as ‘Y2K-Hooray’ by the band Jim’s Big Ego. Free mp3 download from http://www.garageband.com/artist/jims_big_ego

For example, in the United States the Federal Aviation Administration, the Pentagon, the tax office and the social security network all had some form of Y2K contingency plan (O'Malley 1998). By the end of the century the millennium bug was everywhere. As "The New Republic" writes, "just about every outlet covered Y2K wall-to-wall" (Kestenbaum 2000).

Ontological security and the cold war

The key to explaining the emotional outburst that the millennium bug scare entailed lies in the need to re-establish ontological security in a time that was marked by social anomie. Ontological security can be described as confidence in the validity of the meanings that individuals and societies attribute to objects. In short, this notion comes down to the ability to find one's bearings in the world and to establish such existential matters as the significance and purpose of life without too much doubt. Anthony Giddens defines it as the trust that people have in their own identity and in the reliability of both the physical and social worlds they inhabit (Giddens 1990: 92). To use Giddens' phrase, ontological security entails confidence that "the world is as it is because it is as it should be" (Giddens 1991: 48).

Giddens observes that trust in the validity of how one understands the world remains mostly on the level of so-called practical consciousness (Giddens 1991: 36), where agreements on meaning have become self-evident. In this manner, the worldview that the Cold War produced had eventually become more than a political arrangement – it was a natural habitat. As the American political scientist Yahya Sadowski says in his "The Myth of Global Chaos" (1998), in the course of the Cold War the danger of Communism had been an important ingredient of the American [and Western] experience of the world at large (Sadowski 1998: 1). However unnerving, over the years ideological antagonism had become a reliable source of meaning and the Cold War situation had provided a high level of ontological security. When it came to its end in the late-1980s, many of the certainties that had contributed to the sense of ontological security throughout its duration were suddenly irrelevant. Attempts of the period to find new points of reference and to make sense of the times were characterized by one common sentiment: the 'world as we knew it' was no more.

This realization led to varied conclusions. To some, such as the American political economist Francis Fukuyama, the new order gave

hope. In his now-famous article “The End of History” (1989), Fukuyama sketches a dream of complete ontological security that is reminiscent of Emile Durkheim’s ideal of social harmony and solidity (Durkheim 1952). Fukuyama puts forward the eschatological notion that, with the conclusion of the Cold War, humanity had reached the end of the world as we know it. But his vision of the ‘new’ world is generally optimistic; he imagines the post-Cold War world as a peaceful and admittedly stagnant place¹² where all uncertainties have been removed. As he sees it, liberalism on the international political arena is to be the final stabilizer of historical insecurities: the dialectic between ideologies had found the last stage of its evolution, leaving “Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989: 4). An era of stability, comfort and concord was awaiting.

However, the more often-expressed feeling of the post-Cold War years was that around the globe things were seriously awry and that the world was experiencing collective insanity. Sadowski describes the sentiments of the time as follows: “In the early 1990s growing numbers of people accepted the claim that the world was going crazy” (Sadowski 1998: 25). The process of globalization that was now allowed to flourish was expected to bring with it social and political mayhem across the world, undermine locally held values and trouble national politics and economies. A most vivid account of the world at the brink of breakdown came from Samuel Huntington, who spoke of “increased instability, unpredictability, and violence in international affairs” (Huntington 1989: 6). In his essay “The Clash of Civilizations?”¹³ he suggests that there is much reason to be afraid. As he puts it, “The Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology” (Huntington 1993: 28).

Anomie

All in all, judging by the visions of chaos and disintegration that circulated in the public debate in the early 1990s, to many the long-awaited

¹² Fukuyama predicts that in its peace and quiet the post-historical times will be inert and boring: “Perhaps the very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started again” (Fukuyama 1989: 18).

¹³ Huntington’s book of same title continues to be a major bestseller. It is still used in articulations of international anomie and often quoted in fearful discussions about such issues, as the rise of Islam in the world.

truce between East and West had become a source of Durkheimian anomie. Durkheim's understanding of anomie is the opposite of what Giddens calls ontological security – it is *insecurity* about (ultimate) meaning. As he sees it, anomie arises when a society experiences a lack of harmony and continuity, as was the case at the aftermath of the Cold War (Durkheim 1952: 248). In his “Suicide” (1952[1897]) Durkheim posits that shared infatuations and commercial crazes are symptomatic reactions to such a state of affairs (Ibid., 255–56). They are a means of concentrating a group's attention and providing common anchors of security to hold on to in times of social unease.

The millennium bug scare was one such symptom of anomie: it ‘reacted’ to post-Cold War insecurities by employing a classic end-of-times scenario. By becoming the motif of a contemporary eschatology and directing the anxieties of the time through the specific lens of a *digital* apocalypse it gave shape to the notion that after the Cold War the world was indeed nearing its end. The confusing and vague worries inspired by the images of disintegration that were drawn by Huntington and many others found their focus in the shape of a mysterious, seemingly omnipotent computer problem. The bug scare was a collective attempt to re-establish ontological security in an anomic situation. But how could an apparently destructive force like the millennial problem offer solace in a time that was already filled with anxiety and uncertainty? Would the threat of a digital apocalypse not *add* to the sense of anomie, rather than counterbalance it?

If social anomie, as Durkheim describes it, is characterized by feelings of uncertainty and loss of direction within a group, then the millennium bug scare certainly provided a well-defined vision of the state of affairs in the world. The discourse about the bug consisted of clear narratives concerning the significance of the millennial problem and the direction of where the world was heading. In addition, it fitted well into Norman Cohn's description of the “central fantasy of eschatology”: a world threatened by malign forces will first come to its (violent) end and then be delivered to a final, paradise-like stage (Cohn 1957: 4). In other words, not only did the doom-scenarios relating to the Y2K bug sketch strong images of destruction and create a common goal of preparing for end-times, but in the long run, there also beckoned the promise of transformation and improvement. Anomie was thus offset by a collective need to fight against a shared enemy, to overcome hardship and to believe in some form of salvation.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the millennium bug scare was one possible response to the anomie that ensued the fall of the Iron Curtain. The shared fascination with the millennial problem was a mean to deal with social unease and if we follow Emile Durkheim's argument in "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (2001[1912]), then it had an essentially religious significance. According to Durkheim, moments of shared excitement and fascination fulfill a religious function, namely that of fixing and renewing a society's values and beliefs. The Y2K bug scare and, more specifically, millennial survivalism were such instances of collective effervescence that generated truths and anchored beliefs about the world. In the millennium bug both the survivalists and the general public appeared to find a point of reference for their efforts to make sense of the world and this task of sense-making was facilitated by a number of implicitly religious features. These were: collective adherence to a set of beliefs about the power of the millennium bug to fulfill dreams of transcendence to a new way of life, a strong sense of common cause, the construction of a charismatic, super-human object of awe and admiration, and the importance of gurus in spreading the message about the dangers of the Y2K bug.

The millennium bug scare echoed the prevailing end-times sentiment of the 1990s perfectly. It fitted into an age-old apocalyptic formula that had once again become current at the wake of the new millennium. The notion that digital technology could be the cause of an all-out collapse of civilization rhymed well with the *zeitgeist* of an era that had so rapidly and overwhelmingly come under the spell of new technologies. The modern eschatological thought that the Y2K scare inspired was a symptom of a society attempting to cope with a changing world and it did so by means that I have described as implicitly religious.

The use of the term 'religion' in such a secular context as the Y2K craze might be considered problematic. Firstly, because in our daily parlance religion is mainly associated with the very specific teachings and institutions of organized religions, of which the millennium bug seems far removed. Secondly, the basic premise when studying the implicitly religious dimensions of phenomena that one encounters in such everyday settings of our culture as the popular discourse about the bug, is that religion can be found in events and beliefs that some may consider too trivial, too commercial or too common. Thirdly, this approach presumes a broad, functional definition of religion. It implies that *anything* in our

society that somehow instills meaning *could* be religious, as long as it displays the criteria that were mentioned earlier: collective beliefs and references to objects or ideas that are placed above ordinary human experience. But religion is not only limited to certain, well-defined phenomena so if we wish to know how modern societies create meaning then it is this diffuse religion of the lay world that we need to explore. The concept of implicit religion can be used as an analytical tool to help one understand such outbursts of collective emotion as the millennium bug scare. To speak of implicit religiosity in the stories and expectations relating to the bug is to explore how modern societies deal with questions relating to human existence – its significance, purpose and future. It is to trace how we approach the inexplicable, how we cope with overwhelming emotions, what we do with our fears and uncertainties and how we channel our hopes.

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