

## **POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY**



## **POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY**

Based on Papers Read at the Symposium  
on Postmodern Spirituality  
Held at Åbo, Finland, on 11–13 June 2008

Edited by  
**Tore Ahlbäck**

Editorial Assistant  
**Björn Dahla**

**Published by the Donner Institute for Research  
in Religious and Cultural History  
Åbo, Finland**

**Distributed by Tibo-Trading Ltd.  
Pargas, Finland**

Editorial secretary Maria Vasenkari  
Linguistic editing Sarah Bannock & Heidi Granqvist

ISSN 0582-3226  
ISBN 978-952-12-2305-1

Printed in Finland by  
Vammalan kirjapaino  
Sastamala 2009

## Editorial Note

The present volume in the Donner Institute series *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* has the theme ‘Postmodern Spirituality’. A few words on what we mean by this might be called for, and to this purpose, we quote a few lines from our description of the subject in the Call for Papers sent out in preparation of the symposium: ‘Postmodern spirituality is here, in contrast to traditional spirituality, understood as a form of spirituality that appears as an alternative to conventional religion. It refers to the way people outside of the established religions and religious movements handle existential and spiritual issues. They do not choose “ready-made” solutions, but in true eclectic spirit themselves decide what they want to believe in and create their own combinations and sets of answers to existential questions. . . . Postmodern spirituality has an individualistic image. It is spiritual in the sense of being the opposite of materialistic, and it is intramundane in contrast to extramundane religiosity; it is essentially about what the world is like and how one should live in it. . . .’

Basically, it was this description of the theme that inspired the writing of the articles included in the present volume based on papers read at the symposium on Postmodern Spirituality held in Åbo, Finland on 11–13 June 2008. Although we, the Organizing Committee, thought our description was excellent, it turned out, as the readers themselves will realise, that most of the writers had their own, or a so-called stipulative definition of ‘Postmodern Spirituality’, which is either openly declared or implicit in their text. We were not, however, very surprised—we knew that this is a relatively new area of research and that it will take a long time yet for a consensus to be reached on central concepts and definitions.

Nevertheless, the Organizing Committee is quite pleased with the results published in the present volume—and we hope that the readers will also be so.

# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| ANTOON GEELS<br>Glocal Spirituality for a brave new world . . . . .   | 8   |
| SARAH GOLDINGAY<br>Watching the Dead Speak. The role of the audience, imagination,<br>and belief in late modern spiritualism . . . . .    | 25  |
| ANDREAS HÄGER<br>Bob Dylan and Religion . . . . .   | 44  |
| NILS G. HOLM<br>Mysticism and Spirituality. . . . .   | 61  |
| RALPH W. HOOD JR.<br>Them That Believe. A postmodern exploration of the contemporary<br>Christian serpent-handlers of Appalachia. . . . . | 72  |
| JP JAKONEN<br>Beyond Postmodern Spirituality. Ken Wilber and the Integral<br>approach. . . . .  | 92  |
| MARIA LILJAS STÅLHANDSKE<br>Necessary and Impossible. On spiritual questions in relation to early<br>induced abortion. . . . .            | 110 |
| MARCUS MOBERG<br>Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality.<br>The case of metal music . . . . .                  | 130 |
| DOMINIKA MOTAK<br>Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism. . . . .   | 149 |
| JANNE JUHANA RANTALA<br>Magic Hat Economics. Counter-cultural ideals and practices<br>of the Nordig Ting Community . . . . .              | 162 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| BRITTA RENSING  |     |
| Individual Belief and Practice in Neopagan Spirituality . . . . .   | 182 |
| <br>  |     |
| SOFIA SJÖ   |     |
| Postmodern Messiahs. The changing saviours of contemporary<br>popular culture . . . . .                                       | 196 |
| <br>  |     |
| GÖRAN VIKTOR STÅHLE   |     |
| A Matter of Balance in a Fast Paced Society. Performing Ayurvedic<br>health counselling. . . . .                              | 213 |
| <br>  |     |
| TEEMU TAIRA   |     |
| The Problem of Capitalism in the Scholarship on Contemporary<br>Spirituality . . . . .  | 230 |
| <br>  |     |
| KIRSI TIRRI   |     |
| Spirituality in Education . . . . .   | 245 |
| <br>  |     |
| BARBARA WINTERSGILL   |     |
| Andrew Wright's Critical Realism, Clive Erricker's Radical<br>Postmodernism and Teenage Perceptions of Spirituality . . . . . | 259 |
| <br>  |     |
| Biographical Notes . . . . .  | 277 |

## Glocal Spirituality

### For a brave new world

One of my colleagues spent a long time among the Maasai in Kenya, learning about their religion, language, and culture. When on an excursion he felt the need to respond to the call of nature. He excused himself and walked to some bushes nearby. Upon his return, two young Maasai men exchanged meaningful looks, and suddenly one of them ran to the place where the Swedish scholar had relieved himself. When he came back he smiled and said to his friend: ‘Yes, it has the same smell as ours!’

The empirical research of the young Maasai could be regarded as a search for commonalities. As far as the body and bodily functions are concerned it is, of course, not difficult to find aspects of life that we share with others. When we are in the sauna, there is no difference between nobility and the commoner, between the privileged and unprivileged. If we move from somatic viewpoints to the psychological level, then there still are common denominators between people of different cultures. We all have cognitive capacities, and we all share different types of feelings. On the cultural level, however, there are differences. We can all laugh, but we do not laugh at the same kind of jokes.

In top-level politics we sometimes notice that politicians leave their prestigious positions and associate as ordinary human beings. If I am well informed, this is what happened at Camp David, USA, when Israeli Menachem Begin met his counterpart, the Egyptian Anwar Sadat, under the supervision of President Jimmy Carter. When negotiations were kind of sluggish, they showed each others pictures of their grandchildren. After that, there was agreement.

Perhaps this is the kind of social activity that is needed in a brave new world. If top-level politicians, and their low-level counterparts, as well as other persons in leading positions, every now and then can step down from their ivory tower and privileged positions and look at pictures from their family albums, then that would give me hope. And if they forgot their pictures, they could cook dinner together, or do some gardening. Such action would remind them of their humanity. Perhaps they would wake up and discover that life is worth living—and preserving; that nature is worth respecting and



caring for; and that our universe gives us a sense of wonder and surprise. Despite all technological progress, life is still a mystery. We do not even understand our own mind.

The *mysteriousness* of the human predicament ought to create a sense of humility. The *fragility* of the human predicament ought to create a feeling that we all belong to the very same humanity. Life in the world has always been unpredictable, but it has never been as unforeseen or incalculable as it is in our time. People are struck by natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and cyclones.

What has all this to do with spirituality? In my opinion, spirituality, as it will be presented in a little while, can serve as an antidote to an all too disrespectful attitude towards our fellow human beings, towards life in general.

If the world is 'a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing', then there will be egoism instead of altruism, selfishness instead of unselfish action in the service of mankind. If the Scottish king Macbeth, in the version of Shakespeare, is right, then bad turns to worse. World leaders and people in powerful positions will continue providing privileges to the loyal and suppressive action to the unprivileged and 'disloyal'. Feudal society is alive and well, although in different forms.

Spirituality can be an antidote to this selfish and destructive attitude. Spirituality might unite a greater part of the world in the battle for survival. Our world, Gaia, is threatened, as we all know. Apart from the usual disasters as seemingly never-ending wars and conflicts we now also have to confront global threats such as climate changes, global pollution, and food distribution problems. In such a world everything has to be done in order to promote the fundamental idea that we only have one planet and one humanity.

Spirituality addresses such issues. Spirituality, in the words of Linda Woodhead, comprises two poles, one personal and one cosmic. On the one hand, man feels the urge to develop his or her own potential; on the other hand, no man is an island, as the poet (John Donne) says, we are all part of the continent. This holistic view takes egalitarianism for granted. It also provides a new interpretation of the archaic idea of living on Mother Earth, who is in need of our careful attention.

The purpose of this paper is to show that people who express the view that they are 'spiritual, not religious', people belonging to what can be called the new spirituality, despite their aversion to institutionalized religion nevertheless exhibit elements in their belief-systems that are closely related to the great mystical traditions in world religion. These common denominators are, I think, a good ground for dialogue. When theologians from especially the

theistic traditions more often than not search for differences, mystics and representatives for the new spirituality are more inclined to find commonalities. At a time when elements of traditional Christianity such as the belief in a transcendent God show signs of being in decline, there seems to be an increasing interest in the predominant mystical and panentheistic view of God, stating that God is both immanent and transcendent.

## The new spirituality

It is perhaps unnecessary to mention that one has to make a choice in the extensive research that has been reported in the field of spirituality during the last decade. A few years ago, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead suggested that the spiritual revolution in our time can be described as a 'massive subjective turn' from what they call 'life-as religion', largely coinciding with traditional churches, to 'subjective-life spirituality', emphasizing man's inner resources and its cultivation and sacralisation. The former is declining, while the latter appears to be growing (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2 ff.). In his latest book, Heelas confesses that he is 'deeply committed to the beneficial efficacy of inclusivistic (albeit tension-laden) humanistic values – the same values that are sacralised by so many New Age spiritualities of life.' I do welcome this confession, with which I sympathise, and I also share his standpoint that this growing form 'of holistic, mind-body spirituality activities' might prove to be 'valuable, perhaps invaluable, ultimate resources' (Heelas 2008: 10, 14 f.). Spirituality as a resource for increasing peace and understanding is precisely my message or errand.

The expression 'new spirituality' has been borrowed from a book by James A. Herrick (2003), Professor of Communication. In his study of the roots of contemporary spirituality in the history of Western religious thought he points to a dramatic change in the American religious landscape during the last fifty years. Quoting sociologist Robert Wuthnow, Herrick talks about a 'transformation of American spirituality' (p. 19), and he then mentions a number of well-known examples of popular public spirituality. Carlos Castaneda's widely disseminated books about Don Juan from the late sixties and seventies are one example. Shirley MacLaine's bestselling publications about her spiritual journey from the eighties are another one. The list can easily be extended. Marilyn Ferguson's book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) found numerous readers, as did *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) and other books of James Redfield. The increased interest in the relation between science and

spirituality can also be added to the list. Starting with Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and his 1982 bestseller *The Turning Point*, we can add a long list of similar texts, including Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1984) (see Herrick 2003: 19 ff.). During the last decade we can also notice an interest in the relation between Buddhism and Science. An extensive anthology with this title was published in 2003 and recently the Templeton Foundation published a book on Tibetan Buddhism and modern physics, written by Vic Mansfield, Professor of Physics and Astronomy (2008).

We are all familiar with the books mentioned and an additional number of them. There is no need for an exposé of this sort of popular literary genre. Instead, let's go into the question of how Herrick presents the characteristics of this new spirituality and its relation to the 'revealed word' of old time Christianity. This word is, of course, still valid for numerous Christians in our time. The 'revealed word', as Herrick calls it, consists of elements such as (1) the supernatural authority of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, delivered to humanity through the medium of for example prophetic utterance and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth; (2) a personal God, who (3) is creator of the universe, and (4) acts and intervenes in history. A fifth element is (5) the notion of the fall of humankind and its catastrophic consequences, (6) the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ and, finally, (7) the belief in a final judgment of the human race (Herrick 2003: 32 f.).<sup>1</sup>

The contents of this new spirituality show a 'new religious synthesis', as Herrick calls it, comprising (1) a conviction that 'history is not spiritually important'; and (2) sacred texts are understood as largely symbolic, allegorical, or mythic. Other characteristics are (3) the dominance of reason or consciousness as tools in order to gain spiritual insights; (4) the spiritualization of science; (5) the animation of nature, infused as it is with a life force; (6) the existence of hidden spiritual knowledge, accessible to gifted persons and, in principle, to each and every one of us; and finally (7) religious pluralism as rooted in mystical experience (Herrick 2003: 33 f.). This last characteristic is precisely what I will go in to in a little while.

In his final considerations, Herrick, in sharp contrast to Heelas, leaves us in no doubt that he dislikes the new religious synthesis, as expressed in the new spirituality. In its so-called triumph over traditional religion, 'it dispenses with a transcendent and personal deity, irrevocable forgiveness of sin,

1 We should not forget, of course, that Herrick describes an American interpretation of Christianity. Scandinavian Christians probably do not feel at ease with a characterization of this kind.

triumph over death, egalitarian spiritual community and the simple joy of accepting our unchangeable status as infinitely valuable but fallen creatures of a living and holy God.<sup>2</sup> In his final analysis, Herrick turns out to be a defender of the revealed word.

Heelas finds another sympathizer in the American philosopher of religion, Robert K. C. Forman, whose work mirrors an interest not only in traditional spirituality in world religion (see e.g. Forman 1990, 1998) but also in what he and his associates call 'grassroots spirituality' (Forman 2004). Their study is based on interviews with approximately 92 persons occupying 'key-positions' in different spiritual movements. The informants had different religious backgrounds—for example Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Sufi. The analysis of the interviews gave rise to a descriptive definitions of spirituality, comprising

- a vaguely panentheistic ultimate that
- is indwelling, sometimes bodily, as the deepest self and
- accessed through not-strictly-rational means of
- self transformation and group processes
- that becomes the holistic organization for all life (Forman 2004: 51).

Concerning his informants' view of God, Forman notices that not one single person referred to the Western view of a transcendent father or mother (p. 57). Panentheistic descriptions of God are the opposite of the 'hierarchical king model'. Since we all are part of the same One, the same basic ground, this view of God is compatible with 'our democratic and egalitarian mindset' (p. 59). When Forman describes the second aspect of his definition, God as indwelling, as the deepest self, he refers to the *atman* or *purusha* of Hinduism, the *scintilla animae*, the little spark, of Meister Eckhart,<sup>3</sup> or the Shekhinah of Jewish mysticism (p. 60). This dimension can be accessed through not-strictly-rational processes, meaning that they are part of a never-ending process of self-transformation, a process including and reaching beyond rationality. Many informants said that this view functions as a good ground for dialogue with representatives of other spiritual traditions. Adherents of grassroots spirituality, Forman asserts, are all 'functional henotheists', that is persons who stick to their own interpretation of the Absolute, but are open to other interpretations (p. 91, 105).

2 Herrick 2003: 279 f. See also <http://www.ivpress.com/spotlight/3279.php> (accessed on 2 June 2008), where he states: 'I don't see any benefits to the emerging spirituality.'

3 About whom Forman wrote an in-depth study in 1991.

This final remark reminds me of similar statements, presented by academics. In *The Case for Religion* (2004), the British scholar Keith Ward connects to the pluralistic hypothesis of his fellow-countryman, the philosopher of religion John Hick. It says that all religious traditions contain partial truths, that the divine world defies all description. There are so many ways of relating to the transcendent world. No one tradition has the right to claim that they possess the only truth. The world of physics offers a similar basic view. No physicist would say that he or she has access to a complete picture of the universe; but they would agree that there are numerous partial truths. This is what Ward regards as a shift from religion to spirituality, a shift from exclusive dogma to inclusive religiosity, grounded in personal experience. It is a tribute to multiplicity, while simultaneously relying on the conviction that spiritual truth, fundamentally, is unitary (Ward 2004: 226 ff.).

The American islamologist Charles Kimball expresses a similar view. Let me just quote a significant statement in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil* (2002). Here is the quote:

I am convinced that it is possible to be a person of faith with integrity – a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist – and at the same time recognize that one’s own experience of God does not exhaust all the possibilities. A constructive outlook of religious pluralism can take us beyond simple diversity and embracing it as a source of strength. Rather than being necessarily divisive, religious traditions can provide models for tolerance. (Kimball 2002: 8 f.)

The reference to Keith Ward and the quote from Charles Kimball naturally lead us into another issue, pertaining to questions of globalization. The Swedish scholar Liselotte Frisk (2009) has written an interesting article about the importance of globalization for religious change. Referring to a number of contemporary scholars of spirituality, including Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, Ursula King, and Eileen Barker, she discovered six interlinked characteristics pertaining to contemporary religious change, characteristics touched upon by the authors mentioned. Although Frisk is reluctant to talk about ‘a major cultural shift’—far too strong expression—she nevertheless thinks that there certainly is change, important change. I will now present these characteristics, which then will be related to the different descriptions of the new spirituality, as presented above.

The first characteristic is labelled *from particular to eclectic*. Rather than relying on one religion, one *source*, contemporary spirituality seems to use the

easily accessed world religions as different *resources*, creating a worldview or a religiosity that appears to be unique to each person. As a result of globalization, there is increasing communication between particular societies and, consequently, a relativization of these particular cultures, including religion. Today people become increasingly aware of the fact that a particular religion is but one among numerous alternative creeds. In Western individualistic culture this may lead to a ‘wild eclecticism’ of the kind we usually can observe in spirituality and New Age. This eclecticism, in turn, may lead to tolerance towards other religious interpretations.

The second characteristic is called *from dogma to experience*. A consequence of globalization is the crystal clear insight that not all religions can be true. As Liselotte Frisk points out, you cannot simultaneously believe in heaven or hell after death and believe in reincarnation. People then conclude that all belief systems are relative; the claim of absolute dogma is undermined.

The next distinctive feature is *from collective to personal*. When belief in religious dogma is weakened, when institutionalized religion loses its importance, it may lead to the empowerment of the individual. Referring to the work of Peter Beyer, Frisk states that globalization favours privatization. In this context we could mention that Heelas (2008: 32 ff.) points at several keywords related to what he calls New Age spiritualities of life—activities or practices; healing, well-being, love, humanistic values, and ‘affective, expressive relationality’. These keywords are all related to the personal life.

Then there is a notable shift *from a hierarchical to an egalitarian life-view*. This feature collides with the view of Herrick, who stated that the new spirituality dispenses with the ‘egalitarian spiritual community’. But it harmonizes with conclusions drawn by Woodhead and Forman, who maintain that egalitarianism is taken for granted by the new spirituality (Woodhead), or that the pantheistic view of God, expressed by interviewees, is compatible with ‘our democratic and egalitarian mindset’ (Forman). Globalization promotes two opposed responses, Peter Beyer asserts. It either leads to a conservative response and a polarization of ‘we versus them’, or to a liberal response, which in the field of religion leads to ecumenicalism and tolerance, to inclusion instead of exclusion. And these concepts go well with egalitarianism and democratic values.

Another shift is *from a theological to an anthropological dimension*. Subjective experience and egalitarianism may lead to a change away from theology. Instead, there is an emphasis on individual growth, on the sacralisation of the self (Heelas).

The final shift, as mentioned by Liselotte Frisk, is a shift in focus *from life after death to this-worldliness*. Representatives of contemporary spirituality are more interested in this world than in the world to come. One of the consequences is that God is conceived as immanent in man and in the world, rather than transcendent. Ideas of eternal punishment, hell, and damnation are excluded from the new spirituality. This shift is, of course, also noticeable in contemporary interpretations of, for example, Christianity.

Now, what common denominators can be found among the scholars presented above? One of them, I think, is related to a different perception of divine immanence, including man, mentioned especially by Forman. Herrick does not expressly mention that concept, but he talks about nature being infused with life force, which is close to, if not equivalent with the idea of immanence. A second, related issue pertains to the human capacity to realize this divine dimension through a process of spiritual growth. This is probably the 'hidden spiritual knowledge' that Herrick hinted at, or the sacralisation of the self, as mentioned by Heelas and others. Keywords such as healing, well-being, and practice fit into this aspect, in other words the experiential basis of spirituality. A third commonality is the altered view of sacred scripture as being largely symbolical or allegorical, a view opposed to fundamentalism. Other characteristics comprise egalitarianism and eclecticism, pluralism and tolerance.

It is my conviction that the fundamental traits of the new spiritualities of life are in harmony with the great mystical and spiritual traditions within world religion. Space does not allow me to go all too deep into this issue. But let me just hint at some dimensions in the phenomenology of mysticism that harmonize with spirituality. In other words, we now move from the new spirituality to the old spiritualities.

## **The old spirituality**

Contemporary spirituality shares a panentheistic view of God with a substantial part of traditional mysticism. Such a view is usually associated with the language of emanation. The divine world overflows, the end product of which is creation. But this also means that part of the divine remains in the product. The whole of creation will eventually return to its origin. This is the dominating, basic scheme in mystical theology, greatly influenced by Neoplatonism.

But while the God of spirituality appears to be diffuse, the virtuosi of mysticism have more to say about a God who is both hidden and revealed.

The mysteries of God's Word, says Pseudo-Dionysius in the early sixth century, 'lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence' (Dionysios Areopagita 1987: 997A–b, p. 135). Influenced by Neoplatonic thought, Dionysius taught that this hidden God nevertheless can reveal himself to the earnest seeker. The method is 'absolute abandonment of yourself and everything' (*ibid.*). About six hundred years later, the Cistercian Friar Bernhard of Clairvaux adds a new dimension. The hidden God reveals himself through love and the practice of virtues: chastity, patience, cheerfulness, simplicity, and humility. Such a soul, writes Bernhard in his grandiose commentary to the Song of Songs, 'is worthy of the caresses of the Bridegroom' (Bernhard of Clairvaux 1980: Sermon 69:1; cf. Halflants 1971: xvii).

About one hundred years later we encounter a similar message in the mystical theology of Bonaventura, one of the great mystical theologians among the Franciscans. Perhaps he can be described as an eclectic of his time, combining ideas from St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory the Great, the Cistercian masters, and others. The three pillars in his theology are the concepts emanation (*emanatio*), exemplarity (*exemplaritas*), and consummation (*consummatio*), three dynamic terms that describe how the divine 'fountain-fullness' emanate into the Word and the Spirit. The 'fountain-fullness', or Father, cannot be described in words. We can only approach him through the second person of the Trinity. Through him the whole of creation can return to its divine origin (McGinn 1998: 88 ff.).

This basic structure can be found again in the work of the famous Dominican Meister Eckhart, writing somewhat later than his Franciscan brother.

In his Latin works Eckhart described this process of emanation with the terms *exitus* and *reditus*; in his German sermons he uses the words *ûzviezen* and *durchbrechen* (McGinn 1981: 30 f.). This whole process has its counterpart in the human being, since in the ground of the human personality there is a 'little spark', the essence of which is identical with the godhead, described in apophatic terms.

But the distinction between God concealed and revealed is not limited to the male representatives of Christian spirituality. The Benedictine Nun Gertrud of Helfta had numerous visions of the divine world. She does not hesitate, however, to describe the godhead in impersonal terms, with the language of infinity:

Let me be submerged in the abyss of the sea of your most merciful goodness. Let me perish in the deluge of your living love, as a drop of the sea dies in the depth of its fullness. Let me die, let me die, in the outpouring of your



immense mercy, as dies the spark of flame in the irresistible force of the flood. (Gertrud of Helfta: *Documenta spiritualium exercitiorum* 4, quoted in McGinn 1998: 274.)

Gertrud also frequently uses the language of love and undisguised eroticism in order to express her intimate relationship with the divine world. The bridegroom, she writes, prefers to be alone with his bride, in the nuptial chamber, where they can ‘delight one another with the charm of intimate converse and tender embraces’ (Marnau 1993: 32 f.).

Another example is Mechthild of Magdeburg, one of the most renowned beguines from the thirteenth century. The title of her book, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, reveals an emanational view of God and creation. God is primarily described as light, a light which encompassed the blessed soul, if it only knew. Just like her Benedictine sister, Mechthild describes the soul’s return to this light in erotic imagery.

Then a blessed stillness  
That both desire comes over them.  
He gives himself to her,  
And she gives herself to him.  
What happens to her then—she knows—  
And that is fine with me. (Quoted in McGinn 1998: 237 f.)

There is no doubt that the mystical theologies referred to have an experiential base. The mystics mentioned know from their own overwhelming experience that the divine is immanent in creation. Their texts are merely reflections on their own experiences. But while representatives of the new spirituality have a *feeling* of divine presence, the classical mystics *know* from their own experience. There is a difference in degree, not in kind.

If we move to the fascinating world of Jewish mysticism, the world of Kabbalah, we do find similar ideas about the hidden and revealed God, immanent in creation and in man. One of the most important Kabbalistic writings is *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ‘The Book of Splendour’. In this lengthy and complex text one encounters a number of mystical techniques which all aim at ‘cleaving’ (*devequt*) to God. Which God? Zohar distinguishes between a hidden God and its revealed characteristics. The former is known as *ein sof*, ‘without end’, while the latter is described as the ten *sefirot*, the emanations of the hidden god, arranged in three triads. To this is added the tenth and final emanation—

*Malkhut*, 'Kingdom', or *Shekhinah*, which means 'divine presence', inherent in creation and therefore accessible to the searching of the mystic.

How is one to experience this divine presence? Zohar proposes various ways. The most important way is by prayer and by study of the Torah, especially at midnight. The intention is to 'draw down' divine energy to the world. Another technique is that of rotating the closed eye, which leads to the experience of numerous colours, symbols of the middle triad of the *sefirot* system. Yet another technique described in the Zohar is staring at a dish of water that has been placed in the sunlight. The play of light and shadows that is created is interpreted as visual traces of the sefirotic system.

A similar, although more developed, scheme can be found in Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century. Limitations of space do not allow us to go deeper into this fascinating world of experientially based thought. Instead, I will present a few examples of a panentheistic God in Islamic mysticism or Sufism. In its early period there are clear signs of the immanent bent. Didn't the Holy Koran mention that God is closer than his jugular vein (Sūra 50:16)? And isn't it true that 'withersoever ye turn there is the Face of God' (Sūra 2:109)? After all, God has 'put signs into nature and into the human soul' (Sūra 51:21).<sup>4</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find the following beautiful lines attributed to an eighth century Egyptian Sufi:

O God, I never hearken to the voices of the beasts or the rustle of the trees, the splashing of waters or the song of birds, the whistling of the wind or the rumble of thunder, but I sense in them a testimony to Thy Unity (*wahdāniya*), and a proof of Thy Incomparableness; that Thou art the All-prevailing, the All-knowing, the All-wise /-/. (Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani: *Hilyat ul-Awliya* (The Ornament of the Saints) 9:342, quoted in Arberry 1972: 52 f. See also Schimmel 1975: 46.)

At the same time, in another part of the Muslim empire, another influential Sufi called Tirmidhī wrote about the hidden and revealed God, a theme so common in Islamic mysticism. Tirmidhī makes a distinction between God's essence and God's attributes. Although God's essence cannot be described, Tirmidhī nevertheless uses terms such as existence, the inner (*bā in*), and the hidden, in order to say something, hinting at the indescribable. But his attributes can be described and perceived, attributes such as radiance, mercy,

4 All these quotes can be found in Schimmel 1975: 25.

and wisdom. They are realms of light, hierarchically ordered. Creation originates from this divine light (Radtke 1980: 59 ff.).

Man has a unique place in this creation. Equipped with a lower and higher soul, man oscillates between the angel and the beast. With her higher soul, man can reach beyond the angels, to direct knowledge of the light of God (*ma'rifa*) (Radtke 1980: 62 ff.; see also Radtke & O'Kane 1996: 44 ff.).

In the eleventh century the need arose to summarize the teachings of the Sufis. Different summaries or handbooks were published, one of them being the 'Unveiling of the Hidden' of Hujwiri. We might ask: what veil? The answer to that is, of course, the veil that separates us from the hidden or immanent God.

We cannot leave Sufism without mentioning the greatest master (*al-Shaykh al-akbar*) Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). His view of God is a cornerstone in his numerous writings, influencing the Muslim world from then until now. According to Ibn 'Arabi there is only one Reality, that is God, which can be discussed from two angles. God is *aqq*, the Real, regarded as the Essence of the phenomenal world, impossible to describe with words; and God is *Khalq* if we regard him as the manifestation or the self-disclosure of that Essence. There is fundamental unity, but empirical multiplicity. The relation between the One and the many is like the body and its limbs, or as the mirror and its reflected images (Affifi 1979: 10 f.; cf. Landau 1959: 31 ff.). *aqq* means transcendence, while *Khalq* represents immanence.

If you assert (pure) transcendence you limit God,  
 And if you assert (pure) immanence you define Him.  
 But if you assert both things, you follow the right course,  
 And you are a leader and a master in gnosis. (From *Fusūs al- ikam*, quoted  
 in Affifi 1979: 21.)

God's attributes can be understood in his 99 beautiful names, for example Life, Knowledge, Power, Speech, and Justice. These attributes are mirrored in the universe. God's Power, for example, is passively reflected in all he has created. Actively it is inherent in different types of activity, from the buzzing of bees to the outbursts of volcanoes (Chittick 1989: 6–12). If we ask ourselves *where* I can find God, the answer is: wherever he is present, through his essence, and his attributes. If we ask ourselves *how* I can find God, the answer is: by unveiling the veils of existence.

Union with God has been expressed in so many ways. There is great variety in the language of the Sufis. Let me finish this very short presentation with a few lines from the famous Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 1273):

I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one;  
One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.  
I am intoxicated with Love's cup, the two worlds  
have passed out of my ken;  
I have no business save carouse and revelry. (From *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabriz*,  
quoted in Nicholson 1966: 96.)

### **The new and the old: glocal spirituality**

In addition to classical pantheistic descriptions of God we could go into presentations of the view of man, and man's return to his or her origin. There is no room for that in a short article. So let us now return to the new spirituality, especially as defined by Forman and his colleagues. It is obvious that the defining characteristics of grassroots spirituality can be recognized in classical mysticism.

There are other commonalities between spirituality and mysticism. There is a shared scepticism towards the written word, expressed for example in negative theology. Words, texts, or religious dogma are like the finger pointing to the moon—in an expression borrowed from Zen Buddhism.

If the word religion is derived from the Latin *ligare*, it means to 'bind' or to 'connect'. If it is derived from *re-ligare*, it means 'to reconnect'. Whether the former or the latter, we do not find many serious attempts to connect or reconnect in the world of institutionalized religion, at least as far as connecting to our fellow human beings is concerned. We mostly observe the opposite: division, schism, conflict, and even violence in the name of God.

It is my firm belief that the conditions for mutual understanding are much better in the world of spirituality, grounded in practice and personal experience. In the world of spirituality it is a commonplace that man is more than the sum total of words and thoughts. Convinced that religious dogma cannot grasp all of reality, representatives of spirituality usually exhibit an attitude of openness and tolerance towards other religions. When I visited the Halveti-Jerrahi order of dervishes in Istanbul, Turkey, and asked the spiritual leader if I could participate in their ritual, the answer was spontaneous: 'Of course you can participate. The only thing that matters is the one God.'

The attitude I met among Sufis in Turkey reminded me of Robert Jay Lifton, an American psychiatrist and a prolific writer. In one of his more optimistic books he writes about what he calls the Protean self (see Lifton 1992). This is a word derived from the Greek sea god Proteus, a god of many forms, a god who could adapt to different situations, a shape shifter. The Protean self is a many sided self, a person with free-floating emotions, and a person with an uneasy relationship to the holding of ideas. 'Idea systems can be embraced, modified, let go, and re-embraced', in other words, the Protean self is the very opposite of the fundamentalist self. The flexibility and adaptability of the Protean self gives us hope, Lifton says, and I certainly do agree.

Proteanism involves choice, Lifton continues. According to him, certain forms of Proteanism 'are not only desirable but necessary for the human future'. Many of us do have a tendency towards Protean openness. But absolute Proteanism is neither possible nor desirable. What we do need is a certain measure of Proteanism and an anchorage in a belief system or a system of moral values. This is the antidote to fundamentalism and apocalyptic violence. This is, precisely, what is meant by *glocal spirituality*.

Finally, when Lifton mentions that 'the Protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded', it reminds me of some favourite metaphors being used in an ancient Chinese book of wisdom called the *Tao Te Ching*. The author Lao Tzu uses imagery from daily life in order to illustrate man's proper attitude in a time of crisis, a period in Chinese history labelled as 'the time of a hundred wars'. Try to be like water! Lao Tzu exhorts. Water always manages to pass obstacles. Just imagine sea waves rolling to the coast, passing by a big stone. Water always searches the lowest point, and in that it is closest to Tao, the Absolute. In manifestation water can be as serene as a lily pond or as wild as the stormy sea, and in form vaporous as steam or as solid as ice. Let us read a few lines from the *Tao Te Ching* (verse 8, translation by Ellen M. Chen, 1989):

A person with superior goodness is like water,  
 Water is good in benefiting all beings,  
 Without contending with any.  
 Situated in places shunned by many others,  
 Thereby it is near Tao.

Or consider this quote (verse 76):

At birth a person is soft and yielding,  
 At death hard and unyielding.

All beings, grass and trees, when alive, are soft and bending,  
When dead they are dry and brittle.  
Therefore the hard and unyielding are companions of death,  
The soft and yielding are companions of life.

Try to visualize a small bush, with its roots firmly in the soil. But its branches and leaves are flexible. Thanks to its firmness and flexibility, the bush can stand the strong wind by yielding. In yielding is strength.

People with a Protean personality are aware of their cultural identity, and with a high sense of empathy they encounter the other with a sense of curiosity and wonder. God is, ultimately, a mystery. So is life. Let us search for commonalities, without shutting our eyes to the differences. Let us regard sacred scriptures in general as different cultural attempts to cope with our fundamental existential questions. In spirituality there is a good ground for such commonalities.

In my perhaps utopian world, I have visualized a meeting of high-level politicians, trying to solve one of those seemingly never-ending conflicts. They all arrived a day earlier in order to have time to associate as human beings. They all brought their family albums, with pictures of their children and grandchildren. Then they cooked dinner together. In the evening they discussed Rūmī and Eckhart, by the open fire. Like the two Maasai men mentioned in the beginning, the politicians exclaimed: 'Yes indeed, we do have so many things in common.' The day after the meeting took place. Afterwards the world was taken by surprise. Never before did politicians reach mutual understanding in such a short time. Documents were signed, with a smile on their faces. Pictures were taken, hands were shaken.

Peace at last.

Peace in the name of God.

Peace in the name of humanity.

## References

**Affifi, A. E.**

1979 *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid din-ibnul Arabi*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf. (First published in 1939)

**Arberry, Arthur J.**

1972 *Sufism. An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. London: George Allen & Unwin. (First published in 1950)

**Bernhard of Clairvaux**

1980 *On the Song of Songs* IV. Transl. by Irene M. Edmonds. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications.

**Chittick, William C.**

1989 *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. New York: State University of New York Press.

**Dionysios Areopagita**

1987 *The Mystical Theology*. Translated by C. Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press.

**Halflants, M. Corneille**

1971 Introduction to Bernhard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* I; pp. ix–xxx. Trans. by Kilian Walsh. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications.

**Forman, Robert K. C.**

1990 (ed.) *The Problem of Pure Consciousness. Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1998 *The Innate Capacity. Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

2004 *Grassroots Spirituality*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

**Frisk, Liselotte**

2009 Globalization: An Important Key Factor in Contemporary Religious Change. To be published in the *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*.

**Heelas, Paul**

2008 *Spiritualities of Life. New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead**

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Herrick, James A.**

2003 *The Making of the New Spirituality. The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

**Kimball, Charles**

2002 *When Religion Becomes Evil*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco.

**Landau, R.**

1959 *The Philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi*. London.

**Lifton, Robert Jay**

1992 *The Protean Self. Human Resilience in the Age of Fragmentation*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

**Marnau, M.**

1993 Introduction to Gertrud av Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*; pp. 5–44. Transl. and ed. by M. Winkworth. New York: Paulist Press.

**McGinn, Bernard**

1981 Theological Summary. In: Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*; pp. 24–61. Translation and Introduction by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn. New York: Paulist Press.

1998 *The Flowering of Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad.

**Nicholson, R. E.**

1966 *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (First published in 1914)

**Radtke, B.**

1980 *Al-Hakim at-Tirmidhi. Ein islamischer Theosoph des 3./9. Jahrhunderts*. Freiburg: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.

**Radtke, B. & J. O’Kane**

1996 *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism. Two works by Al-Hakim Al-Tirmidhi*. An annotated translation with introduction. Richmond: Curzon Press.

**Schimmel, A.**

1975 *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

**Tao Te Ching**

1989 A New Translation with Commentary by Ellen M. Chen. New York: Paragon House.

**Ward, Keith**

2004 *The Case for Religion*. Oxford: Oneworld.



SARAH GOLDINGAY

## Watching the Dead Speak

### The role of the audience, imagination, and belief in late modern spiritualism

let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
On your imaginary forces work.  
. . . Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth.  
(Shakespeare 1997 (1599): prologue to *Henry V*)

so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (Coleridge 1847 (1817): XIV).

performances of everyday life . . . ‘make believe’ – [they] create the very social realities they enact. In ‘make-believe’ performances, the distinction between what’s real and what’s pretend is kept clear (Schechner 2002: 42).

This article began, as many do, in the form of a conference paper. In the live action of presenting a paper it is very easy to express, simply through gesture, the divide between actor and audience, watcher and watched. I, who am giving the paper, standing on the platform being watched, am the actor; you, sitting down in the chairs watching, are the audience. However, life is more complex, more provisional, and more ephemeral than that. The performances of everyday experience do not take place only in an auditorium; they happen in a variety of other locations, domestic and corporate, urban and rural. Moreover, the role of the audience, and the individuals within it, is not constant across all performances, nor is it fixed within discrete performances: it has an inherent potential for fluidity.

This article is going to consider my experience of this fluidity as a member of a late-modern audience during two performances of psychic mediumship. It will describe them, drawing on narration provided by my field notes,

and analyse them through theoretical discourses, provided by the discipline of performance studies. It will also go on to consider how post-modern, or for the purpose of this paper, late-modern audiences, are connected to their modern antecedents. I am using the term 'late-modern', as opposed to 'post-modern', because the paper sets out to explore contemporary society's ongoing continuity with its past, rather than its disjuncture. A late-modern focus suggests a society that is a development of what has gone before rather than a reaction against it—as one aspect of post-modern theory might propose. (Bauman 2000: 5–8, 28–9; Giddens 1990: 1–10, 149–50). And, with this connection in mind, the paper will explore a preoccupation attributed to modern society, an emergent sense of self-identity and self-consciousness that was synchronic with the 'golden age' of spiritualism (1880–1914) (Owen 2004: 7; Warner 2006). It will consider this modern self-awareness in relationship to an examination of the role of the late-modern audience at contemporary demonstrations of psychic mediumship. It will focus on how the performance conditions of these events stimulate the audience's imagination and beliefs and consequently affect their sense of self.

## The rules of engagement

let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
On your imaginary forces work.  
... Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth.  
(Shakespeare 1997 (1599): prologue to *Henry V*)

In order to discuss the two performances of psychic mediumship on which this article will focus, I need first to talk about the theoretical discourses from theatrical theory I will be using to deconstruct and analyse the events. Both audiences and actors bring a set of expectations with them to a performance—a set of beliefs, if you will, about how this interaction will operate: these are the ways they, as individuals, expect this world of performance to work. These implicit expectations are rarely articulated either internally, by the individual to him/herself, or out loud, to the collected participants. These expectations are, most often, in the terms of Roland Barthes, 'naturalised'<sup>1</sup> and beyond

<sup>1</sup> French philosopher and social theorist Roland Barthes, through his observations of the relationship between cultural material, in particular photographs, and its use by bourgeois society, described how certain objects and processes could become so

question. That is not to say that all parties are in agreement. Each set of individual beliefs varies, one from the next, some subtly, some radically. This variation is negotiated in the collective interaction of these individual beliefs. Here, through their points of contact, and the spaces between them, implicit negotiations take place which lead to the formation of contracts of collective consensus about how a particular performance operates.

A commonly held view of theatre, which is broadly naturalist and often euro-centric, suggests that an actor does not begin a performance by coming out in front of the curtain to speak directly to the audience in order to explain the mechanisms of imagination that make a performance possible. There is a presumption that the audience know what the collective consensus is, about how this performance will work, and that this consensus includes an expectation that the actors will pretend they are part of a real world that has no sense of being watched. There is no need for a pre-show statement that says, 'you sit down there and watch us up here, as we pretend to be people other than ourselves, in order to enact a narrative through the physical construction of an imagined world.' The implicit agreement here is that there is an invisible, fourth wall through which the audience look. This prevailing view would have it that to give such a statement, in front of the curtain, would demystify the live performance, break the contractually sustained 'spell' between actor and audience, and render it impotent.

But audiences are more sophisticated, complicated, and fluid than that. They, with the actors on stage, are active participants in this process of make-believe. In the opening epigraph of this article, I quote from the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*, where this breaking-down of the fourth wall, and the explicit articulation of implicit expectations, is part of the script. Here the audience's complicity in creating the pretend, performed world is part of the performance itself. The actors ask the audience to forgive them for being unable to recreate the Battle of Agincourt in its entirety on stage, and to 'play along' by pretending to believe that they see not one man, but an army, not floorboards, but muddy fields with horses '[p]rinting their proud hoofs in the receiving earth' (Shakespeare 1997 (1599): prologue). Shakespeare's classic script challenges one of the prevailing assumptions—the commonly held view of theatre under consideration—about how performances work; an assumption that suggests it is a process that divides actor from audience. Shakespeare exploits this implicit complicity of the audience, by stipulating

common place as to gain a 'naturalistic truth' enabling them to be accepted as beyond question; they become naturalised. See Barthes 1957.

that it is not only the actor who plays, who imagines, but also the audience who actively engages in this process of make-believe. This is how performances operate, not as processes of division between watcher and watched, but as a provisional concordance of belief and imagination between all parties.

These provisional rules of engagement set up a framework within which the audience's set of beliefs, about how this world of performance works, interact. It is a world that is set apart from the everyday where space and time operate differently: it is a liminal world. Just like its epistemological source, the architectural limen, the liminal world of performance is a threshold, it occupies the metaphorical space between the everyday and the extraordinary, the natural and the supernatural, and, in the events under consideration in this paper, it bridges the worlds between the living and the dead.

So, how does this interaction of implicit and explicit beliefs and processes of reality and make-believe make themselves manifest in performances of psychic mediumship? We have already established that audiences are not passive, fixed vessels but active in the process of making meaning in a performance. The ways they do it change, across different performance genres, and even during the performances themselves. It is clear that audience members have an inherent potential to change their role, but where does the impetus to change come from?

## The suspension of disbelief

so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith (Coleridge 1847 (1817): XIV).

The second epigraph for this article comes from a letter that Coleridge wrote to a fellow English poet, Wordsworth. In it, he explains that readers, and for the purposes of this paper, audiences, fully engage with a performance by creating a moment of 'poetic faith', a process by which they draw on an internal, personal truth in order to *willingly* suspend their disbelief. For Coleridge, this is done in order to find a closer connection to the 'supernatural' world of the Absolute. By suspending their disbelief audiences are setting aside the inconsistencies between the real and performance worlds. They do this in order to 'play along' with—and within—the liminal world they are occupying, creating and sustaining. But Coleridge identifies a further point of signifi-

cance: this suspension of disbelief is in fact, a *willing* suspension. Audiences choose to be complicit in the world they are sharing with the actors who are performing.

This suspension of disbelief is not fixed, sustained in one state, because audiences are fluid. They change what they do, and what they think, during the course of a performance. This impetus to change roles is not simply forced on the audience from the outside. Audiences are self-aware, and reflexively engage in personal observation as the event proceeds—Should I be laughing at this bawdy joke if I'm sitting with my children? Should I like Macbeth this much; he's just murdered someone? And, in the case of public demonstrations of psychic mediumship, how do I feel about myself now my father has just forgiven me from beyond the grave? These moments of internal reflection challenge the beliefs and expectations the audience brought with them. And, as the performance continues, they are processed, fed back, and challenged anew, in relationship to the continuing events of the performance. They are interpreted by the audience through a process of comparison to the meaning-making contracts that were constructed at the outset. These contracts, like the audience members who constitute them, are in a state of constant change.

This fluidity means audiences are 'multiphrenic'.<sup>2</sup> They are in a place where plural truths, rational and irrational, are embodied, processed, lived, and deconstructed, simultaneously. The particular performances under consideration are, like all performances, full of enticing contradictions: they present tensions between truth and fraudulence, the sacred and the secular, entertainment and efficacy. They are places, not of binary oppositions, but of simultaneous, provisional and ephemeral states. The article will now move on to consider, in light of two performances of psychic mediumship, how audiences negotiate these complex contradictions and how performances create conditions that allow both actors and audiences to sustain multiphrenic states both as individuals and collectively. The first performance is a public demonstration on the stage of a provincial theatre, and the second is a closed séance in a private home.

2 'Multiphrenic' is a phrase Michael Mangan uses in his book *Performing Dark Arts: a cultural history of magic* (2007) to explain the capability of audiences, in an age of technological rationalism, to move beyond the apparently dominant discourse of 'modern knowing as rational, sceptical and scientific' to sustain a simultaneous engagement with 'a rich alternative culture . . . saturated with images of magic' (p. 191).

## Performance 1: Shaun Dennis

The auditorium of six hundred is full. The medium on stage is in full flow and he says, 'I'm getting a gentleman—I can feel a tightness in his chest. Can anyone own this?' Several dozen hands are raised. He continues, 'I'm getting the letter B or D.' Some hands go down, others go up. He closes his eyes and nods. He says, 'Please more slowly, one at a time.' He opens his eyes and explains that there are several spirits coming forward to speak through him and he's having difficulty hearing the gentlemen with the chest pains clearly. He closes his eyes again. And apparently listens, nods again, and says, 'Thank you.' He opens his eyes and says, 'I've got a name, Helen: he says he's sorry about the car.' There's a gasp from a group of four people in the row in front of me—they whisper an agreement: it must be a message for them. The medium looks directly at them, makes eye contact, and says, 'Can you own it?' One voice says, 'Yes. It's my Dad.'

And the psychic's colleague, wearing a black t-shirt emblazoned with the word 'Crew', brings a microphone up to their row that is passed, with great solemnity, down to the voice. Again, the medium makes eye contact and says 'Can you own this?' And the, now amplified, voice rolls around the auditorium with the words, 'Yes, it's my Dad'. (Field note extracts, Goldingay 2006b)

I saw the work of Shaun Dennis, 'psychic medium, stage and platform demonstrator' (Dennis 2008) in a traditionally styled, proscenium arch theatre, where he, the actor/medium on stage, like me giving the conference paper, was separated from the audience in the auditorium. In order to explore the relationship between the watcher and the watched at this event, this section will focus on a small, apparently insignificant moment, as described by the preceding field notes above. It is a moment where Dennis speaks directly to the audience members, who, through their process of response, change their roles.

As the event opened the rules of engagement were clear. We waited facing an empty stage: the actor was to be separate from the audience. The clarity of this separation was not fully exploited by lighting, with the usual dark auditorium and lit stage. The architecture of the building however, with the framed platform the medium was about to occupy above and the audience seating below, was sufficient to set up clearly defined, implicitly accepted, power structures for the engagement. We would follow his lead.

His arrival is announced by a voice off-stage that says, 'Please welcome, Shaun Dennis.' It seems most likely that Dennis announced himself. This a technique often used by compères and stand-up comedians. But here, in particular, it highlights one of the implicit agreements audiences have with their performers, that, in this liminal space, one man can be an army, floorboards a battle field, and there is more to human experience than 'meets the eye'. The disembodied voice off-stage sets up two potentials. Firstly, and primarily, it prepares the audience for the actor's entrance so that they can be appropriately welcomed. Secondly, in this case, another more subtle, implicit, possibility is also reinforced; it suggests to the audience, that by suspending their disbelief, they may be able to perceive possibilities that are beyond their everyday experience.

Dennis enters: we clap. We know this is part of the appropriate behaviour expressed by those in the role of the audience. We, through this action, explain that we have already decoded signs, and consolidated our broad, collective rules of engagement for the performance. We have understood what is taking place, and can differentiate between different kinds of performances of platform mediumship and the appropriate behaviour an audience should demonstrate. Through clapping we show we understand the distinctions between a public demonstration of psychic mediumship in a theatre and a demonstration in a Spiritualist church service. In a church setting, although the medium is announced by their local sponsor, they are not usually welcomed with applause; it is not one of the rules of engagement for a sacred event. In this case, we are in a secular building: but, are we witnessing the sacred or the secular? Which rules of engagement should we apply? The edges between entertainment and efficacy are already being blurred. The set of beliefs each individual has brought with them, their consolidation, and their fluidity is already in evidence.

Our clapping subsides: Dennis explains what he will be doing during the course of the event, and what techniques and processes he will be employing in order to speak on behalf of the dead. This gives our roles further clarity, we the watchers, he the watched. Dennis then begins to communicate with 'the other side' and to speak the words of the dead that he has been given. Here, the previous clarity of roles fogs as another performer is introduced, a third party at the event who was previously mute; the dead. Now there are two performers, the newly-apparent dead, who Dennis is able to hear, but the audience cannot, and Dennis, who the audience is able to see and hear. With this introduction of further actors, a second liminal world is constructed within

this performance event that is itself already set apart in space and time. A liminal location within a liminal location is created.

There are now also two audiences, Dennis, who observes the dead, and we the audience who observe him. This is where we, the audience, are more richly engaged with suspending our disbelief. Whether we believe he is speaking to the dead or not, we are still prepared to engage sufficiently with this performance on some level, so that it, in part, fulfils its purpose as it sets out to change us, to convince us that there is something taking place that we cannot see. Dennis has become multiphrenic, simultaneously being watcher and watched. He is also taking on the more complex, intermediate role of conduit. Here he listens to the dead, 'watching', then becomes a conduit for the dead as he interprets and communicates what he 'hears' to the audience. This takes place whilst he, in the role of narrator and compère, simultaneously sustains and 'holds' the performance space for the audience. There are two processes at work for Dennis as 'medium' as he works to engage his audience. As conduit he is concerned with the efficacy of his communication whilst as compère he is concerned with the entertainment of the audience. The audience's multiphrenic position at this time is more subtle; they are still separate from the actor, but during this exchange they are embodying several possibilities as they suspend their disbelief. They sustain both the residue of sceptical technological rationalism and the possibility that this presentation is indeed evidence of a supernatural realm.

Dennis shifts role again: he begins to communicate more directly with the audience. He no longer closes his eyes in order to listen to something apparently behind him, but opens them in order to take in the width of the auditorium and shift his dialogue from the dead to the living by asking, 'Can anyone own this?' This is an interesting choice of language; he is encouraging us to 'own' his message, to take responsibility for it, to confess to our complicity in it. There is a well-established discourse in performance studies, developed, in part, from the work of Bertolt Brecht and his 'active spectator'. It asks questions about the responsibility of an audience member at a live performance. It argues that rather than being simply passive, (as with the broadly naturalist, Aristotelian view of theatre presented in the introduction) that audiences have a great deal of power: the collective, and in particular the individuals within it, have the ability to change the thing they are watching, to intervene if they wish, and to alter their world as a consequence of what they experience. With this power to change the world comes responsibility, and this responsibility makes us not watchers, but witnesses.



Dennis, then, is asking the audience to explicitly admit to an implicit potential within the performance—to own what he is saying. Once it has been ‘owned’ with a response from a member of the audience, things begin to change again. The respondent’s role shifts from that of watcher to that of a potential witness to what is about to follow. The audience’s shift is more subtle. If we have the potential to intervene in what we see, then we, even if we are sceptical of what is taking place, are complicit in it and, on some level, our non-interventional presence bears witness to its validity. Once the person the message is ‘intended for’ has become clear by a process of elimination, and someone has indeed come to ‘own’ this communication from the dead with the whispered words, ‘Yes, it’s my Dad’, she then shifts fully from being an audience member to becoming a performer. She is about to witness to her belief, and in part, to our ‘belief’ also.

The apparent fixity of the power relationships between actor and audience are challenged further when Dennis introduces a theatrical device into the auditorium that is usually reserved for the stage, a radio microphone. As the extract from the field notes describes, once Dennis identifies an audience member for whom he has a specific message, they are given a radio microphone so they can be heard more clearly. This is an apparently simple action, using a seemingly benign, ‘naturalised’ piece of technology. However, the processes involved are much more interesting if we consider them in relationship to how the role of the audience might change in response to its introduction, and how the action of an audience member speaking through the microphone is, in fact, the culmination of several implicitly agreed transactions of change.

The introduction of this device again changes the roles of the performers and spectators. The entire audience become performers in two ways. First, we are placed in a state of potential: although we have not been selected for this message, we may be selected for the next and this anticipation encourages us to invest ourselves further into the event. Second, as we look around the auditorium to see where the microphone is going, we are all watching each other. The microphone means we all become simultaneously both watcher and watched. This shift then, for some, becomes concrete, physicalised as they are given the microphone to pass down the row to the person for whom the message is intended. They too, for a fraction of time, are fully performers. The increase in energy and excitement, instigated by the shift in our role from observers to participants, slows, quiets and shifts again as our attention returns to Dennis who has, in the interim, continuously held eye contact with the

respondent. He says to her, 'Can you own this?' She replies, now amplified with the microphone, 'Yes, it's my Dad.'

Dennis responds. At this point several things take place simultaneously. First, space and time collapse as specific members of the living speak with specific members of the dead. This process means a third liminal space is constructed as the watchers disappear. They move to occupy a world that is outside that which is sustained within the gaze between Dennis and the respondent, which contains the spirit he speaks for. The actors apparently lose all awareness of us; we are no longer there, as their intimate bond is constructed. Second, the majority are now audience again, but watching a new performer, who is not on stage, but in the auditorium. Third, the liminal space now extends from the bounded safety of the 'other' world of the stage, into the more everyday world of the audience. The introduction of the microphone challenges the power relations on stage. It gives authority to the respondent who was formerly watching and facilitates their newly accepted role of being watched. However, it simultaneously challenges this new found authority, because in this performed exchange of intimacy the performers share a volume. This is a volume that is not ordinary, but one that allows the audience to become voyeurs, to listen in. We are now able to hear private moments where intimate family secrets and personal anguishes are exchanged. With the arrival of the microphone the members of the audience are reaffirmed as witnesses to beliefs; the respondent's belief in life after death and our own belief that this intimate exchange is not private but part of a product to be consumed for our pleasure.

How does this event, and other demonstrations of psychic mediumship, challenge belief, and the expectations we negotiate through the process of performance? We, as audience, accept our part in the performance through our own suspension of beliefs and disbelief, becoming willing witnesses to a collective engagement with an unseen liminal world. We embrace the possibilities that performance, and the performative roles and techniques it uses, present us with. We become active spectators and complicit witnesses to that which we engage with. To witness is to step beyond Shakespeare's 'make-believe'—which asks its audience to pretend they can see the Battle of Agincourt on stage—to allow the performance to become more concrete, to seep out into the reality of our everyday experience. In the final quotation of the epigraph I cite Richard Schechner who makes a helpful distinction between 'make-believe'—the playful, act of 'pretend' that Shakespeare asks his audience to engage in—and 'make belief'—the type of performance that requires its audience to accept that what they are seeing, in the enactment of

certain public events, is true. Such a performance is exemplified by the party political television broadcast or political rally that asks its audience to believe what they see and hear is factual, that they are witnessing a force for good in their world and therefore the party is worth voting for. These performances set out to ‘make belief’ in their audience, rather than to engage their audience in ‘make-believe’. But as I experienced in Dennis’s performance, and will go on to explore in the next example of a public demonstration of psychic mediumship, these apparently clear binaries between real and pretend are not sustainable, and collapse in the complexity of lived experience. Shaun Dennis, although working in the pretend world of a theatre, is himself asserting that there is life after death. He is attempting to make the audience believe that the living can communicate with the dead.

## Performance 2: soul rescue

In the suburban sitting room the clock on the mantelpiece reads eight o’clock.

M says, ‘Shall we begin?’

All the lights, except a small lamp in the corner, are extinguished. M turns on a tape of soothing music. The small, closed séance begins.

The group collectively speaks the Spiritualist ‘Great Invocation’ that begins: ‘From the point of light within the Mind of God, Let Light stream forth into the minds of Men.’ It ends with a rousing ‘May Christ return to Earth!’

I feel a tap on my knee, look up, and M points towards J. He is slumped in his chair, his breathing slow, but laboured. I can hear a rasp in the back of his throat. The criss-cross of muscles over his face is flickering, contracting. J grunts, nods his head, and, with great fluidity and rapidity, lifts up straight from his hips, rolling along his spine until it is fully extended. His chest expands and he looks straight ahead with his eyes closed.

M says, ‘Welcome friend’ and J begins to speak. (Field note extracts, Goldingay 2006a)

This is an extract from my notes made during six-months of fieldwork in 2006 with the *Soul Rescue Group* affiliation of mediums in the South West of England. They meet bi-weekly to hold a closed séance—‘a circle’ working without an audience, a single affiliation to a larger religious group or any financial exchange—from the home of one of their members. The purpose

of these séances is altruistically to 'rescue souls'. For them, these 'souls' are spirits who, on dying, having left the physical world, but instead of moving on to the Realm of Spirit, they have become trapped in a sort of limbo between this world and the next. The circle has nine members. During séances the group's three 'mediums' enter into full or partial clairvoyant, clairsentient or clairaudient trance. This is in order to allow the dead to speak through them to a convenor. He, along with the rest of the group, the 'sitters', helps this trapped soul to 'find the light' and move on to the next realm. The group sees this private aspect of their work as their 'moral duty to heal the world' and as something of equal importance to their paid work of clearing unwanted spirits from homes, or giving private psychic readings, in addition to their other public, altruistic church based work as healers and platform demonstrators. (Evans 1997, 2006)

The evening begins over tea and cake as these old friends pick up conversations about families and current affairs. The séance opens with the question: 'Shall we begin?' And, here, in my nodded response, that mirrors the behaviour of everyone else, I am already complicit in what is about to take place. We collectively speak the *Great Invocation*, all watchers, all watched. There is an assumption that I know the prayer's words: I do not. And from here on, from the beginning of this experience, the rules of engagement between actor and audience, as suggested by our commonly held view of theatre, shaped by the division between the watchers and watched, are challenged and moved: the balance is changed. This shift can be seen most clearly in terms of numbers, particularly if we begin by considering the audience. I am the audience—the *one* person who has come into this liminal world to watch, and thus the assumption that the audience is in the majority is already lost. I cannot lose myself in a crowd. In this setting I am as visible as the actors.

As with other performances, I have expectations about patterns of behaviour that will be appropriate for this performance and, during the event, I continually decipher and respond to cultural signs and signifiers. However, unlike other performances, not all the rules of engagement are implicit. One key aspect of my role as the audience is made clear to me from the outset. When the circle's convenor, M, invited me to the séance, he explained that if I was to attend, I would have work to do, that I would act as a 'sitter'. The sitter's role is to join with the circle in order to supply the collective energy that enables the medium to enter into, and sustain, their trance state. M described how sitters provide the 'power' for the intensification of the liminal world that bridges the realms of the living and the dead, thus creating the right conditions for the medium to become a vessel of communication for those who

have ‘passed over’. In this engagement the rules of interaction, unlike the previous performance, were discussed explicitly beforehand: what was expected of me was articulated clearly. However, the opportunity to discuss what my supplying of this energy might mean, and how I might produce it, never arose. So when I agreed to attend the event I was already accepting that, beyond the privilege of entering a closed séance, I had a responsibility to the group and the success of the event: I was a witness.

We conclude the *Great Invocation* and wait in silence. I mirror the posture and behaviour of the other sitters. At this point to call myself ‘audience’ is inadequate; the terminology is too broad. There are other terms that might better describe my multiphrenic role. The group sees part of its purpose in the world as evangelical, a position that is not uncommon in classical spiritualism. They believe that they should be sharing their experiences and providing proof of life after death. And so, on some level, my presence as a researcher was welcome—although that does not mean I was free from suspicion. The role of ‘researcher’ shares points of commonality with the role of the audience through the actions of watching and interpreting. My role might also be understood in terms of ‘observer’. In discourses surrounding ethnographic methodologies the term ‘observer’ is often placed at one end of a continuum that connects at the other to the term ‘participant’. This participant-observation pairing is a useful means of describing the oscillation of my role in relationship to the event.

But, what of my relationship to the group? A further discourse, prevalent in the sociology of religion, considers the ‘insider versus outsider’ status of the researcher (Arweck & Stringer 2002; McCutcheon 1999). At the séances, I was always an outsider, not part of the community I was studying. However, I did have specific responsibilities for the functioning of the event, and at the séance’s close I was thanked for my contribution and asked for feedback and observations along with the rest of the circle. So, at times, I was in part an insider; here this clear distinction of my relationship to the community fogged. As the séance begins, my multiphrenic state is particularly complex: I am the audience, the researcher, the witness, the participant, the observer, the insider, and the outsider. My role is super-fluid.

J begins to speak: M touches my knee to direct my neophyte attention. And, the circle’s collective focus shifts to the primary actor, the medium. The audience now watch. Those previously separated by their designations, of sitter or medium, share the same role as we wait for the message. Earlier, settling down as a group and preparing for the séance, we all watched J as he transformed from his everyday, pedestrian self—with a body that had strug-

gled to take a cup back through to the kitchen only minutes before—into the medium before us, sitting upright with great ease. In the moments preceding his first words he transforms again, becoming the vessel who, on entering a trance, goes through a series of observable physiological changes. These include shifts in body position and mobility, muscular contraction and breath patterns. In a later interview he puts these changes down to ‘transfiguration’, the moment when the soul of the dead person enters the vessel’s body to speak (Goldingay 2006). J’s changes in role are clearer than mine. With the words ‘Shall we begin?’ his pedestrian-self becomes his medium-self. And then, as he enters his trance, his medium-self becomes a vessel, carrying a simultaneously separate and inherent ‘other’.

The way that J enacts that aspect of himself that is ‘a medium’, is different from the way that Shaun Dennis enacts this ‘medium-self’. The clairvoyant Dennis is an interpreter who sustains multiple awarenesses of three worlds whilst demonstrating; the world of the dead, the everyday world of the living, and the liminal world of the performance. J however, as a full-trance medium, does not remember anything that takes place in any realm from the moment he enters trance to the moment he leaves it. He explains that this loss of consciousness ‘is just the way I like it’ (Goldingay 2006a). J argues that he is not interpreting what the dead wish to say, nor locating who the message is intended for, but simply allowing the soul who is to be rescued to occupy his body and to use his vocal chords in order to speak their own words. For J then, as he enacts his medium-self, his role as a facilitator is sharply defined. He is not multiphrenic but ‘non-phrenic’, choosing as he does to enter full trance and to be completely unaware of the performance he is giving.

J speaks and an ‘other’ appears. This is someone who is expressed through J’s body as the voice of a dead person. Those who are sceptical of the possibility of communicating with the dead would say he is now, most fully, an actor. They might argue that he is creating, for the watching audience, a living, breathing fictional character. There is a particular popular mythology surrounding acting that suggests that for an actor to create a character they must undergo a process that requires them to embody full transformation in a way that is not dissimilar to J’s description of his working process. The suggestion is that actors need to become their characters and to do so they need to be an empty vessel, devoid of themselves, for the character to fill: that to act is to be taken over by another. This particular technique would be commonly recognised as ‘method acting’. Here actors do not make a distinction between the world of performance and their everyday life. During the performance period they claim to fully become, to be taken over, if you will, by their char-

acter. This comparison is an interesting one but it disregards the importance of the lengthy process of creation an actor goes through, via rehearsals and direction, scripts and props, costumes and the other players, that help actors create their characters.

This position is challenged further if we consider the mythology of 'method acting'. In a comprehensive survey of more than 300 UK and USA based actors completed in 2007, Eric Hetzler demonstrated that one of his key findings contradicted the popular assumptions held by some members of the media, and even some performance theorists, that actors fully experience themselves 'becoming' their characters (Hetzler 2007). For the majority of his respondents this was an untenable position. He explains that, for example, if an actor is playing the role of a serial murderer, it is hardly appropriate for them to live this character in the real world. Actors then, like audiences, sustain plural awarenesses of their roles and states of self. They simultaneously have a sense of their everyday self, themselves as an actor, and themselves as a character, in addition to a reflexive sense of how they are simultaneously both like and unlike the character they construct.

However, there is another position. This is not one that would sustain the assumptions of the sceptic who argues that mediums set out to be actors, but one that suggests that actors, like mediums, seek to become the vessel through which 'others' speak. This ability to become a vessel, to quiet the contradictions that living plural, simultaneous roles presents the actor with, is sought by some actors because it is perceived to be a means to create better performer focus and therefore better performances. They, through training, often based on Eastern martial and meditative practices, seek states they describe as 'optimum performance' or 'flow'. These are usually expressed in the metaphorical terms of 'when the body becomes all eyes' or 'standing on the edge of the breath looking' (Zarrilli 1998, 2004). Here the actors are seeking the means to create, during their performance, a state of conscious trance where they are able to move beyond their sense of sustaining multiple, separate awarenesses, to find a seamless single state of being at one with their character, fellow actors, the liminal world of the performance and their audience. Here they are not, like the approach taken by Shaun Dennis, interpreters connecting plural worlds, or non-phrenic and in full trance like J, but 'omni-phrenic', simultaneously occupying the parallel real and pretend realms of the performance.

What I saw happen to J was more complex than simply pretending. I saw physiological changes in his body preceding the trance and I heard a voice speak that was of a similar vocal range and quality as J's everyday voice. However, the soul that was being 'rescued' spoke freely for twenty minutes us-

ing words and accents that were other than the medium's everyday language. In his performance, I did not see a dead person speak again, but I did see a living person transformed by a performed process.

## **Make-believe and make belief**

. . . performances of everyday life . . . 'make belief' – [they] create the very social realities they enact. In 'make-believe' performances, the distinction between what's real and what's pretend is kept clear (Schechner 2002: 42).

In the transitions taking place in, and in-between, these two performances of psychic mediumship, the edges of the pretend and the real, the sacred and the secular, that which is entertainment versus that which is efficacious, merge. As late-modern audiences we are very good at decoding the information we are presented with, and reading it in relation to our expectations. We recognise that performances contain aspects of both make-believe and make belief. When watching performances that most obviously set out to make belief, to convince us of their truth, we expect there to be elements of pretend and elements of entertainment within it. Our interpretation of the performance's explicit message is tempered by our knowledge of its subtext: we suspect that politicians lie, that company boards want our money, and that churches want Believers. And, whilst we watch performances that invite us to make-believe, to play in a pretend world, we expect to connect that world sufficiently to our own realities to be deeply moved, challenged and uplifted by what we experience. The ephemeral effects that performances have on audiences—the effects that change audiences as a result of make-believe—are those same effects that those who seek to make belief would like to create in their potential believers.

Thus, any simple, clean divisions between entertainment and efficacy, sacred and secular, make-believe and make belief are not sustainable. If we take the example of the work of Shaun Dennis, its setting is make-believe. It is created in a theatre; a building that we know is constructed to hold a pretend, performed world. This world of course reflects and recreates the real world outside, but it is, by its very nature, a forum of pretend. We buy tickets knowing that he sets out to capture and sustain our attention by entertaining us. However, through these devices and processes established for the pretend of theatre, Dennis is asking us to engage with the supernatural, to suspend our disbelief in the possibility of communication from 'the other side', and believe



that what he does is in fact true. He wants to make us believe that he can give messages from the dead, to believe in life after death.

In the example of the Soul Rescue Group their primary purpose is efficacious: their séances set out to rescue souls who are trapped in a sort of limbo; entertainment is not part of their intention. In discussion with the group at a later date about another platform medium I had booked tickets to see, one of the sitters commented on his approach. She said, 'He's quite a good clairvoyant. But he's a bit of a showman.' (Goldingay 2006a). Here she was expressing the sophisticated process of interpretation that audiences go through. She is acknowledging the plural roles the platform medium takes on, in this case clairvoyant and showman. She is acknowledging that different situations require different techniques to engage an audience but that, sometimes, the entertainment aspect of these events overshadows their efficacious purpose.

Moreover, her distinction between the clairvoyant, as the vessel of truth, and the entertainer, as a misleading showman, is for many outside spiritualism, who are sceptical of its members' ability to discern subtle differences in intention and delivery, counter intuitive. They would expect her to have only one relationship to the 'truth' content of a psychic's demonstration of life after death: they would expect her to believe it absolutely and unconditionally. In the enduring conflation between acting, mediumship, fraud and pretence there are two positions at work; the first is that for many, mediumship is fraudulent, and, in a different, but not unrelated way, so is acting. There continues to be an ongoing tension between the Church, and its moral residues in society, and the association of theatre with immorality and pleasure. Mediums are seen as con-artists who, like actors, exploit the vulnerable for financial gain. Actors are placed alongside these con-artists and conjurers, who through a minor shift in perception can be seen to be presenting themselves as fortune tellers and prophets. The second position argues that spiritualism, and public events that provide evidence of life after death, are acts of religious significance and should not be conflated with, or considered in terms of, 'performance'. This position is antithetical to the former. Spiritualism is often seen to be at odds with the established Christian church but they share a broadly similar distrust of performance because it explicitly 'pretends'. For some it is morally unacceptable to use performance as a means of examining the processes of a truthful spiritual experience.

So, what of our relationship to our modern antecedents and their emergent a sense of self-identity and self-consciousness? Anthony Giddens suggests, in his book *Modernity and Self Identity*, that these questions continue to be of paramount importance:

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity—and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. (Giddens 1991: 70)

These performances of psychic mediumship present a particular focus from which to consider our late-modern relationship to the self and our creation of it. Like our modern forbears, for us late-moderns, the self and our beliefs about the world are not absolute. For most people, most of the time, the word is made of provisionals and possibilities. We recognise that the playful enactment of make-believe is not the same as the instructive purpose of make belief that attempts to change us. But we do recognise that they share a common point within the consciousness of the super-fluid self. They have the power to change us, temporarily at the very least. The performance of psychic mediumship continues to be a forum where we late-moderns can pretend and change, believe and suspend our disbelief, in order to explore our relationship to mortality.

## References

**Arweck, Elisabeth & Martin D. Stringer** (eds)

2002 *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.

**Barthes, Roland**

1972 *Mythologies*. Annette Lavers (trans.) London: Cape.

**Bauman, Zygmunt**

2000 *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

**Coleridge, Samuel Taylor**

1847 *Biographia literaria; or, Biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions*. 2nd edn. London: Fenner. (First published in 1817)

**Dennis, Shaun**

2008 Shaun Dennis: Where heaven can meet the earth. [www.shaundennis.com](http://www.shaundennis.com) (accessed in September 2007).

**Evans, Michael**

1997 *The Rescue Pack: The Manual*. Exeter: The Maltings Press.

2006 *Why Rescue Works*. Unpublished manuscript.

**Giddens, Anthony**

1990 *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

1991 *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

**Goldingay, Sarah**

2006a *Soul Rescue Group: Interview and Field Notes*. Unpublished manuscript.

2006b *Shaun Dennis: Field notes*. Unpublished manuscript.

**Hetzler, Eric**

2007 *The Actor's Experience*. Unpublished PhD thesis.

**Mangan, Michael**

2007 *Performing (Dark) Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

**McCutcheon, Russell** (ed.)

1999 *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*. New York & London: Continuum. (Controversies in the Study of Religion)

**Owen, Alex**

1989 *The Darkened Room: Woman, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

2004 *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

**Schechner, Richard**

2002 *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

**Shakespeare, William**

1997 *The Life of King Henry V*. New York & London: W.W. Norton. (First published in 1599)

**Warner, Marina**

2006 *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Zarrilli, Phillip B.**

1998 *When the Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses and Practices of Power in Kalaripayattu. A South Indian Martial Art*. New Delhi & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2004 Towards a Phenomenological Model of the Actor's Embodied Modes of Experience. *Theatre Journal* 56: 653–66.

## Bob Dylan and Religion

This article is a discussion of the relations of one particular rock artist, Bob Dylan, to religion. Bob Dylan is one of the most influential artists of the rock era. After a career spanning almost fifty years and over forty albums, he still continuously tours around the world. He has been the subject of many biographies and studies. Religion can be seen as a recurring topic in Dylan's work—particularly during a period at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, often referred to as his 'Christian era'—and also in the discourses around him. This article explores how the topic of religion appears in discourses around Bob Dylan.<sup>1</sup>

This article is located within the field of research on religion and popular culture, which has emerged as a small subfield within religious studies during the last decade or so (e.g. Forbes & Mahan 2000; Mazur & McCarthy 2001). The perspective in the field is here a sociological one, where the connection between religion and popular culture is seen as an example of how religion relates to contemporary society. Popular culture is an important part of contemporary society and one to which religion also relates; popular culture is an area where religion appears today.

Here I want to look at one particular aspect of the connection between religion and popular culture: the construction of certain artists or stars as religious figures, and more specifically I will talk about one artist, Bob Dylan, as a case. I want to emphasize that I am *not* trying to discover whether Dylan is religious or not; nor am I trying to find out which religion he possibly adheres to. Rather, I am looking at how rock artists and in this case Bob Dylan are 'constructed' as religious figures; or, putting it differently, I am looking at how religion appears in various texts and discourses around Bob Dylan.<sup>2</sup>

1 I want to thank Maria Punnonen and Pål Ketil Botvar for helpful comments and suggestions.

2 There are many other artists that could be interesting to discuss from the same perspective. In previous studies, I have analyzed discourses on religion in relation to artists such as Sinead O'Connor (Häger 2005), Madonna (Häger 1996), Bruce Springsteen (Häger 2006) and Thomas Di Leva (Häger 2004).

The article presents an example of how people today encounter religion outside its institutional context and in popular culture. I believe that the example shows that religion is relevant in a sphere such as pop culture, but not necessarily in ways that are very familiar to those well acquainted with institutional religion. The article thus shows an example of how religion has become detraditionalized (cf. Woodhead & Heelas 2000).

In the following passage I will briefly discuss two theoretical concepts that are used as starting points for the article. The main part of the article then continues with a presentation of some examples of how religion appears in discourses around Bob Dylan.

### Theoretical concepts

The first concept is borrowed from the Finnish cultural historian Janne Mäkelä (2002). It is the concept of 'starnet'. The point of the concept is to serve as a reminder that the meaning of a (movie or rock) star is not created by or fixed to one single individual but rather created in a 'web' (or 'net') of texts and practices. This starnet which creates the meaning of a star has four aspects, according to Mäkelä (2002). These are: the individual artist, his or her biography and works; the industry that produces, distributes and markets the works; the media; and the audience or the fans.

The concept of starnet here serves two purposes. Firstly, it is a tool for organizing the presentation of the material on and the discussion around a particular star. Secondly, and more importantly, it reminds us that there is more to a 'star' than what is said and done by a single person; or, in other words, if I want to study the meaning of Bob Dylan, it does not suffice to look at, for example, his song lyrics or other things he himself has uttered. Furthermore, if I, for example, am interested in the biography of Dylan, I will not know anything without the information I get through media; nor do I have any access to his works without the distribution by the music industry. The concept of the starnet shows that all these aspects are interrelated.

The second concept I want to present is that of 'sacralization'. I am not here talking about stars in general or Bob Dylan as a star in general, but about how these stars—exemplified by Dylan—are constructed as religious figures, how they in various discourses are related to religious traditions. This I understand as a form of sacralization. With Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000), I see sacralization as a parallel countertrend to secularization, here particularly in the sense of an 'increase' of the presence of religion in public space, or

rather as the increase of observation or perception of religion in public space. The concept of sacralization remains in the background in the main part of the article and is discussed more explicitly in the conclusion.

Sacralization in relation to discussing pop culture stars as religious figures could be understood at various levels. Most basically, it could refer to how artists are held in such high esteem that they could be said to be 'worshipped' as 'idols'. Stars could be seen as religious figures in a functional sense. Here, however, I will focus on how artists are connected to religious traditions in a substantive sense. This can also be seen at different levels. A first and most basic level would be simply to state a connection between an artist and a religious tradition, as for example in saying that Bob Dylan attended Bible school. A second and more interesting level is then the discourses on what such connections may mean; for example the discussion on whether Dylan still is a Christian, how Christianity might influence his work, and so on. This is the level at which most of the discourses referred to in this article are to be placed. Furthermore, it is still possible to discuss what kind of religious figure Dylan may be constructed as: a messiah, a prophet, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

In the remainder of the article, I will use the categorization of the starnet to study the construction of Bob Dylan as a religious figure. Dylan is a prolific artist with a long career, and the literature on the artist is abundant. The discussion on Dylan and religion in this article is therefore bound to be limited to a small number of examples. To attempt some form of delimitation, the main focus will be on Dylan's relation to Christianity, but it is important to remember that the discourses on Dylan also relate him to many other traditions.

## The artist

Bob Dylan was born as Robert Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota in 1941.<sup>4</sup> His family was Jewish and he was bar mitzvahed at the age of thirteen. However, Dylan's most publicized personal involvement with organized religion must be his conversion to Christianity in 1979. He was baptized in

3 This last aspect is, for the sake of brevity, left out of this article. The construction of Dylan as 'prophet' is perhaps the most common within this category, and can be found in, for example, Marshall (2002) and Gilmour (2004), who both compare Dylan to the biblical prophets Jeremiah and Jonah.

4 Biographical information of Dylan is brought from Shelton (1986), Sounes (2001) and Heylin (2003).

a (Pentecostal) Vineyard church in California and attended Bible school for some months in the spring of 1979. At the beginning of the 1980s, he was reported as having returned to Judaism, and he has later been involved in Orthodox Jewish charity work and has been reported to attend synagogue occasionally ('Singer/Songwriter...').

Trying to decide what may be the 'religious aspects' of Dylan's biography is of course very much a matter of interpretation. The same goes at least to the same extent for his artistic output. I will, however, here provide some examples of what may be seen as the most explicit references to narrowly defined religious traditions in Dylan's work, and come back to the issue of interpretation in the passages on discourses on Dylan and religion in the media and among fans.

The most explicitly religious material in Dylan's work is doubtlessly the two albums following his Christian conversion, *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*. The subsequent album, *Shot of Love*, is often counted as the third part of Dylan's 'religious trilogy', but contains a more mixed material than the two previous albums. The songs include 'In the Garden', which presents some of the events in the life of Jesus as depicted in the gospels, and 'Saving Grace' talking of the one road that leads to Calvary.<sup>5</sup> On his first—self-titled—album of 1962, containing renditions of traditional songs, Dylan sings the spiritual 'Gospel Plow'. He has covered gospel songs also later in his career, notably on the tours conducted in the years 1999 and 2000, which regularly featured songs such as 'Rock of Ages' and 'Pass Me Not Oh Gentle Saviour' (Dylan – The Yearly Chronologies). He has his own radio show, where each program deals with a certain theme and here he has, among other themes (such as 'weather', 'birds', and 'smoking', etc.), talked about the Bible (Theme Time Radio Hour). References to the Bible in Dylan's lyrics will be discussed below.

Bob Dylan is not known for being very talkative on stage, but during the period when he performed only gospel songs, he often gave lengthy speeches between songs. These speeches often amounted to sermons, particularly centring on Dylan's belief in a coming apocalypse. He even once condemned rock music from the stage (1979 First Gospel Tour; Heylin 1990). On tour in 1986, Dylan regularly introduced the above mentioned song 'In the Garden' as being a song about his hero (e.g. Marshall 2002: 86). In 1991, on the other hand, he often introduced the opening track from his first gospel album, 'Gotta Serve Somebody' as an 'anti-religion song' (Marshall 2002: 109).

5 Information on and lyrics from all of Dylan's albums may be found at [www.bob-dylan.com](http://www.bob-dylan.com).

Dylan is not referring exclusively to Christianity or to the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the *Desire* album, for example, there are several references to Egyptian mythology, as in the song 'Isis', and rather more obscurely in 'Oh Sister'. There are also pictures of tarot cards on the record sleeve of that album. During the same tours in 1999 and 2000, where he performed the old gospel songs mentioned above and others like it, he also covered the Grateful Dead song 'Friend of the Devil', with the lyrics 'a friend of the devil is a friend of mine' (Dylan – The Yearly Chronologies).<sup>6</sup>

## Industry

A rock artist cannot exist without some form of music industry, producing, marketing and distributing the artist's work, and to a great extent the artist him/herself. In Dylan's case, the record company obviously played a role in making and distributing Dylan's gospel records. Some songs from this period have also been included on subsequent collections. During 1979 and the spring of 1980, Dylan only played his gospel material in concert, discarding his old songs. He started including old material again in the autumn of 1980. There are no official live recordings released from the concerts of Dylan's 'Christian' period. Dylan received a Grammy for the song 'Gotta Serve Somebody', which of course is a sign of recognition from the music industry.

One particular conflict with the music industry during Dylan's gospel years concerned the cover of the album *Saved*. The cover shows a large hand stretching down towards a number of smaller hands reaching up (Dylan 1980). Clinton Heylin (2003: 523) interprets the cover as depicting 'Christ's extended forefinger picking out a believer's upraised hand from a sea of damned souls'. He quotes the cover artist, Tony Wright, as saying that the record company hated the sleeve and did not want to promote another gospel record. The album was finally shipped to the radio stations in a white sleeve (Heylin 2003: 524, 426) and the cover was changed in 1985 (*Saved* 1980).

Dylan's songs have been performed and recorded by many other artists, and this is also true of the gospel songs. A notable example is the project called 'Gotta Serve Somebody', where a number of prominent African American gospel artists recorded gospel songs by Dylan, released on a CD and DVD (*Gotta*

6 The complete lyrics to this Grateful Dead song, with comments, can be found on *The Annotated Friend of the Devil*. The lyrics to this song can of course also be interpreted in many ways.



*Serve Somebody* 2003). Dylan's music, from his gospel period as well as other songs, have been used in churches for example in a number of 'Dylan masses' celebrated in churches both in Sweden and Norway (Kultursamverkan; Løvli 2002; *Saving Grace* 2007). This is also part of the distribution of Dylan's songs and a part that of course very clearly relates him to religion and even organized religion.

However, taking industry in a more strict sense as meaning the record industry and Dylan's record company (Sony BMG Music), I believe this is the aspect of starnet where the connection to religion is the least evident. Indications of this are the above mentioned reluctance to issue a live recording from the gospel period, as well as the fact that Dylan's gospel period seems to be a part of his career that includes many unreleased compositions (Björner; Heylin 2003: 731–47). The record industry is less willing to construct a star as religious than are artists themselves, or the media or the audience.

## Media

This is perhaps the most important aspect of the starnet: the arena where the meaning of a star is first and foremost created. The media discourses on Dylan are, given that he has a long career as a very prominent artist, of course very extensive and also quite diverse, including printed press and various electronic media, as well as a large number of books, from biographies to academic treatises.

Religion comes up as a topic in many different media texts about Dylan. He has talked about religion in interviews during his gospel period (e.g. Cott 2006: 271–84). He has touched on the subject in various ways in later interviews as well. In an interview for the CBS program '60 minutes' in 2004, he explained that he continues touring because he 'made a bargain with the chief commander of this world and the world we can't see' (Dylan on '60 minutes'). In 2007, in an interview for *Rolling Stone Magazine*, he answered a question regarding whether he is religious:

Where can you look in the world and see that religion has been a force for positive good? Where can you look at humanity and say, 'Humanity has been uplifted by a connection to godly power?' . . . Religion is something that is mostly outward appearance. Faith is a different thing. (Wenner 2007: 50.)

and specifies when asked that he has faith in 'Nature. Just elemental nature.' It is clear that Dylan in this quote distances himself from the label 'religion.'

Religious aspects also come up in reviews of Dylan's records. The *New York Times* headlined its review of Dylan's 2006 album, *Modern Times*, 'The Pilgrim's progress of Bob Dylan' (Pareles 2006). The review says that Dylan is 'haunted by God', that his songs show 'a longing for salvation' or can 'be taken as avowals of faith'. The magazine *Christianity Today* says in the review of the same album:

[Dylan's latest records have] summarized everything that he's ever said before: The world is going to pot, humanity is nothing but a bunch of cads and villains, women are nothing but trouble, death lies in wait around every corner, and only God can save us now.

...

For the faithful, though, there's still one light shining in the night sky, and it's enough to make the journey bearable. Dylan reminds us of this beacon in 'Thunder on the Mountain,' and it's enough to carry us through the rest of the album: 'Some sweet day,' he vows, 'I'll stand beside my king.' (Hurst 2006.)

These reviews are examples of how religious interpretations have been applied to Dylan's later work. The English writer Chris Gregory (2007) criticizes these interpretations of Dylan. Instead he suggests that the phrase 'the gardener is gone', from the final song on *Modern Times*, 'Ain't Talking', states that we have been abandoned by God.

There is an abundance of critical literature on Dylan, and much of this material touches upon religion; some of the critical literature deals exclusively with this topic. The literature on Dylan and religion includes Christian books focusing on Dylan's Christianity in general (Williams 1985; Marshall 2002; Webb 2006) or particularly on his use of the Bible (Cartwright 1985; Gilmour 2004). There are publications viewing Dylan from the perspective of other religious traditions such as astrology (Ledbury) and of course Judaism. Examples of the latter include an analysis of the kabbalistic references in the album *Infidels* (Moaz 2005); as well as a report from Dylan's 1974 American tour, titled *Bob Dylan Approximately: A portrait of the Jewish poet in search of God: A Midrash* (Pickering 1975). There is academic theological work on Dylan (e.g. Friberg 1999). There are critical studies pursued outside a religious context focusing on certain religious or existential aspects of Dylan (Williams 1980; Ricks 2004). Major general critical works (Gray 2000;

Williams 2004) as well as many biographies (e.g. Shelton 1986; Sounes 2001; Heylin 2003) include analyses of Dylan's religious output. There are also some DVD-documentaries with material, mostly interviews with musicians and record producers, regarding Dylan's gospel period (*Bob Dylan 1978–1989*; *Bob Dylan 1975–1981*).

I here want to give some examples of how Dylan's religion is treated by some writers and analysts. The first example is a general look at Dylan's career from a Christian perspective; the second is a book on Dylan and the Bible; and the third example is an analysis of Dylan from an esoteric perspective.

*Restless Pilgrim: The spiritual journey of Bob Dylan* (Marshall 2002) is an example of a book looking at Dylan's career from a Christian perspective. The focus of the book is on the period when Dylan was explicitly Christian, 1979–81, and his subsequent career. The book basically argues that Dylan has continued to be a Christian since 1981, and if he sometimes engages in Jewish activities—attends synagogue, for example—it is because Dylan believes, as does Marshall, that it is possible to be both a Jew and a Christian at the same time.

Scott Marshall comments on the fact that Dylan stopped writing new gospel songs after 1981:

Jesus was, and is, the answer to the question [Dylan] and his generation had been asking for so long. He saw no need to repeat himself by continuing to write gospel songs or continuing to preach from the stage: truth is truth, and it stands for ever. (Marshall 2002: 57.)

He calls the album *Oh Mercy* from 1989 'practically a companion piece' to *Slow Train Coming* (Marshall 2002: 98). In 1991, Dylan often called 'Gotta Serve Somebody' an 'anti-religion song' when he introduced it in concert. Marshall (2002: 109) argues, to my mind quite convincingly, that this is a statement based on an Evangelical view that Christianity is not a religion (cf. statements to the same effect in a radio interview with Dylan made in 1979; Cott 2006: 272). Marshall (2002: 109) draws the conclusion: 'In the end, there seems to be little doubt that Dylan's 1991 stage raps simply affirmed the reality of his experience with Jesus back in 1979.'

These are some examples of how Marshall (2002) attempts to argue that Dylan still is a Christian and that this influences his work. The arguments are not always convincing and are based on a rather narrow view of Dylan. There is, for example, a reference to St Peter in one of the songs on *Oh Mercy*, but this hardly makes it comparable to the very explicit gospel material on *Slow Train Coming*.

Michael Gilmour (2004) analyses how Dylan has been influenced by the Bible in his lyrics. Gilmour cites some obvious and often commented upon examples, such as the references to Judas Iscariot in ‘Masters of War’ and ‘With God on Our Side’ as well as the reference to Matthew 19:30, ‘But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first’, in ‘The Times They Are A-changin’.

Gilmour (2004) does not pay much attention to the gospel records, perhaps in an implicit support of the thesis that Dylan always has been religious.

Gilmour also produces some more original analyses, for example when he sees Dylan’s 2001 album *Love and Theft* as a retelling of the Exodus story. Some of the observations regarding this album are more plausible, as when Gilmour (2004: 92) compares the mention, in the song ‘Mississippi’, of a river crossing, with the Israelites’ crossing the river Jordan. Other comparisons are less convincing to me:

[J]ust as the Israelites were trapped against the shores of the Red Sea by Pharaoh’s army (Exodus 14:5–31), so too the narrator [of the song ‘Mississippi’] is ‘all boxed in’ with no escape route available (Gilmour 2004: 92).

Associating a very general phrase such as being ‘boxed in’ to the biblical tale of the children of Israel escaping from Pharaoh to my mind takes a lot of—and perhaps too much—creative imagination, or rather a very strong will to claim that Dylan is even more influenced by the Bible than is obvious in a superficial reading of his work.

The Italian Dylan scholar Nicola Menicacci has written extensively in Italian on Dylan’s connections to esoteric tradition. On his website, Menicacci summarizes some of his analysis in a number of video statements in English (Nicola Menicacci videos). He discusses the connections of Dylan’s work to I Ching, tarot and the story of Mary Magdalene’s journey to France. In one video, he states that there is a different message behind Dylan’s so called Christian albums. Menicacci observes that on the back cover of the albums *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved* and *Shot of Love* there can be found (among other things) a cross, a light<sup>7</sup> and a rose. Taken in reverse, these three words give the initials RLC, which according to Menicacci is a reference to the French village Rennes-Le-Chateau, said to be the place where the documents on the Priory of Sion were discovered (Rennes-Le-Chateau: The Mystery; Baigent

7 The picture referred to is a caption from a concert, the light is a spotlight on Dylan (Dylan 1980).

*et al.* 2005). As with any interpretation, Menicacci's analysis of the esoteric content in Dylan's records is open to criticism, but I find his comments to be an interesting example of how the work of an artist such as Bob Dylan can be and is interpreted from many perspectives, including many different religious traditions. Both Marshall (2002) and Menicacci also serve as examples of how interpreters who like a particular artist, in this case Bob Dylan, attempt to incorporate Dylan into their own sphere, claiming Dylan to be one of their own.

## Fans

The fourth aspect of the starnet is the audience or the fans of the star in question. Dylan has a large fan base, and many fans are very devoted when it comes to following Dylan's career in various ways. It is important to note that contemporary fandom points to the fact that the distinction between media and audience and even between industry and audience is difficult to make. Fans are critics (and critics are fans), and fans form part of the industry in the sense that they produce and distribute various unofficial recordings.

I will here focus on the most important arena for contemporary fandom, the Internet. There are fan pages devoted to presenting regular news on what happens in the world of Bob Dylan (Expecting Rain); listing every song from every concert or recording session (Björner); or presenting and reviewing bootleg records (Bobsboots). In addition, there are of course a number of discussion forums (e.g. Love and theft; My back pages). There are many arenas for fan distribution of audiovisual material; some larger sites, for example YouTube, hosting a great variety of material, including material on Dylan; others exclusively devoted to this artist (Rare Dylan Recordings).

There are also several web pages dedicated to issues on Dylan and religion. The blog Dylan Devotional calls itself a 'resource blog for spreading the gospel of Bob Dylan worship music'. A website called 'A Lily among thorns' is dedicated to 'exploring Bob Dylan's Christianity', and presents analyses of songs, interviews as well as transcripts of stage speeches from the gospel period concerts. The site called 'Not dark yet' analyses many of Dylan's songs, both old and new, tries to connect the lyrics to various biblical passages, and argues that Dylan has recently been singing more of these 'biblical' songs than in previous years. There is also a fan site devoted to a religious follow-

ing of Dylan, including a religious calendar and a list of the saints of ‘bobism’ (Church of Bob).<sup>8</sup>

Religion also appears as a topic in online discussion forums on Bob Dylan. One recurring topic is the question regarding Dylan’s current relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular. I will here present some quotes from one such discussion thread on the discussion forum at the Expecting Rain website (Bob and religion). The discussion was conducted in September 2006 and contains 87 messages written by 24 different forum members.

The discussion starts with the question: ‘I was just wondering if he is still a strong [C]hristian?’ The answers to the question are both affirmative:

I think you[’re] an idiot if you are in the camp that likes to believe th[at] Dylan has completely abandoned everything he stood for in the early eighties. There are just too many signs to prove otherwise. I do however think, that he quickly realized that when you are Bob Dylan, you can’t keep up the christian public persona he had created and not get shot

and negative:

I think the particular strain of christianity he got involved with in the late 70s did represent a phase that he passed through. The Vineyard Church has all the criteria of a cult short of the tainted Kool-Aid. . . I doubt he [k]ept most of the born-againers he picked up during his ‘Saved’ period.

These quotes are examples of two different interpretations of Dylan’s relationship to religion. One interpretation emphasises a continuing relationship, where religion, and perhaps even Christianity, has always been a part of Dylan’s life; while the other interpretation sees the ‘Christian period’ as an exception and religion as more or less irrelevant during the rest of his career. In the critical literature, Marshall (2002) is a clear example of the former while Williams (1980) is more of an example of the latter.

8 Other examples of—what I understand as ironic—constructions of a religious following of Dylan include two books by a Norwegian author, Carl Johan Berg, on Dylan’s ‘disciples’ and Dylan’s ‘gospel’ (Rakvaag 2007; Berg 2007); as well as a feature in the music magazine *Uncut*, which asked its readers the rhetorical questions ‘Is Bob Dylan a God?’ and ‘Should we worship Bob Dylan?’

There are also examples from other online discussions of fans relating Dylan to other religious traditions than Christianity. One further quote from the above quoted discussion (Bob and religion) emphasized a continuing relationship to religion, but not to Christianity: 'I've heard him talk about eastern philosophies and yoga and meditation, he's obviously been around the block religion wise.'

On the same discussion forum, one fan started a discussion thread with the title 'Dylan Akbar', and after every mention of Dylan's name added 'may peace be upon him', thus tying Dylan to Islamic tradition and even implying that Dylan is a prophet of Allah (Dylan Akbar); and other fans have wondered about Dylan's possible relations to freemasonry (Is Bob Dylan a Mason in Distress?), or whether he perhaps has sold his soul to the devil (Did Dylan sell his soul to the Devil?).

### **Concluding remarks**

This article has been a presentation of some examples of how a particular rock artist, Bob Dylan, is related to various religious traditions in different discourses around the artist and his works. This construction of Bob Dylan as a religious figure, as it were, is seen as an example of how religion relates to an important sphere in contemporary society: popular culture.

The discussion has revolved around the construction of Bob Dylan as a rock star and particularly ways in which his artistry relates to religion. Examples have been presented of how Dylan's own biography and works, but in particular media and fan response, relate to religion and create a connection between Dylan and religious traditions. I have first and foremost attempted to argue that religion is an important category in the constructions of the meaning of the rock star Bob Dylan. I hope that the examples also show that the interpretations are quite varied, where some—particularly Christian—interpreters emphasize Dylan's relationship to Christianity, but where the wider view shows a more ambivalent picture.

I see the connections made between Bob Dylan and various religious traditions as examples of sacralization. The discourses on Dylan and religion are to me an example of how religion is evoked in the contemporary public sphere. It is impossible on the basis of the material in this article, and difficult even in a more general discussion on religion and popular culture, to claim with any certainty that there is an increase of references to religion within contemporary popular culture, although this is sometimes argued (Possamai

2005; Hoover 2006). But it is also difficult to completely ignore the fact that religion appears within popular culture in various forms, and that this is also acknowledged in fan and media discourses on popular culture. Furthermore, it is clear to me that these connections between religion and popular culture constitute interesting and important changes in the position of religion in contemporary society.

## Sources

### *Internet sources*

#### **1979 First Gospel Tour**

<http://www.bjorner.com/DSN05060%201979%20First%20Gospel%20Tour.htm#DSN05270> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

#### **A Lily among thorns**

<http://www.alilyamongthorns.8m.com/> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

#### **Björner**

<http://www.bjorner.com/bob.htm> (accessed on 8 October 2008).

#### **Bob and religion**

<http://www.expectingrain.com/discussions.html> (accessed on 14 September 2006).

#### **Bob Dylan official homepage**

<http://www.bobdylan.com/> (accessed on 3 November 2008).

#### **Bobsboots**

<http://www.bobsboots.com/> (accessed on 8 October 2008).

#### **Church of Bob**

<http://www.geocities.com/churchofbob/> (accessed on 3 November 2008).

#### **Did Dylan sell his soul to the Devil?**

<http://expectingrain.com/discussions.html> (accessed on 14 February 2006).

#### **Dylan Akbar**

<http://www.expectingrain.com/discussions.html> (accessed on 30 October 2006).

#### **Dylan Devotional**

<http://dylangospel.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

#### **Dylan on '60 minutes'**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS5MwoqDTSY&feature=related> (accessed on 29 September 2008).

#### **Dylan – The Yearly Chronologies**

<http://www.bjorner.com/chronologies.htm> (accessed on 26 September 2008).

#### **Expecting Rain**

<http://www.expectingrain.com/> (accessed on 8 October 2008).



**Gregory, Chris**

2007 From the Pen of Chris Gregory: Bob Dylan's Modern Times track by track. <http://www.chrisgregory.org/blog/CategoryView,category,Bob%2BDylan%27s%2BModern%2BTimes%2BTrack%2BBy%2BTrack.aspx> (accessed on 8 April 2009).

**Hurst, Josh**

2006 Bob Dylan: Modern Times [review]. Christianity Today. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/music/glimpses/2006/moderntimes.html> (accessed on 29 September 2008).

**Is Bob Dylan a Mason in Distress?**

<http://expectingrain.com/discussions.html> (accessed on 17 February 2006).

**Kultursamverkan**

<http://www.kultursamverkan.se/arkiv/gudstjanster.htm> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**Love and theft**

<http://loveandtheft.se/smf/> (accessed on 6 October 2008).

**Løvli, Geir**

2002 Dylan en messe verdt. *Fredrikstad Blad* 30.1.2002. <http://www.fb.no/apps/pbcs.dll/artikkel?Avis=FB&Dato=20020130&Kategori=SPEILLET&Lopenr=50058869&Ref=AR> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**My back pages**

<http://www.my-back-pages.com/forums/index.php?act=idx> (accessed on 8 October 2008).

**Nicola Menicacci videos**

<http://www.nicolamenicacci.com/bd/videos/english.htm> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**Not dark yet**

<http://notdarkyet.tripod.com/> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**Pareles, Jon**

2006 The Pilgrim's progress of Bob Dylan. *New York Times* 20.8.2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/arts/music/2opare.html> (accessed on 29 September 2008).

**Rakvaag, Geir**

2007 Stor tropå Dylan. *Dagsavisen* 30.8.2007. <http://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/musikk/article312886.ece> (accessed on 1 November 2008).

**Rare Dylan Recordings**

<http://www.expectingrain.com/discussions/viewforum.php?f=9&sid=a87162a228d3b9b777a965c00db32bec> (accessed on 6 October 2008).

**Rennes-Le-Chateau: The Mystery**

<http://www.renneslechateau.com/default-uk.htm> (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**Saved 1980**

<http://www.searchingforagem.com/1980s/Internationalo25.htm> (accessed on 31 October 2008).

**'Singer/Songwriter Bob Dylan Joins Yom Kippur Services in Atlanta'**

[http://www.chabad.org/news/article\\_cdo/aid/573406/jewish/SingerSongwriter-Bob-Dylan-Joins-Attends-Yom-Kippur-Services-in-Atlanta.htm](http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/573406/jewish/SingerSongwriter-Bob-Dylan-Joins-Attends-Yom-Kippur-Services-in-Atlanta.htm) (accessed on 29 October 2008).

**The Annotated Friend of the Devil**

<http://arts.ucsc.edu/gdead/agdl/fotd.html> (accessed on 8 April 2009).

**Theme Time Radio Hour**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/6music/shows/bob\\_dylan/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/6music/shows/bob_dylan/) (accessed on 26 September 2008).

**Uncut**

[http://www.uncut.co.uk/music/bob\\_dylan/special\\_features/8987](http://www.uncut.co.uk/music/bob_dylan/special_features/8987) (accessed on 31 October 2008).

*Printed sources*

**Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh & Henry Lincoln**

2005 *Holy Blood, Holy Grail: The secret history of Jesus, the shocking legacy of the Grail*. New York: Bantam Dell. (First published in 1982)

**Berg, Carl Johan**

2007 *Dylan's Disipler: Ikke helt som andre fans*. Oslo: Koloritt.

**Bob Dylan 1975–1981**

2006 *Bob Dylan 1975–1981: Rolling Thunder and the gospel years*. Highway 61 Entertainment. (DVD)

**Bob Dylan 1978–1989**

2008 *Bob Dylan 1978–1989: Both ends of the rainbow*. Chrome Dreams. (DVD)

**Cartwright, Bert**

1985 *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*. Bury: Wanted Man.

**Cott, Jonathan** (ed.)

2006 *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*. New York: Wenner Books.

**Dylan, Bob**

1980 *Saved*. Columbia. (CD)

**Forbes, Bruce David & Jeffrey H. Mahan** (eds)

2000 *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Friberg, Pär**

1999 *Brustenhetens budbärare: En läsning av Bob Dylans sångtexter 1979–1997*. Stockholm: Teologiska högskolan.

**Gilmour, Michael**

2004 *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan & Scripture*. New York: Continuum.

**Gotta Serve Somebody**

2003 *Gotta Serve Somebody: The gospel songs of Bob Dylan*. Columbia. (CD)

**Gray, Michael**

2000 *Song & Dance Man III: The art of Bob Dylan*. New York: Continuum.

**Häger, Andreas**

- 1996 Like a Prophet: On Christian Interpretations of a Madonna Video. In: Tore Ahlbäck (ed.), *Dance, Music, Art and Religion*; pp. 151–74. Åbo: The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History.
- 2004 Religösa aspekter i verk och mediebevakningen av den svenska artisten Thomas Di Leva. *Prismet: Religionspedagogisk tidskrift* 55 (2): 57–65.
- 2005 Under the Shadow of the Almighty: Fan reception of some religious aspects in the work and career of the Irish popular musician Sinéad O'Connor. In: Michael Gilmour (ed.), *Call me the Seeker: Listening to religion in popular music*; pp. 215–25. New York: Continuum.
- 2006 Seek and you will find: A critical discussion of the search for “Christian” content in popular culture. In: Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen, Knut Lundby & Raimo Salokangas (eds), *Implications of the Sacred in (Post)Modern Media*; pp. 217–33. Göteborg: Nordicom.

**Heylin, Clinton**

- 1990 Saved! Bob Dylan’s conversion to Christianity. In: John Bauldie (ed.), *Wanted Man! In search of Bob Dylan*; pp. 128–34. New York: Citadel Underground.
- 2003 *Bob Dylan: Behind the shades revisited*. New York: HarperEntertainment.

**Hoover, Stewart M.**

- 2006 *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge.

**Ledbury, John**

- n.d. *Mysteriously Saved: An astrological investigation into Bob Dylan’s conversion into American fundamentalism*. London: Quest Publications.

**Mäkelä, Janne**

- 2002 *Images in the Works: a Cultural History of John Lennon’s Rock Stardom*. Turku: University of Turku.

**Marshall, Scott M.**

- 2002 *Restless Pilgrim: The spiritual journey of Bob Dylan*. Lake Mary: Relevant Books.

**Mazur, Eric Michael & Kate McCarthy (eds)**

- 2001 *God in the Details: American religion in popular culture*. New York: Routledge.

**Moaz, Daniel**

- 2005 Shekhinah as woman: Kabbalistic references in Dylan’s Infidels. In: Michael Gilmour (ed.), *Call me the Seeker: Listening to religion in popular music*; pp. 3–16. New York: Continuum.

**Pickering, Stephen**

- 1975 *Bob Dylan Approximately: A portrait of the Jewish poet in search of God: A Midrash*. New York: David MacKay.

**Possamai, Adam**

- 2005 *Religion and Popular Culture. A Hyper-Real Testament*. Brussels: Peter Lang.

**Ricks, Cristopher**

2004 *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. New York: Ecco.

**Saving Grace**

2007 *Saving Grace: The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan*. Zebra Art. (CD)

**Shelton, Robert**

1986 *No Direction Home: The life and music of Bob Dylan*. New York: Da Capo Press.

**Sounes, Howard**

2001 *Down the Highway: The life of Bob Dylan*. London: Black Swan.

**Webb, Steven**

2006 *Dylan Redeemed: From Highway 61 to Saved*. New York: Continuum.

**Wenner, Jann S.**

2007 Bob Dylan. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, May 3–17: 48–54.

**Williams, Don**

1985 *Bob Dylan: The man, the music, the message*. Old Tappan: Fleming H Revell.

**Williams, Paul**

1980 *What happened?* Glen Ellen: Entwistle.

2004 *Bob Dylan: Performing artist 1974–1986. The middle years*. Reading: Omnibus.

**Woodhead, Linda & Paul Heelas**

2000 *Religion in Modern Times: An interpretive anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

## Mysticism and Spirituality

### Introduction

Since my active period as professor is coming to an end, this might be a good time to make a brief survey of some of my interests and research activities, which are in line with the main topic of the Donner Institute's conference on postmodern spirituality. First of all, I wish to note that, to a large extent, I have focussed on popular phenomena of an experiential character. Therefore I have specialised in questions pertaining to the psychology of religion, since this field has provided explanations for the religious phenomena that I have been interested in.

But how does the popular correspond to the grand terms of the title? Are not mysticism and spirituality something very exclusive, reserved for a few individuals? I do not think so. The following presentation of both my own studies and the research of others will provide a different picture of these two concepts.

Mysticism and spirituality are notions that are very difficult to define. Traditionally mysticism has been regarded as a way to reach the inner dimensions of human life, dimensions where man even achieves unity with the Divine Being. Such traditions have been found in all the major religions, and since the times of William James a hundred years ago, the features of mysticism in various religions have been analysed.

Spirituality is a concept that can hold various meanings. It has often been associated with religious traditions where inner life and its growth are emphasized. These include, in particular, various schools, orders and movements that aim at cultivating a deeper spiritual life. In its more recent use, the term spirituality has, to a fairly large extent, been dissociated from religion and has become a notion that seeks to grasp the searching of modern man for ethics and norms in a globalised world, where pollution is accelerating and where stress and entertainment disrupt the inner harmony of people. I will return to these issues later on in this article.

## **My research on Pentecostalism**

My early research in the beginning of the 1970s aimed at exploring Pentecostalism from as comprehensive a perspective as possible. I was particularly interested in the individual experiences, primarily the speaking in tongues and baptism in the Holy Spirit. My licentiate thesis 1973 (published 1974) was a linguistic study of the actual production of sound in glossolalia. I recorded an extensive amount of field material and then started the laborious work of analysing the speaking of tongues on the tapes. Counting sounds in the glossolalia, comparing these to phenomena in ordinary languages and drawing conclusions on sound qualities in tongue-speaking was a very demanding task. My results showed that the glossolalia mainly consisted of sound forms from the speaker's mother tongue, but these were expressed in simplified patterns. Sometimes, however, more exotic sounds found in foreign languages were added. (Holm 1974 and 1975.)

My subsequent project was my doctoral thesis (1976), with the objective to explain the actual experiences of spiritual baptism among the Pentecostals. On the basis of a large body of empirical material, I could draw the conclusion that baptism in the Holy Spirit was a kind of role-play, where the participants took on models from actual examples in the congregations, but, above, all, from the holy tradition, that is, from the Bible. After a transition period when a person is waiting to be spiritually baptized, he or she takes on a role as 'the one that God has given an abundant measure of the Holy Spirit'. The rite of passage usually begins with the person starting to speak in tongues, in preparation for taking on the entire role (Holm 1978).

Thus, my research has shown that speaking in tongues can be regarded as a common human skill, which we all are able of, if the social and psychological obstacles to speaking mumbo jumbo are removed. Such obstacles are removed within Pentecostalism when glossolalia is connected to the role of spiritual baptism, and people often, during prayer in the congregation or when going to bed at home, reach a stage where the ability to speak in tongues emerges. This greatly excites the person.

## **My research on mysticism**

The glossolalia research led me to further questions on ecstasy and mysticism. At the end of the 1970s I therefore started an extensive empirical project together with a number of psychology students. We explored strong personal

experiences among ordinary people in Swedish Finland. In this, I made great use of the research carried out by Ralph W. Hood in the USA. Having gained permission, I translated his test into Swedish, and the psychology students distributed it together with an interview and a questionnaire. The material was partly analysed by the participants in the course, but above all, by myself. This work resulted in the book *Mystik och intensiva upplevelser (Mysticism and Intensive Experiences, 1979)*. The main results were also published elsewhere, for example in *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* (Holm 1982b).

In the book, I first give an extensive presentation of research on mysticism in the twentieth century. I noted that there were various approaches to the research and that much was based on the main representative of American psychology or religion from a hundred years back, William James. There was also an emerging line of research on yoga and meditation, and the use of drugs. However, much remained to be done. The empirical research, then represented by Hood, was something entirely new and interesting in this context. For me, it was of great advantage to be able to continue his research contributions. Our results also matched each other well. Above all, we could note that ordinary people have strong experiences with qualities that to a fair extent also correspond to those described in the so-called great mystics within the world religions. The criteria we used to narrow down mysticism were based on W. T. Stace's categorization of reports and descriptions given by the great mystics over several centuries.

As it happened, the Donner Institute organised a conference in Åbo in August 1981 on the topic of *Religious Ecstasy*. I then got the opportunity to present my glossolalia research and also give a survey of the research on ecstasy. This survey (Holm 1982a) is the introduction of the volume published after the conference, number XI in the series *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 1982.

At the end of that article, I emphasized that there were some important research tasks that rapidly needed some input. These were, for example, 'continued research into the nature, origin and properties of the mental state itself, particularly in relation to hypnosis' and 'studies of culture-bound models of altered states of consciousness'. In addition, I pointed to sociological and psychological questions pertaining to the issue.

I concluded the article by underlining the need for research into human neurological structures in order to gain greater insights into ecstasy and mysticism. I also wrote the following: '... man has a basic capacity to condense his needs, desires and religions of various kinds into symbolic form' (Holm 1982a: 24).

What I then wrote, on the need for research pertaining to ecstasy and mysticism, can be summarised in the following points. Firstly, I called for studies on the mental states as such, apart from research directly concerned with the cultural expressions of mysticism and ecstasy. Here, hypnosis research was an obvious gateway at that time. It is important to explore the neurological structures on a basic, biological level. Secondly, mysticism should be placed in a cultural context, and the interaction between biology and social psychology explored. And thirdly, I postulate that human beings have a capacity to translate their needs and wishes into a symbolic form of the kind represented by religion. In the following, I will give a few glimpses of studies pertaining to mysticism and intensive experiences.

### Later research on mysticism

Research into mysticism has developed during the last decades. I myself have not had the opportunity to pursue these issues to any greater extent. Looking at the field, we find studies using approaches from the philosophy of religion and studies focussing on the psychology of religion. Naturally, there are also descriptions of the intensive mystic experiences of individuals within various religions. Accounts of meditation, yoga and the dimensions of inner life are always interesting to us.

The point of departure for the interest in the philosophy of religion has, to a very large extent, been William James and his classic presentations in the famous lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this context, I only want to refer to Eugene Taylor's, *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (1983), Richard H. Jones', *Mysticism Examined. Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism* (1993) and G. William Barnard's, *Exploring Unseen Worlds. William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (1997). Research on mysticism with a philosophical approach is also carried out at the Lund University in Sweden. I am primarily thinking of Catharina Stenqvist (1984 and 1994) and Christina Runqvist (2002). There are much more work that could be mentioned, but I am letting this suffice here.

Within Nordic research on the psychology of religion, Antoon Geels in Lund can be particularly emphasized. Using approaches from the psychology of religion, he has presented extensive descriptions of mysticism, in the main religions (see Geels 2002). His work has given those of us within the Swedish language area a comprehensive and deepened understanding of mysticism. Geels has also focused on persons with mystic experiences in modern times.



The experimental psychological research has been continued particularly by Ralph W. Hood in the USA. As has already been mentioned, he is interested in contemporary strong human experiences. In this context, I wish to refer to his article 'The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism' (2006), where he argues that mysticism exists as an element within religions, but also in individuals without a strong religious profile.

## Cognitive research

Since I wrote about neurological structures, research pertaining to basic biological functions has been strongly accentuated. Personally, I have not actively participated in this line of research, but it has been interesting to follow what has been written within the field.

One area of research on religion has, in a strange way, slid over to trying to discover the biological bases for linguistic communication and thus also for religion (Andresen 2001). Leading figures in this field of research include Dan Sperber, Pascal Boyer, Harvey Whitehouse, Robert N. McCauley, E. T. Lawson and Ilkka Pyysiäinen (see Whitehouse & McCauley 2005). In several extensive studies these scholars argue for the biological foundation, that is, the human cognitive developmental basis, for communication of a religious kind. Here, I cannot refer to studies done in this field, since it would simply take too long. However, I wish to point out that there has occurred, in this area, an interesting repetition of the thoughts and attitudes held about one hundred years ago. The theory of evolution was then high fashion, and religions and cultures were also included in the models. In the middle of the last century, and particularly after the horrors of the Second World War, cultural evolutionism was strongly criticized. Instead, issues of social constructivism were emphasized within research. The behaviour of individuals were thus to be understood exclusively on the basis of culture and environment.

I welcome the renewed interest in the cognitive basis in many respects. It is important that we get research aiming at exploring the fundamental biological functions that govern our behaviour, emotions and thoughts. However, when scholars of religion with a background in the humanities venture into fields designed by the natural sciences, there is a risk of over-interpretation and even of misunderstanding the results of neuro-psychologists. I am not at all saying that this would pertain to every form of cognitive research on religion, but I seem to have noted a somewhat vague basis for some of the cognitively oriented conclusions. Much of it is close to what could be called speculation.

Too narrow a cognitive interpretation of religious phenomena is perhaps a disappearing trend in more recent studies of this kind. As an example I would here like to mention Ilkka Pyysiäinen's article 'Amazing Grace: Religion and the Evolution of the Human Mind' (2006). In his conclusion, Pyysiäinen writes the following: 'Religion is a specific kind of human activity canalized by cognitive process with an evolutionary background' (Pyysiäinen 2006: 221). This sounds perfectly self-evident, and he continues: 'Although not an adaptation in itself, religion yet is a cultural institution that has transformed the evolutionary process. We have had to adapt to a cultural environment shaped by religion because our ancestors have imitated learned patterns of behavior. . . The spread of religion is due to gene-culture coevolution rather than to straightforward biological adaptation.' (Pyysiäinen 2006: 221). In other words, Pyysiäinen here clearly calls for research on religion that takes both biology and culture into consideration. There must, thus, be a balance in research, and, at the same time, space must be allowed for studies within limited special areas, too. Socio-psychological approaches and a focus on the psyche and the body can, together, provide a fuller picture of certain phenomena. Nevertheless, the mental and neurological foundations have not yet been entirely described. Much remains to be done pertaining to neurobiology. But this is perhaps, after all, a task primarily for neuropsychologists and not for scholars of religion with only a humanist or theological education. In order to understand the whole phenomenon of religion, forms of culture also hold an essential meaning, and this field is better suited for scholars of culture and religion.

## **Spirituality**

Another important line of research that has developed since I wrote my summary in the beginning of the 1980s, is research pertaining to spirituality. There are several approaches to this field, but I choose to emphasize here the studies and influence of H. Gardner. His point of departure is intelligence research, and in his theory he identifies seven different forms of intelligence. He also postulates an intelligence that can be called spiritual. In other words, individuals can display a form of spirituality in the same way as they can show intelligence.

On the basis of this theoretical framework, research within education has been developed. Here, Finnish education researchers are at the forefront. In Helsinki, Kirsi Tirri (2004) leads a project aiming at exploring the connec-

tions between intelligence and spirituality. The universe and conditions of life are issues that attract some young people to formulate a kind of general spirituality. Humans are thus disposed to experience and see the world in a way that can be called spiritual. In the educational context in schools, the teaching of religion should therefore associate to such basic spiritual needs of the pupils in order for the teaching to be successful (Ubani 2007).

The concept of spirituality has, during recent years, been introduced as a term for all the interest in meditation, yoga, tranquillity and personal growth that has emerged on the general cultural level. This began a few decades ago with what was usually called New Age and was a loose combination of interests in human spiritual dimensions. The term New Age has now been abandoned and we are left with spirituality. We have thus, in our Scandinavian languages, got a new meaning and use for this word. It aims at capturing the interest in personality developing psychological mechanisms beyond what is traditionally called religion. Religion is regarded as something more or less rigid and static, something antiquated and unnecessary. On the other hand, the individual need for spiritual development is seen as something positive, and answers to this are sought in movements originating in China and India. I am thinking of, for example, Feng Shui and various forms of meditation with roots in Hinduism or Buddhism. A good portion of imaginative thoughts and notions tend to be associated with this interest. Studies focussing on esotericism and occultism seek to capture some of all this.

So, research on religion today does not only comprise studying what we traditionally understand as religions, but must also consider all spirituality besides the religions. It is therefore interesting to note that what I, in my mysticism research in the 1970s, could formulate as general mysticism, something found in ordinary people, is very close to what is today called spirituality. Ralph W. Hood draws more or less the same conclusion in his article 'The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism' from 2006, which I referred to above. In other words, there is a field of experience in people that is inclined towards mysticism and intensive experiences, and which is brought to the fore in many tangible ways in our culture today. People 'see the light' but not in the same manner as before. The issue for research is to explore this with regard to biological as well as cultural models. The interaction of nature and culture on a personal level is also an important topic to be studied.

## The understanding of symbols

The third point in my summary of research tasks from more than 25 years ago pertains to symbols. About 15 years later, in a commissioned article on the role theory for American readers (Holm 1997a) and in my text book *Människans symboliska verklighetsbygge* (People's Symbolic Construction of Reality, Holm 1997b), I could take the human symbolic capacity as my starting point and describe expressions and forms of religion as symbols located both in the inner existential space of people as well as in their outer existential space, in culture in general. I could then formulate a theoretical approach called integrated role theory, which is a further development of Hjalmar Sundén's role theory. I called his way of analysing experiences a perceptual theory, and combined it with certain deep psychological insights, which mean that we must also consider processes in the human psyche where memories and experiences are treated on an individual level. A combination of socially provided symbolic forms as well as of those that individuals develop within themselves, create the prerequisites for religious and spiritual experiences (see also Illman 2004).

By symbols I mean not only the concrete forms of expression in sounds and images, but, above all, the great thought-constructions such as god/devil, heaven/hell, angels/demons, and other phenomena in the world of religion. I also include the ritual forms in relation to rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage and burial, and others connected to celebrations, devotions and services. These great symbols are primarily conveyed in churches and societies, by established religions and sects; in other words by the socially provided structures. What I find important, however, is that as persons grow up, and also later in life, they learn to share these structures, but they also add their own experiences, which they gather in their memory and in their whole mental apparatus. At each repeated experiential event, the participants attach their own cognitive and emotional memories from their inner existential space to the thought-constructions and rituals, which, in many cases, make these alive and meaningful for the individuals. In other cases, however, they might be encumbering and negative. This entire process is, of course, dependent on the way in which the individual has learnt the thought-constructions and the rituals connected to them. If the learning process is positive, the symbolic language of religion gains an ability to emphasize and interpret the inner nature of life in a rewarding and signifying way. If, on the other hand, something goes wrong, the religious symbols gain a negative meaning and are experienced as an obstacle for spiritual development. The same is naturally true

of symbols expressed in general forms of culture, in literature, art and music, which modern humans have by no means lost the ability to appreciate.

## Concluding remarks

We can see that research, in which I, too, to a certain extent have participated, has developed our use of concepts, so that the term mysticism today covers large experiential areas. These can be intensive experiences of religious masters in various religions, or also qualities of the experiences of ordinary people today. Research on religion has also pointed to the fact that there is a kind of spirituality apart from that which the traditional religions have provided. This rather imprecise spirituality is something that comes close to general mysticism. The concepts of mysticism and spirituality have thus gained a much more extensive use during the last few years, and they now capture spiritual experience on a popular level. Spirituality provides forms of expression, for example, for the anxiety about the destruction of our planet, for needs and opportunities created by globalisation, for issues of peace and intercultural understanding, for experiences of art and music, and so on. What all this will entail for the fields of education and philosophy of life remains to be seen. But interesting perspectives on the teaching of religion do open up on the basis of research on modern spirituality.

On the theoretical level, a re-emergence of the biological and cognitive theories has taken place, which sometimes has led to very narrow interpretations. Nevertheless, a sobering up seems to have happened among representatives of cognitivism, so that socio-psychological and cultural perspectives are also again taken into consideration. In my view, various theoretical perspectives should always be balanced, in order for us to gain as complete an understanding as possible of humans as religious and spiritual beings.

## References

### Andresen, Jensine

2001 Introduction: towards a Cognitive Science of Religion. In: Jensine Andresen, *Religion in Mind. Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience*; pp. 7–16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Barnard, G. William

1997 *Exploring Unseen Worlds. William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*. New York: State University of New York Press.

**Geels, Antoon**

2002 *Berusad av gud. Natur och Kultur.*

**Holm, Nils G.**

- 1974 *Glossolalins kulturmönster och ljudstruktur undersökta på ett material insamlat i Svenskfinland.* Lund. (Uttryck, kommunikation, religion, 2:2)
- 1975 Ritualistic Pattern and Sound Structure of Glossolalia in Material Collected in the Swedish-speaking Parts of Finland. *Temenos* 11: 43–60.
- 1976 *Tungotal och andedop. En religionspsykologisk undersökning av glossolali hos finlandssvenska pingstväänner.* Diss. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. (Psychologia Religionum, 5)
- 1978 *Pingströrelsen. En religionsvetenskaplig studies av pingströrelsen i Svenskfinland.* Åbo: Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation.
- 1979 *Mystik och intensiva upplevelser.* Åbo: Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation.
- 1982a Ecstasy Research in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – An Introduction. In: Nils G. Holm (ed.), *Religious Ecstasy.* Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International. (Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 11)
- 1982b Mysticism and Intense Experiences. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (3): 268–76.
- 1997a An Integrated Role Theory for the Psychology of Religion: Concepts and Perspectives. In: Bernard Spilka & Daniel N. McIntosh (eds), *The Psychology of Religion. Theoretical Approaches.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- 1997b *Människans symboliska verklighetsbygge: en psykofenomenologisk studie.* Åbo: Åbo Akademi.

**Hood, Ralph W., Jr**

- 2006 The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism. In: Patrick McNamara (ed.), *Where God and Science Meet. How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion.* Vol. 3: *The Psychology of Religious Experience;* pp. 125–35. London: Praeger. (The Psychology of Religious Experience, 3)

**Illman, Ruth**

- 2004 *Gränser och gränsöverskidanden. Skildrade erfarenheter av kulturella möten i internationellt projektarbete.* Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press.

**Jones, Richard, H.**

- 1993 *Mysticism Examined. Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism.* New York: State University of New York Press.

**Pyysiäinen, Ilkka**

- 2006 Amazing Grace: Religion and the Evolution of the Human Mind. In: Patrick McNamara (ed.), *Where God and Science Meet. How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion.* Vol. 1: *Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain.* London: Praeger.

**Stenqvist, Catharina**

- 1984 *Simone Weil om livets tragik – och dess skönhet.* Stockholm: Proprius förlag.

- 1994 *Förundran och förändring. Mystikens teori och livssyn*. Förlagshuset ÅSAK.
- Taylor, Eugene**
- 1983 *William James on Exceptional Mental States*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. (The 1896 Lowell lectures)
- Tirri, Kirsi**
- 2004 Spirituaaliteetti uskontokasvatuksessa. In: Lassi Larjo (ed.), *Teologian uudet virtaukset*; pp. 132–42. Helsinki: Suomalainen teologinen kirjallisuusseura.
- Ubani, Martin**
- 2007 *Young, Gifted and Spiritual – the Case of Finnish Sixth-grade Pupils*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. (Research Report, 278)
- Whitehouse, Harvey & Robert N. McCauley**
- 2005 *Mind and Religion. Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

RALPH W. HOOD JR.

## Them That Believe

### A postmodern exploration of the contemporary Christian serpent-handlers of Appalachia

Evaluations of the contemporary psychology of religion range from D. Wulff's (2003) claim that it is 'a field in crisis' to R. A. Emmons and R. F. Paloutzian's (2003) enthusiasm for a 'new *multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm*' (p. 395, emphasis in original) to replace the older measurement paradigm identified by R. L. Gorsuch (1984). In my view, these different evaluations are not really at odds if one simply accepts the postmodern suspicion of any claim to a grand or totalizing narrative. Multiple perspectives need not be problematic. Neither is one methodology privileged. I have provided criticisms of the assumption that psychology of religion must commit itself to essentially positivist assumptions and the search for singular and objective truths ('empirical facts') (Belzen & Hood 2006). Others have likewise persuasively argued for methodological pluralism (Roth 1987) which necessarily raises issues that S. Koch and D. E. Leary (1985: 935–50) suggested reveal an emerging consensus in general psychology: included are the limited applicability of experimental methods and an increasing awareness of the philosophical presuppositions contained within research methods. In this article I wish to champion the idea of a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm and to demonstrate what I think is a good exemplar of what this paradigm might look like. In so doing, I assume not only the notions of multiple levels of analysis, but also *interdisciplinarity* in the sense that psychologists might utilize a variety of methods often linked with other disciplines that are required for a fuller psychological treatment of a phenomenon. In this sense I acknowledge postmodernist abandonment of a single, grand, authoritative narrative. The diversity of the methods I use illuminate different aspects of this tradition that need not be summarized in a single narrative that would only serve to mask the complexity of a tradition, whose obituary has often been anticipated but is, I think, unlikely to ever be written.



## Serpent-handling and the confluence of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism

Postmodern researchers accept that all research is guided implicitly or otherwise by assumptions and intuitions about the object being studied. My position is that serpent-handling emerged in recent history as a confluence of two related religious traditions: fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.

### *Fundamentalism*

For a long time I had the sense that psychologists and other social scientists who studied fundamentalism had it wrong. The research seemed more like methodologically-biased studies confirming stereotypes held by those who claimed to be objectively studying fundamentalism (Hood 1983). In a recent book (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005), I not only documented these stereotypes, but also developed an explicit model of religious fundamentalism that had guided much of my research on serpent-handlers. The key concept in my model is *intratextuality*, which connotes the fact that fundamentalists interpret all reality in light of their absolutely authoritative text. The tautology of the fundamentalist world view is not a vicious one, for the text simply demands that the world can be meaningfully comprehended by the sacred text alone and need not be pieced together by knowledge scattered across many texts, none of which is absolutely authoritative (an alternative view we term *intertextuality*). This is not the place to describe my model fully (see Hood *et al.* 2005: Ch. 1), but it will be helpful to correct one common error: fundamentalists are not categorical literalists. The irony in claiming fundamentalists to be literalists is that their sacred text, the King James Bible in the case of Christian fundamentalists, indicates when the text is to be literal and when it is not. For instance, the parables of Jesus have never been taken literally: fundamentalists do not pluck out their eyes, nor do they try to push camels through the eye of a needle. However, they do handle serpents. Why? My answer is to appeal to the principle of intratextuality that characterizes not only fundamentalism but is integral to Pentecostalism as well.

### *Pentecostalism*

Serpent-handlers are not simply fundamentalists (and few would apply this term to themselves. Most serpent-handlers simply refer to themselves as holiness people. However, some would accept the term Pentecostal. I have documented the history of Pentecostals in their search for biblical evidence of legitimate emotional expressions and how tongues-speaking became widely

accepted by Pentecostals as the biblically sanctioned evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Williamson & Hood 2004). However, where you have biblical sanction for tongues-speaking, you also have biblical sanction for handling serpents (Hood 1998, 2003).

If there is a foundational text for serpent-handlers, it is Mark 16:17–18. In the King James Bible (the only acceptable Bible to handlers), it reads:

17. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Contemporary handlers take the plain meaning of this text to heart. While one sign is conditional (*‘if’*), the other four are perceived as mandates believers must follow.<sup>1</sup> This is an *intratextual* view, and it informed the early Pentecostal movement and led to diverse discussions as what do to with this aspect of the Gospel of Mark. Intratextuality does not require agreement since even if one accepts a sacred text as infallible, the text is read and understood by fallible minds. So, as researcher, I needed to explore another level of why only some Pentecostals handle. This task was historical.

## Historical considerations

There were multiple levels to my historical work. One was tracing the oral history of this tradition by a preacher steeped in the tradition and whose family can be traced back hundreds of years within the Appalachian region. I also documented the actual history of reactions to serpent-handling by Pentecostal denominations as well as documenting reasons for the longer gospel of Mark within the history of Christianity.

### *Early Pentecostal attitudes toward serpent-handling*

Early on I noted that few historians concerned with the rise of Pentecostalism paid much attention to the role of serpent-handling in the early portion of the movement, which one well known authority ends at 1925 (Wacker 2003). Jimmy Morrow’s own oral history of handling alerted me to the central role

1 My focus in this paper is only upon serpent-handling. In other studies I have explored poison drinking (Hood & Williamson 2008b).

serpent-handling played in the Appalachian Mountains prior to the rise of what was to become a major Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God (Hood 2005). This contrasts with authoritative histories of Pentecostal denominations that once endorsed the practice of serpent-handling but have tried to minimize its role in their early history. For instance, C. W. Conn (1955, 1977, 1996), whose *Like a Mighty Army* has gone through several editions, began his first edition (Conn 1955) by relegating serpent-handling to but a single footnote. In the third and 'definitive' edition of his history of the Church of God, Conn (1996) reluctantly devotes a bit more to the role of serpent-handling in the Church of God, but still minimizes its influence and effect. However, I carefully documented both the Church of God's and the Church of God of Prophecy's (the splinter sister church) early endorsement of serpent-handling using archival documents integral to their traditions (Hood *et al.* 2005: Ch. 5; Williamson & Hood 2004). Both these churches were headed by Tomlinson, and both early on illustrated what Conn in an interview with Deborah McCauley characterized as 'Appalachia for export' (McCauley 1995: 278).

In addition to using archival records, I personally documented the demolition of the old structure that once housed the Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following at Dolly Pond, a group once widely known for its serpent-handling in the 1940s, by the more recent Church of God of Prophecy owners, who did not want the church property recognized for its infamy. It was obvious to me that the Church of God of Prophecy pastor was trying to minimize its support and endorsement of serpent-handling in its formative years. Why this reversal? Before I could answer this question, I needed to explore another historical issue: the challenge to the Gospel of Mark.

### *Historical and hermeneutical challenges to the Gospel of Mark*

It is widely accepted by critical scholars that there are several 'added' or latter endings to the Gospel of Mark. Here I need not explore the various endings, but simply note that the best authorities suggest that the second, unknown author of the latter Mark was inspired to write a coherent narrative in defence of the Christian faith (Thomas & Alexander 2003; Kelhoffer 2000; Wall 2003). He wove the Gospel of Mark as a single narrative. While there is good evidence as to why this unknown author specified the handling of serpents, there is no historical evidence that early Christians ever handled serpents prior to the addition of Mark 16:17–18 (likely written in the early second century some seventy years after the early Mark), nor that they handled in subsequent years until near the end of the nineteenth century (Hood 2005; Kelhoffer 2000). So

why was this inspired author of the latter Mark convinced that Jesus had told his followers to take up serpents?

J. A. Kelhoffer (2000) has documented the pressure of the early Christians to compete for a 'market share' (as the rational choice sociologists would have it) among competing religious sects. Not simply Gnostics, but Roman and Greek sects as well. Within the Greco-Roman culture there was wide artistic representation of humans interacting with serpents, and there were non-Christian sects that handled serpents. Thus, the author of the latter Gospel of Mark appealed to Christians with the assurance that, like others, Christians could do 'signs and wonders', one of which is to handle serpents. So they did, but why only 1800 years later?<sup>2</sup> Here is where fieldwork was required.

## **The renegade churches of God**

Serpent-handling churches have a variety of fascinating names; most are scattered throughout Appalachia in isolated regions. However, most have some version of 'Church of God' in their name (Hood 2003). Examples are the 'Church of God in Jesus' Name' at Del-Rio, Tennessee, or 'Highway Holiness Church of God' in Fort Wayne, Indiana. They are small, and like most religious sects, as J. B. Holt (1940) long ago noted and as McCauley (1995) recently reminded us, are under studied. This is even more the case with sects who have minimal, if any, written records—as is common with Appalachian mountain religion (McCauley 1995; Hood 2005). The mainstream denominational Church of God refuses to recognize these churches, paralleling the Mormon's refusal to recognize their renegade sisters that still endorse and practice polygamy (Williamson & Hood 2004).

I have travelled thousand of miles interviewing handlers; collecting their oral histories and tracing the origin of handling in modern times (see Hood 2005). Further illumination of 'why handle?' comes from the historical studies noted above but also from movement into the twentieth century: Early Pentecostals sought to practice signs and wonders, including the astounding ability to handle serpents, or deadly vipers, without being bitten, or if bitten, without being maimed or killed—or so it seems.

2 I accept the historical claim that early Christians prior to Mark 16:17–18 did not handle serpents. However, I have good reason to explore the historical likelihood that they did handle serpents after Mark 16:17–18. The task is for me to provide the historical evidence, and I am a psychologist 'on the hunt'.

## Sundén's role theory

I have argued elsewhere that it is unlikely that serpent-handling originated with one person (Hood 2005; Hood & Williamson 2008b). All that is required for the practice to emerge is an environment in which serpents are plentiful and a community of believers who accept and believe the plain meaning of Mark 16:18. G. Wacker (2003) has documented what I have also confirmed: the practice of handling emerged most strongly in geographical areas where non-religious handling of serpents was a common folk practice.

However, it is also true that one man, George Went Hensley, is as close to the 'St Paul' of serpent handling as one can find. His influence was immense, modelling the practice of handling serpents as he preached across the Appalachian Mountains until his death by a serpent bite in a religious service in Florida in 1955. He was the 35th person to die from a serpent bite, and, to date, 53 other believers have since followed. However, these are only documented deaths, and, likely, there have been others (Hood & Williamson 2008b: 239–44).

Hjalmar Sundén's role theory has been proven useful in understanding Pentecostalism (Holm 1995). Here I use it to illuminate how George Went Hensley modelled the practice of handling from the King James Bible. As George was later to tell his story to a reporter from the *Chattanooga News Free Press*, he was atop White Oak Mountain, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, when he was confronted by a rattlesnake. He was on the mountain seeking solace and meditating on the Gospel of Mark (Collins 1947). Here the text and a fortuitous presence of a serpent met in the mind of George. Without much forethought, Hensley impulsively grabbed the rattlesnake and to his amazement was unharmed. In terms of Sundén's role theory, Hensley felt the power of the Holy Spirit in a behavioural response to Jesus' imperative in Mark 16:18. Hensley descended the mountain to launch by example a religious practice that would hold tremendous meaning for those who believed the plain meaning of Mark 16:18.

As Hensley's serpent-handling gained recognition, leaders in the Church of God applauded the practice. In addition, newspapers began to chronicle the rapidly spreading doctrine of serpent-handling, largely by following the career of Hensley. However, this is all the chronology of Hensley's growing success with handling and his influence upon the early support of the Church of God that I need to present here. For what is now crucial is the last sentence of A. J. Tomlinson's (1914) description that I deliberately omitted in the above quote: 'Some were bitten, but with no damage to them' (p. 3).

## When the serpent maims and kills

Another level of explanation enters the picture when I began to explore the nature of serpent striking behaviour. There is virtually no experimental work exploring venomous serpent striking behaviour in the context of humans freely handling serpents. The irony is that, from both the secular and religious sides, the assumption is that there must be an explanation for why handlers are so seldom bitten. Likewise, if they are bitten, often they are not hurt. Why?

### *Field observations*

The early explanation from within the Church of God was that God protected the handler by placing a hedge around him or her so that no harm could come.<sup>3</sup> Scoffers and outsiders, then and now, were more likely to claim fraud with stories that handlers ‘tame’ their serpents, or that they ‘freeze’ them before the service, etc. On several occasions, I have taken herpetologists to services, and all have been amazed that copperheads, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, cobras, and a variety of other vipers can be handled (and even trod upon) with impunity.<sup>4</sup>

Hood (2003) proposed an elegantly simple explanation based upon behavioural observations of frequency of handling, of bites, and of deaths. Based upon hundreds of hours of documented handling it is obvious that the single best predictor is that on any given handling a serpent will *not* strike. However, the probability of the serpent biting (B) is a function of three things: (1) the species of serpent (S); (2) unknown factors (X) that herpetologists have yet to identify; and (3) the frequency of handling (H).<sup>5</sup> Here is the best description:

$$p(B) = S + X + f(H)$$

From this equation we can make and test a simple prediction: among individuals who handle frequently, the probability of bites increases. Among groups that have many handlers, the probability of bites increases. Thus, we

3 From Ecclesiastes 10:8, the King James Bible says, ‘He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

4 From Luke 10:19, the King James Bible says, ‘Behold I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemies: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.’

5 Striking behaviour is poorly understood. It remains the case that, even among experienced handlers, serpent strikes are unpredictable.

can expect that as the practice became routinised within the early Pentecostal movement, more and more individuals began to get bitten simply because more individuals handled and believing individuals who began to handle more frequently increased the probability that they would be bitten. That is precisely what happened (Williamson & Hood 2004). The question now is: Why do some not get hurt?

### *The physiology of bites*

Before considering the problem this created, I need but briefly explore another level of analysis, human physiological response to serpent bites which I have documented in detail elsewhere (Hood & Williamson 2008a). Basically I need mention three factors. First, part of the harm done by a serpent bite is dependent on the amount of venom injected by the serpent. Serpents can give 'dry bites', expelling no venom. Here is a simple secular response to Tomlinson's (1914) comment above, 'but with no damage to them' (p. 3). Second, the nature of venom varies with different species, some producing dangerous neurotoxins (rattlesnakes), and some producing toxins that destroy the flesh (copperheads). Third, it is the decision of the victim whether to seek medical care for the bite. Many argue that it is up to God, and seek no care—I have documented on film individuals dying untreated from serpent bites. If medical care is sought, death may still not be prevented, but often critical medical care can prevent maiming from serpent bites.

Given my simple formula above, and this quick caveat into physiological damage that can occur, the reader can anticipate the next move. It also is another level of analysis, this time into church/sect theory, most prominent in the sociology of religion.

## **Church/sect theory and the growth of Pentecostalism**

I need not document the rapid growth of Pentecostalism, first in America and then worldwide, here. However, I do want to briefly explore the abandonment of serpent-handling by what were to become two mainstream Pentecostal denominations, The Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. Basic to my analysis is that, within church/sect theory, sectarian groups are those that have high tension with their host culture. They also are less likely to manage large numbers of adherents if the particular form of tension with the host culture is radical. What is more radical than a religious ritual that maims and kills? Thus, it is easy to predict that, as publicity surrounding bites that

maimed and killed believers increased, the churches would abandon the practice. As noted above, that is what the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy did. Even more, they are in denial regarding the powerful role handling played in their early history (Williamson & Hood 2004).

However, church/sect theory also allows that sectarian groups who have great tension with their host cultures can produce committed members who, by the very fact they make sacrifices to be in sects, avoid what has been called the 'free rider' issue. The contemporary renegade churches of God exemplify this admirably. They are small, primarily scattered throughout Appalachia, and have developed a theology to understand why it is that they handle successfully most of the time, and why it is, at other times, that they are bitten, maimed, and killed.

Remember that, given my simple formula, individuals who handle frequently will have increased probabilities of bites. This also means some will be dry bites, some serious and likely to maim, others likely to kill. Handlers know this. Likewise churches realize that, as more members handle, bites are more likely. It is not unreasonable that bites occur more frequently during homecomings, when several churches join together to celebrate in worship over several days: more people, more handling, more bites.

Handlers have developed two basic arguments for handling. One is to handle by faith. This means that, simply because handlers believe the plain meaning of Mark 16:18, they will take up the serpent. If they are bitten, maimed, or even killed, it is simply God's will. They are assured of their salvation if they have been obedient to God, and only faith itself propels an obedience that includes handling serpents.

Others handle by anointing, not in opposition to faith, but by a bodily sensation of the power of the Holy Ghost that protects them during handling. Many handlers will not handle unless they feel this anointing. If one is bitten when 'anointed' the explanation is more likely to be that the anointing was misjudged or was for doing some sign other than handling.

The appeal to church/sect theory allowed me two things: (1) to predict the abandonment by groups that moved toward denominationalism ('churches'); and (2) to predict firm commitment by the renegade churches that maintain to this day the practice of handling serpents despite laws that have been passed in most states where handling occurs. However, the fact that in most states handling is illegal simply drives the practice underground (Kimbrough & Hood 1995).



## Phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to experienced meaning

Detailed phenomenological descriptions of what it is like to handle a serpent, to be anointed, and to be near death from a serpent bite would be crucial for outsiders to have some minimal empathic understanding of this tradition. In addition, I could use a hermeneutical method (described below) to derive the thematic structure of meaning of these experiences. I will first only briefly describe the particular phenomenological/hermeneutical method I employed and then briefly address its application to each of the three areas noted above.

### *Hermeneutical interpretation of phenomenological interviews*

Postmodern perspectives seek the meaning of experience from the experimenter's perspective and not from the researcher's prior theoretical commitment. Meaning is an inherently human phenomenon and the question of final interpretation is ever open-ended and negotiable (Belzen & Hood 2006; Pollio, Henley & Thompson 1997). There is an irony in that this method echoes the challenge of those within the fundamentalist tradition to interpretations of the Bible: 'Do you have Bible for that?' Before any interpretation is accepted, it must meet the approval of all group members. It is always possible that dissenting opinions or reservations reveal some glimpse of the participant's experience yet unclear to the group. This method parallels serpent-handling churches which cluster together based upon shared understandings of scripture. Those who cannot agree simply move on to form their own church with their shared understanding of scripture.

### *Handling serpents*

First, with respect to serpent-handling, interviews with 17 handlers covering 105 handling events revealed a powerful and meaningful thematic structure (Williamson, Pollio & Hood 2000). Four themes emerged: (1) 'Wanting to do', (2) 'Death', (3) 'Connection with God', and (4) 'Fear'/'Victory'. While I cannot do justice to the richness of the meanings here, I can briefly note each.

'Wanting to do' is the desire and sense that Mark 16:18 is not only a belief, but also a call to obedience. Handlers reflexively are aware of both text and desire as they are inclined by faith and, for some, by anointing, to move to either take a serpent from another or to go to the box and retrieve one for themselves.

Accompanying this sense of desire is the recognition that, in a common phrase, 'there is death in that box'. The notion that one needs an explanation of how handlers 'master' or 'manipulate' serpents into harmful handling not only is unnecessary, given my above discussion of the probability of bites, but blatantly false as each handler is keenly aware that in the very act of handling he or she could at any moment die (Hood 1998; Hood & Williamson 2006).

The recognition (not fear) of possible death is balanced by the sense of connecting with God. The faithful, as well as the anointed, handle by belief that God demands this of them. Thus, regardless of the outcome, handlers note, 'The Word is still the Word.'

Finally, each act of handling that is done with impunity arouses both a sense of fear and of victory. Rudolf Otto's sense of the response to the Holy is echoed in the actual reality of handlers who take up serpents in trepidation and often are able to put them down with not simply a fascination, but a sense of victory. Literally in each case when a serpent is successfully handled there is victory over death (Hood & Williamson 2008a, 2008b).

### *The anointing*

I have also applied my hermeneutical method to the experience of the anointing (Williamson, Pollio & Hood 2000). From the 17 interviewees described above I selected 11 who had described handling by the anointing. I sought the thematic structure of the meaning of the experience, which can be briefly described as follows:

The experience of anointing begins primarily with feeling the moving of God upon the person. This is felt in terms of various body sensations, but always includes a sense that God is taking control of the person. The sense of control often includes the hearing of God's directive voice. With this experience, there is a profound sense of empowerment that infuses a feeling of protection from all harm, combined with a feeling of being sufficiently empowered to do the will of God at the present moment, which is to handle the serpent. This experience is such that the person feels drawn away in varying degrees and no longer feels fully present to the immediate surroundings, date, or time; yet the person feels a flow that radiates through contact with others as they come into awareness. Indescribably good feelings—variously approximated as a high, joy, peace, love, and victory—are felt from the onset of the anointing and continue to linger after the experience lifts.

This experience is close to what some have argued is a trance state, common both to glossolalia and serpent-handling. However, handlers themselves do not use such language, and my approach avoids asking whether or not the anointing is a trance state in favour of the recognition that how one narrates this experience is integral to its understanding (Smith 2003). Thus, the anointing is narrated here, as for all handlers, in a distinctive religious context from which it derives its meaning.

*Near-death experiences from serpent bites*

Finally, with respect to handling in general and by anointing in particular, I am never far from themes associated with death. In my final interview study I identified 13 individuals who had suffered severe serpent bites and had anticipated their impending death (Hood & Williamson 2006). My interest was in part how near-death experiences, encountered from a religious ritual known to cause death, would be structured with meaning. Again, I cannot present the richness of the data here, but only summarize the thematic structure of meaning that emerged from the interpretation of my interviews.

I identified four themes that form the thematic structure of near-death experience as a result of being bitten during this ritual. As a description:

This structure involves first and foremost a feeling of being ‘hit’ by the serpent in such a way that the strike is experienced as extremely serious, likely to maim or kill. This is followed by an experience of overcoming fear with ‘victory’—felt first as a sense of losing life in the face of doubt, and later as a confidence that, whatever the outcome, it is God’s will. In all cases, there is severe physical suffering in terms of pain, swelling, blurred or lost vision, breathing difficulties, and loss of consciousness in varying degrees. Next, anticipating death, the stricken believer backtracks over his life, contemplating both the reason for and the finality of his bite. Fear of the anticipation of death may be relieved by visions of luminous places in which the believer is contented to remain. Ultimate victory is experienced in the eventual acceptance of both the serpent bite and its outcome as God’s will for the obedient believer, whether it means full recovery, maiming, or death.

It is only with methods such as I have employed in these three studies that the meaningfulness of serpent-handling to its believers can be uncovered. Neither ‘bizarre’ nor pathologically driven, neither a function of an impoverished people nor of ignorance, handling, by anointing or not, is a powerful

experience whose meaning matches the intensity of the practice in the face of real risk of maiming and death.

### *The music of serpent-handling churches*

In the Pentecostal tradition in general, and in the serpent-handling tradition in particular, music plays an integral role. Music helps facilitate religious experience. Also within the serpent-handling tradition the lyrics of songs often parallel the messages that preachers deliver as their sermons. However, given the number and range of songs sung, the hermeneutical method used in the qualitative studies above seemed strained. Again, accepting methodological pluralism and a postmodern perspective I used a variety of qualitative methods to explore the role of music in serpent-handling services (Hood & Williamson 2008b: 185–207). Here I focus upon three simple examples of part of my qualitative study of the music of serpent-handlers.

Almost all of the videotapes of church services housed in the Hood–Williamson Research Archives for the Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects, Lupton Library, at The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga contain music, often instrumental solos as well as individual and collective singing. I selected 88 different services from a collection of videotapes that spanned seven years.

The videos included meetings of individual congregations who had gathered for local worship and multiple congregations who had gathered for homecomings. Homecomings are events at which several congregations come together to support a single church, usually over three days, beginning with a Friday night service and ending with a shared meal after a late Sunday morning service. My attendance at these services involved multiple visits to six different congregations in four southern states: three churches in north Georgia; one in north Alabama; one in eastern Kentucky; and one in West Virginia. Among homecoming services used in this analysis, crowds ranged anywhere from 30 to 120 believers. Multiple visits, diversity of locations, and different types of service contributed to a large database of songs with rich variety of form and content. Here I simply wish to report some descriptive data, present a mini-idiographic analysis and then summarize the meaning of music in the language of the handlers themselves.

A descriptive analysis of the recorded music data from these 88 services found a total of 1,114 songs (this number reflects the omission of instrumentals—that is, the performance of a musical selection without singing). The average number of songs per service was 12.66, and most services (about 68%) included a number that ranged from 8.34 to 16.98 songs ( $SD = 4.32$ ).

The largest number of songs in a single service was 24, whereas the least number was 4. There was no service that lacked music. Often the number of songs is simply a function of the length of the service.

To gain a sense of the temporal importance of music in a typical service, an individual church service was selected and analyzed as an idiographic exemplar. Here I will note some objective indices of the amount of time devoted to singing. The service was attended by 19 people (most of whom were children) and lasted 3 hours and 14 minutes from beginning to end. Congregants sung 16 songs. These songs were accompanied by as many as 3 guitarists (all males) at different times. The songs totalled 53 minutes and accounted for over 27 per cent of the time spent in service. Among the singers were 3 adult males who sang a total of 8 songs, and 5 females (2 of them children) who also sang 8 songs. The congregation often would join in with the person(s) when singing. The average time per song was 3 minutes and 20 seconds, whereas the range of time for songs was from 40 seconds to 5 minutes and 45 seconds. The duration of songs is typically longer at homecoming services than at individual church services such as this. For example, it is not uncommon for a song at homecomings to last 10 minutes; one of the most popular songs among serpent-handling churches is 'Little David, Play on Your Harp'. It was sung at one homecoming for 25 minutes. At well-attended homecomings (over a hundred people), more singers are present, and believers tend to sing a greater number of songs for longer periods of time in anticipation of a highly emotional collective worship.

When believers describe the meaning of music they often do so in perceptive ways. One woman noted, 'Music in church is a way of beginning a service, and getting your mind focused on God so we can praise and worship him as he wants us to'. Music provides a way for believers to connect with their God. And as stated by another believer, 'The song's text is the word of God' (Schwartz 1999: 41), which makes the theme of the song important in that connection. Given this, it seems that a categorization based on themes to songs is useful for understanding something about the role of music in that connection without being reductive, as some (Moore 1986; Young 1926) have been. Among the 10 categories that emerged from my analysis, nearly 70 per cent of the songs in my sample were represented in three groups: Comfort/Mercy/Deliverance, Heaven, and Witnessing/Evangelization. The way in which believers experience their lives and the nature of their particular situation at the moment seem relative to the music (Van Hoorebeke 1980). As believers experience the need for comfort, mercy, or deliverance, words of songs that relate to these needs afford connection with God in such a way that comfort,

mercy, or deliverance is experienced. If need for becoming more focused on heaven and its rewards is present, music with that type meaning allows a connection with God such that eternity becomes experienced as a present reality. Since serpent-handling churches do little in terms of organized evangelism outside the church, they oftentimes sing ballad-type songs that include words that resonate with their own past experiences of being woefully lost as sinners and delivered by God's love and grace; such heartfelt singing bears witness of God's presence in the service and invites conviction upon the lost who may be present. As one believer put it, 'The music fits your mood,' and by doing so, provides a doorway through which a spiritual connection with God can be experienced as a reality.

### **A final interpretative exploration: psychoanalysis and evolutionary psychology**

A commitment to methodological pluralism cannot refrain from exploring the immense influence of a variety of psychoanalytic and object relations theories that have been so culturally influential in bringing a particular version of social sciences across disciplines and to the general public. For some time the most influential book on serpent-handling was W. La Barre's (1962), *They Shall Take Up Serpents*. La Barre was an anthropologist, heavily influenced by classical Freudian (Oedipal) theory. It was La Barre who asked the obvious rhetorical question, the emphasis being his: 'When is the serpent *not* a phallus?' (La Barre 1962: 74).

I was intrigued by this question and explored applying Freudian theory to the serpent-handling tradition (Hood & Kimbrough 1995). Accepting a symbolic significance to the serpent, it was obvious from folk tales and other cultural sources that, in the cultural imagination, body symbolism is associated not only with the phallic nature of serpents, but also with the vaginal (menstruation attributed to a serpent bite) and, most crucial, with death and resurrection (circumcision indicative of immortality as the penis is modified to mimic the shedding of the skin of the serpent, depicting its mortality). This latter point—of death and resurrection—gave me a clue to the power of the central ritual of serpent-handling churches within a Christian context.

There is considerable evidence that if both primates and humans are not 'hard wired' to fear serpents, they can easily be conditioned to fear them (Joslin, Fletcher & Emlen 1964; Mineka *et al.* 1984; Mundkur 1983). This obviously has survival value within an evolutionary psychology perspective.

Thus, not only does the serpent *symbolize* immortality in the context of what can be argued is the central message of Christianity—death and resurrection—but the serpent also is an explicit sign of the probability of death as I have documented in my qualitative studies above. Thus, the power of the ritual of handling is understandable: the sign value and the symbolic value of the serpent meet in a ritual that not only symbolizes death and resurrection, but, each time it is performed successfully, death has in fact been overcome. Outsiders fail to appreciate the central awareness of the power of the serpent to maim and kill that is on the mind of all who handle. With respect to the serpent, I think that the merger of sign and symbol also accounts for the close parallel that can be drawn between Otto's notion of fear and fascination as a response to the numinous and the fear and attraction that serpents hold both for those who do and for those who do not handle them. However, for those who do handle, this high-risk ritual is, as I have argued above, integral to a tradition that seeks not endangerment and death, but eternal life, as promised to 'them that believe' and empowerment to follow the signs, including the imperative to take up serpents. No better statement summarizes the richness of this tradition than a comment made by the matriarch of a powerful church in Jolo, West Virginia: 'The difference between your faith and mine, she said, is that when I go to church I do not know if I will come out alive.' But then, death in obedience to God is for them that believe assurance of eternal life.

### **Overview and summary of the new paradigm as a postmodern methodology**

The call for a new paradigm is loud and clear and consistent with postmodern methods. They are no gold standard to be applied to all investigations; no master narrative to be defended. Interdisciplinary, as I have tried to demonstrate, can mean not only cooperation among disciplines, but also the use of a variety of often discipline-favoured methods by a single investigator or a team of investigators whose location within a particular 'discipline' is both historically contingent and likely dated in terms of its usefulness. Likewise, the use of multilevel considerations means that the diversity of methods and approaches at various levels of abstraction are necessary to begin any study of religious phenomena in their immense complexity. My study of serpent handlers involved me in more research methods than are presented in this paper. Here I have focused upon archival research; hermeneutical explorations of textual criticism of the Bible; ethnography linked to videotapes that helped

document part of my database and are archived for other scholars to use;<sup>6</sup> phenomenological interviews analyzed in terms of a hermeneutical method that reveals the meaningfulness of handling serpents, being anointed, and the experience of near death from serpent bites. Committed as I am to methods that explore the meaning of serpent-handling from personal and cultural perspectives, I did not ignore the value of psychoanalytic and evolutionary psychological theories to link the symbolic and sign value of serpents that further does justice to the power of the serpent to elicit genuine religious experiences and to serve as an apologetic for a tradition that has been maligned and misunderstood by lay persons and scholars alike (Birckhead 1993; Hood & Williamson 2008b). Elsewhere I have also discussed the study of court rulings that upheld (and continue to uphold) bans on handling; and the extension of phenomenological and hermeneutical techniques to the analysis of extemporaneous sermons. Likewise, refusing to apply one qualitative technique blindly, I have explored the role of music in serpent-handling churches using both simply descriptive data, an idiographic study of one service, and the exploration of believers' own description of the role and meaning of music in their tradition. In addition I have done quasi-experimental studies to reveal prejudicial views involved even in the reasoned rejection of serpent-handling and to demonstrate that attitudes can be changed such that even those who do not believe in serpent-handling can come to respect the sincerity of those who do and their right to practice what they believe. Thus, the call for a new paradigm is welcomed by me as are the conceptual achievements of postmodernism. Postmodernism has no single definition, nor need it have. Likewise the call for a new paradigm may not be exactly a 'paradigm' in the philosophical sense. However, both postmodernism and the call for a new paradigm is taken by me to mean being open to levels of interpretation and to a variety of methodologies, some of which I have illustrated in this paper. In the spirit of postmodernism I have not sought a grand narrative, but have let participants speak for themselves. Where I have imposed theories upon my data, I have been explicit and believe they add some clarification without distorting the beliefs of my participants or denigrating their tradition. I have presented only a few of the methods employed in our ongoing study of this

6 The Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Serpent Handling Holiness Sects, Lupton Library, at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA contains almost 200 videos, converted to DVD. Included are all the interviews referred to in this paper.



tradition. Additional methods are explored more fully in Hood & Williamson 2008a and 2008b.

## References

### **Belzen, J. A. & R. W. Hood Jr.**

2006 Methodological issues in the psychology of religion: Toward another paradigm? *The Journal of Psychology* 140: 1–28.

### **Birckhead, J.**

1993 “Bizarre snake handlers”: Popular media and a Southern stereotype. In: K. G. Heider (ed.), *Images of the South: Constructing a regional culture on film and video*; pp. 163–89. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

### **Collins, J. B.**

1947 *Tennessee Snake Handles*. Chattanooga, TN: Chattanooga News-Free Press.

### **Conn, C. W.**

1955 *Like a Might Army*. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

1977 *Like a Might Army*. Rev. edn. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

1996 *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God*. Definitive edition. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

### **Emmons, R. A. & R. F. Paloutzian**

2003 The psychology of religion. *Annual Review of Psychology* 54: 377–402.

### **Gorsuch, R. L.**

1984 Measurement. The boon and bane of investigating the psychology of religion. *American Psychologist* 39: 201–21.

### **Holm, N. G.**

1995 Religious symbols and role taking. In: N. G. Holm & J. A. Belzen (eds), *Sundén's Role Theory—An Impetus to Contemporary Psychology of Religion*; pp. 129–51. Åbo: Åbo Akademi.

### **Holt, J. B.**

1940 Holiness religion: Cultural shock and social reorganization. *American Sociological Review* 4: 740–7.

### **Hood, Ralph W., Jr.**

1983 Social psychology and religious fundamentalism. In: A. W. Childs & G. B. Melton (eds), *Rural Psychology*; pp. 169–98. New York: Plenum publishers.

1998 When the Spirit maims and kills: Social psychological considerations of the history of serpent handling sects and the narrative of handlers. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 8: 71–96.

2003 American primitive: In the shadow of the serpent. *The Common Review* 2: 28–37.

2005 (ed.) *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition*. Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press.

- Hood, R. W., Jr., P. C. Hill & W. P. Williamson**  
2005 *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*. New York: Guilford.
- Hood, R. W., Jr. & D. L. Kimbrough**  
1995 Serpent handling Holiness sects: Theoretical considerations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34: 311–22.
- Hood, R. W., Jr. & W. P. Williamson**  
2006 Near death experiences from serpent bites in religious settings: A Jamesian perspective. *Archives de Psychologie* 7: 139–59.  
2008a Contemporary Christian serpent handlers and the new paradigm for the psychology of religion. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 19: 59–89.  
2008b *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-handling Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Joslin, G., H. Fletcher & J. Emlen**  
1964 A comparison of the responses to snakes of lab- and wild-reared Rhesus monkeys. *Animal Behavior* 12: 348–52.
- Kelhoffer, J. A.**  
2000 *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Kimbrough, D. & R. W. Hood Jr.**  
1995 Carson Springs and the persistence of serpent handling despite the law. *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 1: 45–65.
- Koch, S. & D. E. Leary** (eds)  
1985 *A Century of Psychology as Science*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- La Barre, W.**  
1962 *They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-handling Cult*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- McCaughey, D. V.**  
1995 *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Mineka, S., M. Davidson, M. Cook & R. Deir**  
1984 Observational conditioning of snake fear in Rhesus monkeys. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 93: 355–72.
- Moore, J. K.**  
1986 Socio-economic double entendre in the songs of the snake handlers. *Hymn* 37: 30–6.
- Mundkur, B.**  
1983 *The Cult of the Serpent*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Pollio, H. R., T. B. Henley & C. J. Thompson**  
1997 *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Roth, P. A.**

1987 *Meaning and Method in the Social Sciences: A Case for Methodological Pluralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

**Schwartz, S. W.**

1999 *Faith, Serpents, and Fire: Images of Kentucky Holiness Believers*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.

**Smith, C.**

2003 *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Thomas, J. C. & K. E. Alexander**

2003 'And the signs are following:' Mark 16.9–20. A journey into Pentecostal hermeneutics. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11: 147–70.

**Tomlinson, A. J.**

1914 Sensational demonstrations. *Church of God Evangel* 5: 1–3.

**Van Hoorebeke, K.**

1980 The rhetorical paradigm in the service of the snake handling cult. Unpublished Master's thesis. Western Illinois University, Macomb.

**Wacker, G.**

2003 *Heaven below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Wall, R. A.**

2003 A response to Thomas/Alexander, "And the signs are following" (Mark 16.9–20). *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11: 171–83.

**Williamson, W. P. & R. W. Hood Jr.**

2004 Differential maintenance and growth of religious organizations based upon high-cost behaviors: Serpent handling within the Church of God. *Review of Religious Research* 46: 150–68.

**Williamson, W. P., H. R. Pollio & R. W. Hood Jr.**

2000 A phenomenological analysis of the anointing among religious serpent handlers. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10: 221–40.

**Wulff, D.**

2003 A field in crisis: Is it time to start over? In: H. M. P. Roelofsma, J. M. T. Corveleyn & J. W. van Saane (eds), *One Hundred Years of Psychology of Religion*; pp. 11–32. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

**Young, K. Y.**

1926 The psychology of hymns. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 20: 391–406.

## Beyond Postmodern Spirituality

### Ken Wilber and the Integral approach

#### Introduction

We might say that we moved from living in a cosmos to being included in a universe (Charles Taylor 2007: 59).

In his latest book, the British philosopher Charles Taylor asks ‘why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?’ (Taylor 2007: 25). What are the contours of the modern world in which we live? Why the change from believing in God as a default to not-believing as the new mode for our being-in-the-world?

The American philosopher Ken Wilber has taken on a sizeable challenge by trying to unsnarl the modern world-knot and its secular worldview. In the course of his almost forty years of predominantly solitary study (he has worked outside academia for the best part of his career) and writing, Wilber has produced a body of work that spans from consciousness studies to sociology and anthropology, to mysticism and to different fields of philosophy, psychology and comparative religion (Visser 2003: 1–15). The main theme running through his writings is the concept of *Kosmos*, the universe of matter, life, mind and spirit, that he seeks to restore and bring back both to our vocabulary and to our everyday experience of reality (Wilber 1996: 16).

#### The spectrum of consciousness

A recurring theme in Wilber’s oeuvre is the idea of a spectrum of consciousness. Since the writing of his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* at the ripe age of 23, Wilber has maintained that the human psyche has a natural capability to span a huge spectrum of available stages of consciousness (Wilber 1993: 3–6). Starting out as an attempt to bridge the gap between

Western psychological therapeutic modes and Eastern contemplative practices, Wilber found that consciousness indeed forms a spectrum from the earliest prerational stages of a newborn infant to the highly developed mature stages of a well-functioning adult human being and beyond. Different modalities of treatment and therapy place themselves along this spectrum according to their appropriate and respective stage (Wilber 1993: 7–10).

A few words of explanation regarding the ‘beyond’ might be in place. According to Wilber, the spectrum of consciousness spans the entire psyche of a human being. This psyche has three basic stages: prerational, rational and transrational (Wilber 2001a: 180). Prerational stages are the ones that correspond roughly with the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget’s first two stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor and preoperational (Slater & Muir 1999: 36–40).

In the prerational stages a human individual lacks the capacity to take another person’s perspective. Humans at these early stages are very much egocentric and lack authentic, natural, developmentally acquired compassion that follows from the cognitive skill of taking another person’s viewpoint and operating from that point of reference. However, in the concrete operational stage the child starts to disengage from his or her egoism and starts to feel a need to belong to a separate group larger than him/herself. It is this intrinsic need to extend beyond the confines of one’s isolated ego that forms the basis of the next big stage, conventional or rational, or formal operational in Piaget’s terms (Slater & Muir 1999: 41–2).

The studies of moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg and later, Carol Gilligan, are a good context in light of which to see the three broad stages of Wilber’s idea of the spectrum of consciousness. Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist who studied with Piaget, theorized that the moral reasoning underlying ethical behaviour is constructed in six stages that can be grouped together at three levels. These three levels are called pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional (Kohlberg 1984: 172). Very similar to Piaget’s findings, these three levels represent the capacity to hold more complex systems of thinking and feeling in mind, and the capacity to base one’s judgment on an ever-expanding circle of care, compassion and justice. The further one is in one’s moral development, the more thought-out and principled one’s moral reasoning is (Kohlberg 1984: 216).

Psychologist Carol Gilligan did additional work on Kohlberg’s stage conception, trying to balance out its criticized androcentrism. In Gilligan’s model the basic stages are the same, but the emphasis is on care and compassion rather than rights and justice. As the title of her book puts it, men and women

develop in a different voice through the same developmental stages (Gilligan 1993: 1–7, 16–23, 69–70).

Kohlberg postulated also a seventh stage which is a ‘response to ethical and religious problems . . . based on constructing a sense of identity or unity with being, with life, or with God’ (Kohlberg 1984: 249). It is the stage that functions as a bridge connecting the orthodox stages predominantly studied by Western psychology with transrational or contemplative stages, both of which together form the spectrum of consciousness crucial to Ken Wilber’s Integral Model. It is to these stages beyond the post-conventional development that we shall now turn.

### **Pre/trans-fallacy**

In his earliest works Wilber postulated human development as going from the oneness of a newborn child to the existential angst of a mature adult, and again back to the source of which we had an unconscious taste in our earliest years or, better, months (Visser 2003: 71–3). However, revising his theory after his first books were published, Wilber came to the conclusion that there is a difference in the spectrum between prerational and transrational consciousness. The early stages appeared at first glance to be in union with the universe; more likely, they are not yet separated from it. There is a big difference between being one with something, which is a transrational experience, and being embedded in something, which is the case of a child and her mother before the separation phase begins (Visser 2003: 73–7).

The crux of the pre/trans-fallacy is as follows. The rational stage and its corresponding cognitive functions see everything non-rational to be either pre- or trans-rational (Wilber 2001a: 184). Wilber often uses the case of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as an illustrative example. Freud tended to reduce everything non-rational into infantile oceanic feeling, thus committing what Wilber calls a reductionistic version of the fallacy. Everything non-rational was pre-rational nonsense, said Freud. Jung for his part tended to elevate everything non-rational into spiritual visions of a reality that is somehow more real, committing an elevationist version of the pre/trans-fallacy. Everything non-rational was trans-rational glory, expounded Jung (Wilber 2001a: 184, 226).

With this new addition to his work, Wilber went from what he himself calls the Wilber-1 stage of his work to the Wilber-2 stage. This new stage began with the books *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development*

(1980) and *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (1981), respectively concerning the psychological and anthropological development of the species *Homo Sapiens* (Visser 2003: 28).

## Stages and states of development

Wilber has done revisions to his theoretical model five times (Visser 2003: xiv, 6). Somewhere between Wilber-4 and Wilber-5 his concept of stages and states of development changed. The core issue behind the change is the following. While trying to tie the psychological stages discovered by Western psychology and Eastern (and also Western, with its variety of mystical traditions ranging from the Rhineland mystics to northern shamans and the desert fathers of Christianity) contemplative practices, Wilber and many of the scholars he drew his vast range of influences from failed to differentiate between stages of development and states of consciousness (Wilber 2006: 88–93).

Basically what Wilber and the other transpersonalists (although Wilber is not strictly speaking a transpersonalist but an integralist; he separated from the transpersonal movement in 1982 criticizing its overemphasis of altered states of consciousness (Wilber 2000c)) did was take the Western psychological stages of development and tried to stack the stages of development discovered by the contemplative traditions on top of these. Thus they came up with a model that represented the spectrum of consciousness in a somewhat simplistic, linear fashion. Not that there is anything wrong with simplicity, but in this case the tower of consciousness turned out to be teetering on the brink of collapse due to its somewhat hollow theoretical groundwork.

Wilber and consciousness researcher Allan Combs discovered, unbeknownst to each other, the relation between states and stages (Wilber 2006: 89). Stages are like the ones researched by Piaget, Kohlberg *et al*: fairly permanent developmental acquisitions that function as centres of the total individual. The stages are earned, in a way, as the human being experiences challenges that foster growth towards more complex levels of cognition. Of course development is not a given, since both regression and developmental arrest can occur, too (Wilber 2000a: 35, 92–3). Wilber sometimes calls these stages structures or structure-stages, underlining their more permanent nature, somewhat like that of levels in a building (Wilber 2006: 72).

States, on the other hand, are fleeting experiences, states of mind that come and go. Unlike stages, states of consciousness do not follow a stage-

like progression. Stages of consciousness cannot be skipped (Wilber 2006: 10–11). Level 1 is followed by level 2; level 3 can never occur without the individual first having experienced level 2. An analogy can be drawn between psychological development and syntactical progression: you have to have letters before words; words before sentences; and so on. States of consciousness, however, do not appear to follow the same kind of rigid hierarchy. One can dive into the deep end of human experience—or, as a mystic might say, the Endless End—at practically every stage. The experience of vast emptiness, of standing outside oneself looking at one’s habitual persona going about, the experience of freedom and/or fullness; in a word experiences usually deemed spiritual or mystical, or, in somewhat dated lingo, religious, can happen at every structure-stage of human psychological being-in-the-world (Wilber 2006: 76).

Now this is very important for a lot of reasons. It liberates us from the simplistic attempts to unite Eastern and Western knowledge. Those theories were and are often not unlike the teetering tower of consciousness postulated above, trying to stack phenomena upon phenomena until observations from real life come and poke holes in its sides in a deadly fashion. It was exactly this that awoke Wilber (and Combs) from his slumber. The result came to be called the Wilber–Combs lattice.

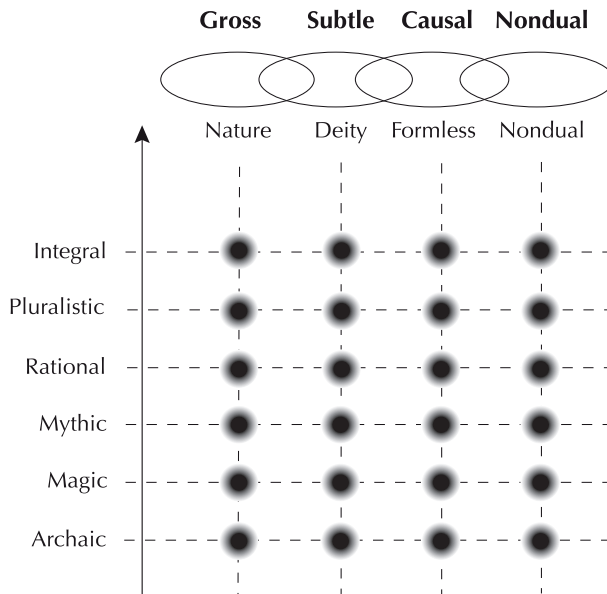


Figure 1. Wilber–Combs lattice. © Ken Wilber 2006.



The problem before the discovery of the W–C lattice was this. If Western stages of development were to be united with Eastern stages of contemplation, they would form a continuum or a spectrum, on the first stages of which we would find Piaget’s sensorimotor and preoperational stages and on the final stages something like *nirvana* or *nirvikalpa samadhi* or *unio mystica*. The problem then becomes, how can someone who has no access to, say, a postformal operational consciousness have a blissful union with the divine? How can a Tibetan monk meditating in a cave experience a sudden luminosity, merging with the light that is supposed to appear, according to the theory, only after three or four or five stages of psychological development? How can a child or someone living in challenging conditions that block the emergence of more complex cognitive capacities ever experience the alleged Divine, the True Reality? Is there a totalitarian hierarchy of realization that omits the unfortunate?

Apparently, no. There is, according to the W–C lattice and the theory that supports it, indeed a hierarchy of realization, but it is not totalitarian. In fact, it seems to be, unlike the stages of development, open to all. States appear to be free, as it were, but stages are earned. And this leads to some very interesting conclusions.

Anybody can experience any state at every stage. I do not have to be developed to formal operational cognition or moral stage six in order to have an altered state experience. But, after coming back from the experience I will interpret the experience according to the stage I am at. A brief look at the lattice will give us 24 possibilities of experiencing and interpreting a mystical or a spiritual experience. We can have a spiritual experience and interpret it in a number of ways according to our developmental frames of reference (Wilber 2006: 84–93). Someone at a conformist stage might give their religious experiences a much more fundamental, one-right-way interpretation than someone in a rational stage. While they both might have the same profound experience of uniting with nature or seeing a figure of light, the former could interpret it as a hierophany or a manifestation of their (or their people’s) personal saviour and bringer of salvation (Wilber 2006: 92–3), while the interpretation of the latter might produce something akin to nature mysticism, the kind that one could nowadays see for example in complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman’s book *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion* (2008). The important thing to keep in mind is that there is a variety of religious experience and a variety of interpretations. Both most likely go far beyond those dreamt of in our philosophies.

## Return to Kosmos

After having briefly touched on some of the basics of Ken Wilber's thinking—namely, stages of development as the spectrum of consciousness, and their relation to states of consciousness and the pre/trans-fallacy—we can start to draft the outline of an Integral theory.

The word integral is not coined by Ken Wilber. There have been pioneers of the integral movement: people such as G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, Sri Aurobindo, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo Ghose are some of the names that are dropped when discussing the birth of integral thinking (Cohen 2007: 100). Its roots lie deeper, though. If, in the words of another pioneer, philosopher A. N. Whitehead, all of western philosophy is just footnotes to Plato, then we must trace the beginnings back to the ancient thinkers. From Plato Wilber takes the concept of The Big Three: the Good, the True and the Beautiful, which form one of the cornerstones of his own philosophical model. But this is getting ahead of the story.

According to Paul Heelas, an increasing number of scholars are attempting to unite the valuable lessons of postmodern thought with the valuable lessons of the Enlightenment thought. Heelas calls this integrative approach The Middle Way (Heelas 2007: 270–1). It is not essentially an either/or-question between Enlightenment and postmodernity, but rather, says Heelas: '[H]aving emerged from two (main) sources, it now operates with its own dynamics... A zone of inquiry has developed,' explains Heelas, 'between the "wilder" shores of Enlightenment and postmodern thought—although ultimately informed by both—in which these modes of thought have come into creative and constitutive interplay' (Heelas 2007: 271). One of the people employing these dynamics and trying to work with their creative interplay is Ken Wilber.

Wilber's work is marked from the very beginning by a maxim: 'Everybody is right' (Wilber 2000b). Trying to figure out how every view can be right is a daunting task. It is a task that can only be achieved by not taking an extremist position but rather a middle way approach. That is something that Wilber has consistently tried to do.

The outline of an Integral theory, approach, or model is formed by (1) agreeing with everybody on their terms, and (2) creating a framework deep and wide enough to fit every perspective (Wilber 2001b: 1–32). Wilber sometimes says that when some particular scientist, be it a representative of a 'narrow science' like physics or a 'broad science' like hermeneutics, says something of their own field of research, we should pay close attention. When

they say something outside of their own fields of study, we should be wary. The simple guideline, then, becomes: beware of reductionism of any sort. One can find cases of reductionism not just in natural sciences but also, and to a large extent too, in cultural sciences, as was the case with extreme postmodernist approaches. Trying to reduce everything to the boundless cultural and societal contexts, denying all universal truths, they committed what Wilber calls a performative contradiction: there are no universal truths except the declaration just made (Wilber 1996: 25). A universal truth of no universal truths is reductionistic in its essence. This is just one of the examples that the Integral approach tries to balance out.

As is the case with postmodernism and every other field of study, there are many valuable and lasting truths in their findings. The central mission, so to say, of the integral theory is to find out what is true in each field and then unite them into a unified whole, a Kosmos instead of a universe. Wilber emphasises the word Kosmos, wishing to return it to our common usage. It was allegedly first used by Pythagorean philosophers, for whom it referred to the unified order of the totality of existence, with hierarchical levels of being (Wilber 1996: 16–17; Taylor 2007: 60). In this Kosmos, humans existed only in relation to the whole. This whole had a *telos*, to use the Aristotelian term, and the telos pointed to God (Taylor 2007: 60).

Charles Taylor describes this worldview in his book *A Secular Age* (2007: 60): ‘This kind of cosmos is a hierarchy; it has higher and lower levels of being. And it reaches its apex in eternity; it is indeed, held together by what exists on the level of eternity; the Ideas, or God, or both together – Ideas as the thought of the creator.’ This idea of a multilayered Kosmos with its levels of existence—the Great Chain of Being—was, as Arthur Lovejoy puts it, ‘the dominant official philosophy of the larger part of civilized humankind throughout most of its history’ (Lovejoy 1936: 26 in Walsh & Vaughan 1994). Only in recent centuries has it changed (Wilber 1995: 16), and according to Taylor, ‘[p]artly as a result of the scientific revolution, the cosmos idea faded, and we find ourselves in a universe’ (Taylor 2007: 60). This universe is what Wilber calls—after Edwin Abbott’s novel—Flatland, where ‘in order to be valid knowledge must be based on the reality perceived by the senses’ (Visser 2003: 195).

Basically Wilber’s Integral approach can be seen as a type of return to Kosmos. Away from mere Flatland, back to the many-hued and multidimensional universe that includes levels of being and the Big Three of Plato’s the True, the Good and the Beautiful. And now, after laying the foundations of the Integral model, we can start to look more closely into its main components.

## The four quadrants

Ken Wilber's integral map is also known as the AQAL model. It is shorthand for all levels, all quadrants, all lines, all states and all types. It is essentially a value-free and empty framework that tries to create the deepest and widest space possible for accounting for the Kosmos (Wilber 2006: 30–2).

All quadrants represent the interior and the exterior of both individual and collective realities. The four quadrants are four different perspectives of any given moment, phenomena and thing. They are in a sense the four sides of everything we face. And they can, in their simplest form, be reduced to the aforementioned Big Three of Plato: 'the Good, the True and the Beautiful', or 'Morals, Science and Art', or 'Culture, Nature and Self', or 'We, It and I' (Wilber 2006: 18–23). But for now, let us deal with the quadrants as they appear in Figure 2.

In the subjective or upper left quadrant (UL) is the world of our individual, interior experiences: our thoughts, emotions, and memories, states of mind, perceptions, and immediate sensations. It is our 'I' space, accessible by asking: 'How do I feel or what do I think right now?'

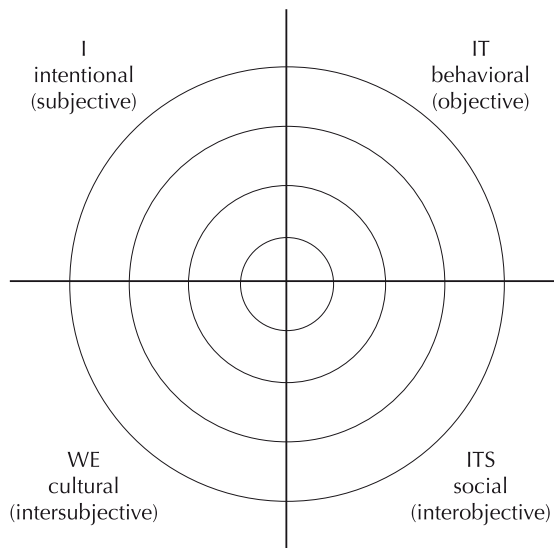


Figure 2. The four quadrants. © Ken Wilber 1995.

In the intersubjective or lower left (LL) quadrant is the world of our collective, interior experiences: our shared values, meanings, language, relationships, and cultural background. It is our 'we' space, accessible by asking: 'How do we feel / What do we think right now?'

In the objective or upper right quadrant (UR) is the world of individual, exterior things: our material body, including the brain and anything that we can see or touch or observe scientifically in time and space. It is, in other words, our 'it' space, accessible by asking: 'What is surrounding me as an individual?'

In the interobjective or lower right quadrant (LR) is the world of collective, exterior things: systems, networks, technology, government, and the natural environment, in other words, our 'its' space, accessible by asking: 'What is surrounding us as a collective?' (Wilber 2006: 20–3).

We usually stay in our quadrant-comfort zone, reducing one way or the other all phenomena into either interior(s) of the individual or the collective (psyche, spirit or culture), or alternatively into exterior(s) (biology, neurology, physics, social structures, etc.). Combinations are also possible, even strange ones. A self-professed 'anti-guru' U. G. Krishnamurti claimed that his enlightenment experience, which he himself called 'calamity', was in essence purely physical and biological (Krishnamurti 2007). Integral theory, however, holds that all four quadrants are equally valid. Every dimension or perspective is irreducible from one another, they correlate with one another, they cause and are caused by one another. With the four quadrants we are dealing with the tetra-emergence of Kosmos in all of its dimensions (Wilber 2006: 19–20).

## Four different types of truth

The four quadrants are four fundamental perspectives that give us four different ways of knowing (Wilber 1995: 127–47). They orient us in acquiring knowledge with four different validity claims, all of which, according to the Integral view, are equally valid and equally true. It is not a case of value relativism, but rather a case of four-folded reality, of which there must be at least four different types of truth claims. Let us look at the ways of knowing in each quadrant.

When we are studying interior individual experiences, we use the art and science of interpretation, i.e. hermeneutics. It reveals subjective realities, for the validity of which we need to be able to trust the mapmaker. It is not about having a trustworthy map of empirical reality; it is about the truthfulness of

the mapmaker. So the validity claim in the upper left quadrant is truthfulness: are you sure you are giving a good interpretation of your own, internal, subjective world (Wilber 1996: 98–102)?

When we study behaviour, or the exteriors of an individual, we use observation as a method. We try to reveal objective reality, the empirical world. The validity claim here is propositional truth. For that we need to have as good a map as possible, a map that represents or reflects nature, the exterior world as accurately as possible. We do not engage in a dialogue but in a monologue. We look, observe, measure instead of asking and interpreting (Wilber 1996: 97–8).

In studying cultures, or the lower left quadrant, we engage in some form of cultural understanding. We try to reveal something of the interior of a collective, their intersubjective reality. Here the validity claim is justness or cultural fit. We ask what is good or what is right. How do the interiors of a collective mesh together? What are some of the shared assumptions about reality? What is considered valuable? Here we enter the arena of hermeneutics or interpretation again, but this time concerning groups of people or cultures (Wilber 1996: 102–4).

When we engage in the study of the lower right, or the exteriors of a collective, we study systems or groupings from the outside. We study their functionality, trying to reveal the interobjective reality behind the appearance. The validity claim here is functional fit. How do these systems mesh? What functions or parts do they play in this whole? Systems theory is an application of the lower right quadrant (Wilber 1996: 104–8).

Wilber calls the interior methodologies Left-Hand Paths and the exterior methodologies Right-Hand Paths (Wilber 1996: 79). He gives other examples of the validity claims for both paths. In the upper left we have sincerity, integrity and trustworthiness, all crucial parts in accessing our interior depth. In the lower left there are claims like mutual understanding and rightness, in the upper right concepts such as correspondence (like the correspondence theory of truth) or representation, and in the lower right we have systems theory webs, structural-functionalism and social systems mesh. As for scholars in each quadrant, Wilber names people like Freud, Jung, Piaget, Plotinus and Aurobindo (UL); Kuhn, Dilthey, Gadamer and Weber (LL); Skinner, Watson and Locke (UR); Parsons, Comte, Marx and Lenski (LR) (Wilber 1996: 77–97).

According to Integral theory, for a balanced and comprehensive view, the reality and the corresponding truth claim of each quadrant must be taken into account in their own terms, and at the same time be seen as one unified whole

(Wilber 1996: 108). The totality of existence demands that each quadrant be given a voice. The harmony Wilber is seeking with his everybody-is-right philosophy comes from balancing the voices so that quadrant absolutism (as he calls any sort of reductionism) is actively monitored and balanced by a more comprehensive view of and a corresponding methodology for a multi-dimensional reality, a tetra-emergent Kosmos, a four-cornered universe.

## Holons and holarchies

Wilber recalls how he came up with the concept of the four quadrants in his book *A Brief History of Everything*:

[A]t one point I simply started making lists of all these holarchical maps – conventional and new age, Eastern and Western, premodern and modern and postmodern – everything from systems theory to the Great Chain of Being, from the Buddhist vijñanas to Piaget, Marx, Kohlberg, the Vedantic koshas, Loewinger, Maslow, Lenski, Kabbalah, and so on. . . the more I looked at these various holarchies, the more it dawned on me that there were actually *four very different types* of holarchies, four very different types of holistic sequences. . . once I put all of these holarchies into these four groups. . . it was very obvious that each holarchy in each group was indeed dealing with the same territory, but overall we had four different territories, so to speak. (Wilber 1996: 66–7.)

Wilber uses the term ‘holarchy’ when referring to hierarchies composed of holons. Holon is a term coined by Arthur Koestler. It means a whole that is a part of another whole; for example an atom is a whole that is a part of a molecule, which is a whole that is a part of a cell, and so on (Koestler 1980: 447; Wilber 1996: 17–19). Wilber’s ontology is based on these holarchies composed of holons. There is another rule, or a tenet of which Wilber gives around twenty, seemingly law-like in the evolution of the Kosmos, that govern these holarchies, namely ‘more depth, less span’ (Wilber 1995: 64–8). It means that the more holons there are at a given level (the span of the holons), the less there is depth at that level. An example is stage six, universal ethical principles-orientation of Kohlberg’s moral development. There are not many individuals at that stage (not much span), but it has huge depth regarding the care and concern for other beings’ welfare. A reverse example is the case of rocks and apes: there are most definitely more rocks than apes in the known

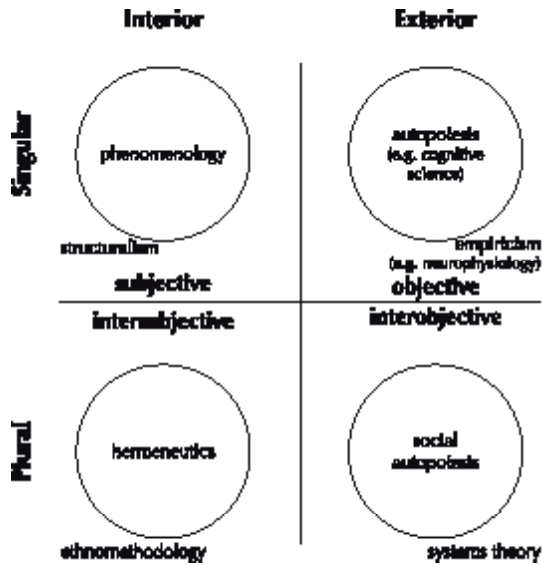


Figure 3. Integral methodological pluralism. @ Ken Wilber 2006.

universe; rocks have more span but less depth than apes. This leads Wilber into formulating the ethical aspect of his system, Basic Moral Intuition (BMI). Its basic premise is to promote and preserve the greatest depth for the biggest span. To oversimplify, it is better to kick rocks than to kick apes, and better to eat carrots than to eat cows (Wilber 1996: 300–7).

So there are holarchies composed of holons going from big span with small depth to less span, more depth. This sequence happens everywhere in the ‘four dimensions of the Kosmos’. The four quadrants represent a blueprint of these evolving holarchies. The interior and exterior of the individual and the collective: mind, nature, culture and societies with their respective whole-spectrum evolution from the Big Bang to Integral (or Super-integral) Consciousness (Wilber 1995: 127; Wilber 2006: 89–91).

### Integral methodological pluralism

The four quadrants form, then, the blueprint of the AQAL model. But if the model is to become truly alive and usable it must have a methodology. As everyone knows, the word ‘method’ becomes from the Greek root words



*meta* and *hodos*, meaning a following after (White & Schwoch 2006: 54), following a way or a path. So we have to have paths that our quest for knowledge follows, trails of truth with distinct truth claims that allow us to enter into their worlds and bring forth data from them. Those worlds, as outlined in the previous chapter, have not one but two paths which we can take.

In each quadrant there is both an inside view and an outside view (Wilber 2006: 35–6). One can find parallels between this and Kenneth Pike's emic and etic distinction and perhaps also with Kim Knott's inside/outside thematic (Knott 2007: 243–58). These views, two in each quadrant, correspond to what Wilber calls the eight primordial perspectives. These perspectives employ eight different methodologies. This approach, which can be seen as one application of the AQAL model, is called Integral Methodological Pluralism (Wilber 2006: 33–8).

So there is an inside and an outside view of the interior of an individual (UL), giving us phenomenology and structuralism, respectively, as methodologies. The same goes for every quadrant: cultural hermeneutics and ethnomethodology (LL), cognitive science and neurophysiology (UR) and social autopoiesis and systems theory (LR).

### **All lines, all states, all types**

Above, we already covered some aspects of the second part of the AQAL map. All levels refer to the levels of development studied in western psychology and in the contemplative traditions around the world. There are pre-egoic or prerational levels or stages of development, egoic or rational levels of development and post-egoic or transrational levels of development. These levels are like basic structures that evolve over time. Some, like psychologist Clare W. Graves, say they evolve as hierarchically more complex answers to existential problems in the interaction between biology, psychology and societal conditions (Beck & Cowan 1996: 15–33). Urie Bronfenbrenner has a somewhat similar perspective with his Ecological Systems Theory approach to human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 16–42). The basic point is that human beings evolve, or have a possibility of evolving, through several stages in the complex ecological system (Bronfenbrenner), the emergent cyclical levels of existence (Graves) or in the four quadrants (Wilber). In any case, levels of development extending from prerational, rational and transrational are a crucial part of the Integral map (Wilber 2007: 30–7, 112–24).

Development is always the development of something. Recent studies on intelligence show that cognitive capacities are but one form of development. Howard Gardner, for example in his studies with multiple intelligences, has shown how many different facets there are to human capabilities. Gardner proposed several different lines of intelligence, such as cognitive, emotional, musical, kinesthetic, and so on (Wilber 2007: 38).

There are also lines of development in needs (Maslow), self-identity (Loevinger), faith or spirituality (Fowler) and values (Graves) (Wilber 2007: 76–7). Lines appear in every quadrant, but Wilber's work has mainly focused on those appearing in the Upper Left quadrant, the individual consciousness.

All states refer to the states of consciousness, as distinguished from the stages or structures of consciousness. When they differ from our everyday, waking-state experience, they are sometimes called peak experiences, altered states, religious experiences or meditative states (Wilber 2007: 139). These states can, according to Wilber, be grouped into four broad categories: gross, subtle, causal/formless and nondual, or following the great wisdom traditions, into waking, dreaming and deep sleep (Wilber 2007: 28, 139). These states can be accessed suddenly but often they appear after some form of contemplative practice. In the words of Zen master Richard Baker Roshi: 'Enlightenment is an accident. Meditation makes you accident prone.'

Wilber has a taxonomy for these states that correlates each altered state with a type of mysticism. It follows the logic of their progression from the gross to the nondual. When a person has an altered state experience in the gross waking state, it produces what Wilber calls nature mysticism. When altered states happen in the subtle dreaming state, it produces forms of deity mysticism. Altered states in the causal deep sleep or formless state produce formless mysticism. Also there are states of flow, of being one with everything that arises in each state (gross, subtle and formless). Wilber calls this nondual mysticism, also known as *turiya* in Hindu philosophy (Wilber 2007: 141). And, as we remember, these states are interpreted according to the developmental stage one is at.

Types refer to the 'items that can be present at virtually any stage or state' (Wilber 2007: 45). These items are ones grouped by different typological systems such as Myers–Briggs Type Indicator assessment, the enneagram of personality or the Big Five personality traits. The common point here is that the viewpoint from any given stage, state, quadrant or line differs according to type. It is important not to erase our self from the equation. The mapmaker or the interpreter is a central part of our being-in-the-world. The types in the AQAL model represent just that part, and its many facets. Wilber does

not suggest any one typological system *per se*, but uses examples like Carol Gilligan and her studies on the 'different voice' of men and women in moral development as a representative of different types that seem to appear in people (Wilber 2007: 45–51).

## Postmodern spirituality and the Integral vision

We have outlined the basics of an AQAL map or an Integral theory as proposed by the American philosopher Ken Wilber. The theory is composed of five key elements: quadrants, levels, lines, states and types. Some key terms in understanding the model, or cartographic symbols that help us approach the map and the post-metaphysical ontological territory (Wilber 2006: 42) it represents, are the pre/trans-fallacy, the relationship between states and stages and the ontological concepts of holarchy and holons. Epistemologically the map leads us from the four validity claims through the eight primordial perspectives to Integral Methodological Pluralism.

The Integral vision is wide indeed. Its wider implications for different fields of study began in 2006 with the publication of *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* and has continued in 2008 with the launch of the Integral Research Center and in 2009 with being the operating system with which State of the World Forum will launch its ten year plan to address climate change. But what does the Integral approach offer to the study of postmodern religion? What could some of its contributions be to orthodox academia?

Taking all four quadrants into account gives a wide view of the phenomenon of postmodern spirituality. It is not a case of any single quadrant, level, line, state or type producing or operating with these currents. Rather, it is an all-quadrant, all-level unfolding with many lines, states and types that form and affect and shape the manifestations of postmodern spirituality. By giving each perspective a space to exist in, it makes as much truth and knowledge available as possible. It tries to steer us clear of quadrant absolutism, the reduction of Kosmos to any one of its corners or holarchical levels, by not favouring any one approach but by letting each pursue its own truth without colonizing others (Wilber 2006: 49, 224). Postmodern spirituality can thus be approached from multiple levels and multiple perspectives. Explanation and understanding; neurobiology and hermeneutics; cognitive science and phenomenology; the Left-Hand and the Right-Hand paths, then, are not mutually exclusive but mutually supportive paths of knowledge.

## References

### *Literature*

**Beck, Don Edward & Christopher C. Cowan**

1996 *Spiral Dynamics. Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

**Bronfenbrenner, Urie**

1979 *The Ecology of Human Development. Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Cohen, Andrew (ed.)**

2007 The REAL Evolution Debate. *What is Enlightenment?* 35: 86–100.

**Gilligan, Carol**

1993 *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Heelas, Paul**

2007 Postmodernism. In: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*; pp. 259–74. London: Routledge.

**Kauffman, Stuart**

2008 *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion*. New York: Basic Books.

**Knott, Kim**

2007 Insider/Outsider Perspectives. In: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*; pp. 243–58. London: Routledge.

**Koestler, Arthur**

1980 *Bricks to Babel. Selected Writings with Comments by the Author*. London: Hutchinson & Co.

**Kohlberg, Lawrence**

1984 *Essays on Moral Development. Volume II: The Psychology of Moral Development. The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages*. New York: Harper & Row.

**Slater, Alan & Darwin Muir (eds)**

1999 *The Blackwell Reader in Developmental Psychology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

**Taylor, Charles**

2007 *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

**Visser, Frank**

2003 *Ken Wilber. Thought as Passion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**White, Mimi & James Schwoch (eds)**

2006 *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

**Wilber, Ken**

1993 *Spectrum of Consciousness*. Wheaton: Quest Books.

1995 *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality. The Spirit of Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala.

1996 *A Brief History of Everything*. Boston: Shambhala.

- 2000a *Integral Psychology. Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 2001a *Eye to Eye. The Quest for the New Paradigm*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 2001b *The Eye of Spirit. An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 2006 *Integral Spirituality. A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 2007 *The Integral Vision. A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. Boston: Shambhala.

*Internet sources*

**Krishnamurti, U. G.**

- 2007 My Swan Song. [http://www.well.com/user/jct/SWAN\\_SONG.htm](http://www.well.com/user/jct/SWAN_SONG.htm) (accessed on 31 October 2008).

**Walsh, Roger & Frances Vaughan**

- 1994 The Worldview of Ken Wilber. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 34 (6). <http://jhp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/2/6> (accessed on 7 October 2008).

**Wilber, Ken**

- 2000b Introduction to Volume II of the Kosmos Trilogy. [http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/cowokev8\\_intro.cfm/](http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/cowokev8_intro.cfm/) (accessed on 31 October 2008).
- 2000c On Critics, Integral Institute, My Recent Writing, and Other Matters of Little Consequence: A Shambhala Interview with Ken Wilber. Part I. The Demise of Transpersonal Psychology. <http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/interviews/interview1220.cfm/> (accessed on 31 October 2008).

*Websites*

Integral Research Center. <http://www.integralresearchcenter.org>.

*Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*. <http://aqaljournal.integralinstitute.org/Public/Default.aspx>.

State of the World Forum. <http://www.worldforum.org>.

## Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality

### The case of metal music

#### Introduction

Recent decades have seen a growing interest in a wide range of alternative religions and spiritualities in the West. This has led to the emergence of an alternative spiritual environment that is often referred to as the 'holistic milieu' (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005) or, more broadly, 'the alternative spiritual milieu' (e.g. Partridge 2004). Commenting on the changing face of religion in the West, scholars such as Christopher Partridge (2004, 2005) argue that contemporary Western society and culture is experiencing a process of 're-enchantment', while Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) contend that the West may be experiencing the beginning of a 'spiritual revolution' as a result of the overall 'massive subjective turn' of Western culture and society. In relation to these debates, scholars of religion have also increasingly started to draw attention to the role played by *popular culture* within the overall context of religious change and transformation in the West. Popular culture not only reflects these changes but, in turn, also provides important sources of inspiration for the transformation of religious and spiritual practices and identities (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2005; Lynch 2006; Forbes 2005).

*Metal* is perhaps *the* most extreme and aggressive form of contemporary Western popular music. Even though it continues to spark controversy and debate, it has also enjoyed enduring popularity for decades and has spread on a global scale. Metal music and culture has always been characterized by its fascination for dark and austere themes and imagery. Commonly dealing with topics such as evil, death, war, alienation and suffering, metal groups have traditionally found much inspiration in the world of religion, particularly Judeo-Christian eschatology and apocalypticism, different forms of paganism, occultism, esotericism and, last but not least, Satanism. These kinds of religious/spiritual themes have arguably developed into an integral part of

metal culture on the whole. They contribute significantly to investing metal music and culture with an apparent aura of sincerity and mystique as well as to raising its shock and entertainment value. At the same time, metal culture is also marked by its high degree of humour and self-irony, its fondness for exaggeration, spectacle and over-the-top theatrics. Even so, metal stands out as a global popular music culture replete with various kinds of often dark and austere religious and spiritual themes, many of which stand in stark contrast to Christianity. As Partridge (2005: 246–55) has pointed out, seen in the wider context of the changing face of religion in the West and the increasingly important role played by popular culture in the transformation of religious and spiritual identities, metal has come to play an important role in the dissemination of a wide variety of 'dark' alternative religious/spiritual beliefs and ideas.

My main aim here is to shed further light on this issue through focusing on some contemporary and successful metal groups from the Nordic countries. In relation to this, I also wish to draw attention to some of the ways in which dark alternative religious/spiritual ideas may be viewed as having become an *inseparable part* of some sections of metal culture as they have become actively and consciously explored, and sometimes explicitly *promoted*, by the well known contemporary metal groups discussed in this article. I will begin by offering a short general account of the contemporary alternative spiritual milieu. This is followed by a brief discussion of the current relationship between religion and popular culture, particularly in relation to Partridge's (2004, 2005) recent thesis on the 're-enchantment' of the West. The final and main part of the article then explores the relationship between popular culture and alternative spiritualities in relation to the world of metal music in light of some contemporary metal bands from Norway, Sweden and Finland.

### **Alternative spiritualities and religious change**

Debates on the emergence of alternative religions/spiritualities need to be situated within the broader context of wider debates on religious change and transformation in the West. The concept of *secularization* has occupied a central position in these debates for decades and has mainly concentrated on the impact of modernization on institutional Christianity in (mostly Western) Europe and North America. Viewed as part of a broader narrative of modernization, theories of secularization have traditionally offered an account of the state of religion in the West, and Western Europe in particular, in terms of a single 'running narrative' of slow but steady decline (Martin 2005: 8).

More recently, though, traditional narratives of secularization have again become increasingly contested and questioned as a result of the emergence and proliferation of alternative religions and spiritualities. Scholars concentrating on these developments often interpret the contemporary Western religious scene in terms of a dialectical relationship between secularization and *sacralization/re-sacralization* (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 9–10; Partridge 2004: 44). Scholars adopting this approach seldom refute the overall effects of secularization on traditional institutional religion, that is, Christianity. They do, however, point to the transformation and changing character of religious belief and practice within contemporary society and culture, with religion and spirituality appearing in new forms and sometimes unexpected places.

Generally speaking, alternative spiritualities stress the role of the individual as his/her own ultimate spiritual authority or, as Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 6) put it, they focus on the ‘cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective lives’. Spiritual truth is not to be derived from external religious authorities but from ‘within’ oneself. Individuals are encouraged to seek inspiration in whichever religious and spiritual traditions, beliefs and practices that suit them and their life situation best at any particular time. Hence, spiritual matters are typically approached in a holistic, eclectic, and experimental spirit. Different beliefs, ideas and practices from a range of different religious and spiritual traditions are thus often combined, resulting in the construction of unique individual spiritualities (Partridge 2004: 72–3). Alternative spirituality stands in stark contrast to what Heelas and Woodhead call ‘life as religion’, such as Christianity, characterized by its emphasis on external authority, dogmatism, tradition, metaphysical dualism, absolute truth claims and so on (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 14–16). This contrast is essentially what makes alternative spirituality viewed as ‘alternative’, that is, as a type of spirituality that is defined over and against traditional and institutional types of religion (Christianity). According to some scholars of religion, these types of attitudes are all typical of ‘postmodern culture’ more generally (e.g. Beckford 1992: 19).

Although the alternative spiritual milieu encompasses a myriad of different and disparate beliefs and practices they often nevertheless share some general basic connections and similarities. So, even though contemporary alternative spirituality is characterized by an emphasis on the authority of the individual and an abandonment of overarching belief systems, a set of key themes have nevertheless come to be widely shared and developed into what Partridge (2005: 11) calls ‘soft orthodoxies’. For example, there is a shared general sense of the West becoming increasingly attuned to ‘the spiritual’, of everything be-



ing holistically 'connected', for example in terms of an all-permeating 'universal energy' or 'life force'. The sacralization of *nature* in particular, stands out as a recurring feature in many forms of alternative spirituality. In relation to these concerns, there is also widespread suspicion towards 'modern invasive technologies' (Partridge 2005: 18) such as those related to irresponsible industrial exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, alternative spiritualities typically emphasize 'the resurgence of ancient traditions' and continuity with an often 'mythical past' as being the key 'to vibrant, authentic contemporary spirituality' (Partridge 2004: 77). This is also connected to a more widespread distrust, suspicion and sometimes outright hostility towards traditional Christianity. On a general level, alternative spiritualities are thus characterized by an open attitude to subjective, pragmatic and experimental exploration of new ('alternative') spiritual ideas and practices (Partridge 2004: 77–81).

### The 'darker side' of alternative spirituality

Even though much of contemporary alternative spirituality emphasises harmony and 'well-being', there is also evidence of an increasing interest in various forms of 'darker' alternative spiritualities, such as different forms of occultism, esotericism, Satanism, and various forms of paganism, which are characterized by rather different concerns. Broadly speaking, 'darker' alternative spiritualities tend to stress the *duality* or *polarity* of existence, focusing more on *self-centred* spiritual development (see Partridge 2004: 79). Here, for lack of a better term, I use the epithet 'dark alternative spirituality' as a broad and highly tentative category that is only meant to highlight the fact that these types of spirituality also stress the darker sides of existence in ways which distinguish them from the 'sanguine, saccharine, light-emphasizing view of reality' (Partridge 2004: 79) found within much of the broader New Age movement and holistic milieu. This is not to say that dark alternative spiritualities do not also share many of the 'soft orthodoxies' mentioned above. For one thing, they are all focused on the cultivation of individual-centred spirituality and the sacralization of the self. Nature is also typically invested with sacred qualities, particularly within various forms of paganism. However, the emphasis here is arguably not so much on altruistically caring for 'mother earth' for the sake of the spiritual and physical well-being of all mankind as on utilizing the sacred powers of nature in a spirit of self-centred spiritual development. The practice of magic (magick) within many occult and esoteric traditions can be seen as an example of this. However, not all forms of dark

alternative spirituality emphasize the sacredness of nature in the same ways or to the same extent.

Dark alternative spiritualities also tend to attach particular importance to the notion of continuity with ancient traditions. Although contemporary Western esotericism is itself 'a conglomerate of various different, and often quite distinct, traditions' (Granholm 2005: 61), occult and esoteric groups nevertheless often stress their connections to particular occult and esoteric traditions (for a detailed account of Western esotericism see for example Hanegraaff 1998). Moreover, even though contemporary paganism is a highly diverse phenomenon, it is not uncommon for particular pagan groups to stress their connections to particular pagan traditions such as Celtic Druidism or pre-Christian Norse religion. Generally speaking then, even though spiritual matters are approached in an experimental and eclectic spirit, the type of eclecticism at play here also puts greater emphasis on disciplined, gradual spiritual development through experience, further learning and initiation in closer connection to tradition, community and ritual. In this way, as Jo Pearson (2003: 172) has pointed out with reference to Wicca, it could be argued that dark alternative spiritualities stress 'commitment and dedication' in a way that sets them apart from the general subjective and eclectic ethos that permeates the broader alternative spiritual milieu (for a detailed discussion on paganism see Partridge 2004: 79–84).

Broadly speaking, darker alternative spiritualities thus tend to be marked by higher degrees of *exclusivity*. They also tend to be more *dualist* in that they put greater stress on the duality or polarity of existence, for example, in terms of light and darkness, harmony and discord, life and death. However, darkness, discord and death are not necessarily perceived as forces to be shunned but, rather, as forces for the individual to embrace and utilize in his/her process of spiritual self development. Dark alternative spiritualities also tend to be antagonistic and sometimes openly hostile towards traditional institutional Christianity. This is a characteristic feature particularly of various forms of Satanism which usually adopt an explicitly *elitist* stance to self development and the realisation of one's true potential. As Partridge (2005: 222) points out, on the one hand, contemporary Satanism can be understood as a "cult of opposition", in that its *raison d'être* is the opposition to and the subversion of an established culture or religious tradition.' However, on the other hand, some forms of contemporary Satanism, such as that of Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan, essentially build on an atheistic world view. Such a brand of Satanism may also be understood as a 'positive self-religion that encourages egocentricity and personal development' (Partridge 2005: 223)

while eschewing herd mentalities of all kinds, such as those associated with traditional and institutional belief systems like Christianity. Therefore, within some forms of Satanism, self development may be understood in terms of an existential process rather than an expressly 'spiritual' one. Yet, other contemporary Satanist groups sometimes express their understanding of the force of Satan in more theistic terms (Partridge 2005: 221–30).

## Alternative spirituality and popular culture

The study of the relationship between religion and popular culture has grown exponentially during recent decades, drawing together scholars from a variety of different fields within the humanities and social sciences with a wide range of particular interests and various theoretical and methodological approaches. So far, most research within the field has concentrated on what Bruce D. Forbes terms 'religion in popular culture', that is, both the explicit and implicit appearance of religious ideas, themes, symbols and language in different forms of popular culture such as film and popular music (Forbes 2005: 10–12). An examination of the dissemination of dark alternative religious themes within metal music and culture could well be situated within this broad area of research.

In his two-volume work, *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 1): *Understanding Popular Occulture* (2004) and *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 2): *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (2005), Christopher Partridge provides an extensive and thought-provoking account of the role of popular culture in relation to overall religious change and transformation in the West. Essentially, he argues that the proliferation of a large number of alternative religions, spiritualities and world views, especially since the 1960s, gradually has led to the formation of a bank of religious, spiritual and existential resources which he terms *occulture*. This considerable expansion of the term 'occult' should not be understood as denoting a form of religion or world view in itself, but 'rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols' (Partridge 2004: 84). This 'reservoir of ideas', or 'constantly evolving religio-cultural milieu' (2005: 2), is not only sourced by more specific ideas and practices found in, for example, more established forms of alternative spirituality and new religious movements but also by a wide array of other disparate spiritual and existential ideas and themes, such as beliefs relating to the 'paranormal', 'well-being culture', 'eco-enchantment', 'sacralization of psychedelics', or 'eschato-

logical re-enchantment' (Partridge 2004: 70; 2005). Partridge also highlights the growing interest in different forms of 'dark occulture' sourced by modern Satanism, Western esotericism, occultism, various forms of paganism, various beliefs relating to the Devil, vampires, malevolent extraterrestrials and ideas of mass conspiracy (Partridge 2005: 207–78). On a general level, the concept of occulture or 'occultural milieu' is meant to encompass the broader cultural milieu in which all of these disparate ideas and beliefs circulate, providing the 'unpredictable raw materials' (Partridge 2004: 85) for the construction of alternative spiritual identities.

The main argument is that the proliferation of this vast plethora of spiritual and existential ideas in a supposedly deeply secularized society and culture points to the emergence of a new 'spiritual atmosphere' or 'a dialectical process of the re-enchantment of the secular and the secularization of the sacred' (Partridge 2004: 44). Partridge explicitly relates his notion of occulture to *popular culture*, arguing that it has proven a 'key sacralizing factor' (2004: 119) in the contemporary re-enchantment of the West: 'Motifs, theories and truth claims that once existed in hermetically sealed subcultures have begun to be recycled, often with great rapidity, through popular culture' (Partridge 2004: 119). As popular culture is all around us, so are the religious/spiritual beliefs and ideas it disseminates (Partridge 2004: 126). Through circulating a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs and ideas, popular culture also contributes to their 'de-exotification', that is, to their integration as part of contemporary Western cultural consciousness (Partridge 2004: 53). As Partridge goes on to argue, 'at a basic level, popular culture both reflects and informs ideas, values and meanings within society as well as providing a site for the exploration of ideas, values and meanings'. Forbes (2005: 5) makes a similar point, arguing that: 'Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflect us.' As scholars of religion and popular culture have argued for some time, popular culture itself provides one important contemporary arena in which the very understanding and perception of 'religion' is constantly negotiated (Mahan 2007: 51; see also Chidester 2005: 9).

Popular culture has long been an important site for the dissemination of alternative religious and spiritual ideas that challenge the traditional Judeo-Christian world-view. A notable exception is found in popular culture's longstanding interest in essentially Judeo-Christian *demonology*, *eschatology* and *apocalypticism*, which is perhaps most vividly reflected in the enduring popularity and success of films about the Devil, the Antichrist and the end of the world. Moreover, these types of theme have always been important sources of

inspiration within the world of popular music; 'popular musicians and their fans have found dark occulture particularly alluring' (Partridge 2005: 252). Metal, and especially its more extreme sub-genres, is no doubt one of the clearest examples of this. As noted by Partridge (2005: 248), 'the subversive values provided by Western demonology are actually enormously attractive to those wanting to construct countercultural identities'. In this regard, he goes on to argue, metal 'has had an enormous occultural impact' (Partridge 2005: 251).

### **Dark alternative spirituality within metal music and culture**

The history of metal stretches back to the emergence of the *heavy metal* rock genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, heavy metal has developed, evolved and diversified in a number of directions. These days, the term 'metal' is commonly used as a general term, coupling together a large number of closely related sub-genres and styles that have developed throughout the years (some commentators also use the term 'heavy metal' as such a general term). Although heavy metal was never 1960s-countercultural in any real sense, it did emerge in close enough connection to that environment in order to become considerably influenced by it, at least during its initial stage of development. Deena Weinstein argues that heavy metal did indeed adopt some of the characteristics of the 'Woodstock generation', such as its deep distrust for social and political authorities, its view of popular music as a serious form of artistic expression and its emphasis on musical authenticity, although in slightly altered forms. Only marginally interested with political or social activism, heavy metal largely abandoned such typical aspects of the 1960s countercultural ethos. Instead, in heavy metal lyrics, imagery and aesthetics, central countercultural themes such as tolerance, peace and love were often replaced with their opposites, evil, death and destruction (Weinstein 1991: 12–18).

With a history spanning four decades, metal has also proven exceptionally enduring and long-lived in the context of a global, fast changing and increasingly fluid world of popular music. Metal music and culture has also spread on a global scale far beyond what has traditionally been viewed as the Western cultural sphere (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007: 97; LeVine 2008). The extreme character of the music, its lyrical themes and aesthetics, have also sparked a great deal of controversy and made metal a highly polarizing form of music that is as dearly loved and appreciated among its fans as it is detested

and reviled among its detractors. Compared to the interest directed at most other major and long-lived popular music genres, scholarly work on metal, and particularly on the relationship between metal and religion, has so far been very limited.

From the very outset, *religion*, particularly the dark and evil forces of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the form of Satan, demons and the fires of hell, has functioned as one of heavy metal's most important sources of inspiration. The *Bible*, particularly the apocalyptic themes of the Book of Revelation, not only provided early groups with a whole set of religious themes but also an arsenal of religious *symbols* and a rich religious *terminology* (see Weinstein 1991: 36–41). Additional inspiration was also found in different forms of occultism, esotericism, paganism and Satanism as well as in ancient legends and myths such as those found in Germanic, Norse, and Celtic mythology. These days, religious/spiritual and mythological themes of the various kinds mentioned above commonly surface at almost every level of metal culture; in song lyrics, in imagery and aesthetics, in specialized media, in music videos, at live performances etc. These types of themes were explored a great deal further within a number of more extreme and radical metal sub-genres, such as *thrash*, *death* and *black metal*, which developed from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. These sub-genres are usually coupled together under the heading *extreme metal*. Extreme metal styles steered the already highly aggressive and powerful music towards further extremes by, as Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 6) writes, 'distancing themselves in a self-conscious attempt to explore the radical potential of metal'.

Criticism and rejection of dominant social and cultural authorities constitute a central component of many popular music cultures, and metal is no exception in this regard. In metal, however, such criticism is often expressed through a conscious, radical and deliberately provocative transgression of the boundaries of the socially and culturally 'acceptable' (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007: 141–56; Weinstein 1991: 42–3, 53–7). The extensive use of radical satanic, anti-Christian or otherwise strongly misanthropic lyrical themes and imagery within many forms of metal can be viewed as examples of this. The apparent seriousness of extreme metal discourse, imagery and aesthetics is greatly fuelled by the use of dark religious/spiritual themes and imagery, particularly those relating to the satanic and anti-Christian, such as the frequently used image of the inverted cross, or satanic symbolism such as the Sigil of Baphomet. However, this apparent seriousness—and especially when it relates to religion—is complicated by the fact that metal generally remains a largely non-political and non-ideological popular music culture. The most

salient ideological feature of metal culture on the whole is that of individualism, of thinking and standing up for oneself and one's beliefs. However, even though this broadly defined individualist ethos also functions as a barrier against attaching the music to any particular ideology wholeheartedly, one can nevertheless cite numerous examples which at the very least seem to suggest otherwise. This is particularly the case within extreme sub-genres such as black metal, which developed in the early 1990s, mainly through the efforts of Norwegian groups such as Mayhem, Emperor and Darkthrone. As Kahn-Harris (2007: 5) writes, 'Black metallers embraced satanism wholeheartedly' and developed a radical anti-Christian ideology as expressed in the black metal slogan 'support the war against Christianity!' Combined with elements of Norse Paganism (e.g. Odinism and Ásatrú) this particular brand of anti-Christian sentiment gave rise to a loosely defined black metal ideology mainly concentrated on ideas of a revitalization of pagan heritage and a return to a pre-Christian culture and society untarnished by the perceived hypocrisy and herd mentality of a historically imposed Christianity.

In the early 1990s black metal attracted the attention of mainstream media in the Nordic countries as some members of the Norwegian black metal scene were linked to, and eventually convicted of, a large number of both successful and attempted church arsons, as well as some instances of extreme violence and even murder (Moynihan & Söderlind 2003). Through these extraordinary events, the Norwegian black metal scene achieved much notoriety within metal culture on a global scale. Indeed, the radical anti-Christian sentiments held by some members of the infamous early 1990s scene are still actively promoted by some bands today. Among these, the openly satanic Norwegian black metal band Gorgoroth, formed in 1992, has sparked repeated controversy and also become widely known throughout global metal culture because of this. In 2007, due to internal disagreements, the band split into two separate line-ups both using the same name. The following discussion will focus on the activity of the band prior to the split. The official website of the version of the band fronted by vocalist Kristian Eivind Espedal, mostly known by his artist-name Gaahl, still contains the band's old 'manifesto' which, among other things, states that Gorgoroth 'was founded . . . as a strategy to perpetrate sonic and spiritual violence upon the world in order to bring forth change in people's perception of being therein.' It also urges readers to 'prepare for a coming of a modern day inhuman and non-secular Satanism channelled through the vehicle of metal music' (<http://www.gorgoroth.org/frameset.html>).

Gorgoroth's radical image has been further reinforced through a number of controversial statements by both its earlier and present members, particularly its vocalist and front man, Gaahl. For example, when asked about his views on the Norwegian church arsons of the early 1990s in an interview for the acclaimed metal music documentary film *Metal. A Headbanger's Journey* (2005), he declared his 'hundred percent' support for them, adding that not only should there have been more of them, but also that there will be more of them in the future. As in many other interviews, he also went on to explain the basics of his highly individualistic world view in which Satan functions as the ultimate symbol and force of freedom and individuality. As discussed above, in general, such an individualistic ideology closely resembles that found in the teachings of more established Satanist groups such as the Church of Satan and other esoteric groups such as the Temple of Set. The Satanist and strongly individualist ideology of the band is further conveyed through the music itself as illustrated by album titles such as *Ad Majorem Sathanas Gloriam* (2006) and *Twilight of the Idols: In Conspiracy with Satan* (2003).

Gorgoroth has also engendered some deal of controversy by making extensive use of anti-Christian and satanic imagery during their live performances. For instance, their 2004 'Black Mass' concert performance in Kraków, Poland, made headline news in both the Polish and the Norwegian press. The concert, filmed live by the Polish state TV station TVP for future release on DVD, featured prominently displayed satanic symbolism, two naked men and women crucified on stage with black hoods covering their heads, drenched in sheep's blood which also covered the entire stage lined with sheep's heads on stakes. As reported by the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* (4 February 2004), the band was even subjected to an investigation for 'religious offence' by Polish police, although no official charges were ever made. ([http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article723414.ece.](http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article723414.ece))

Far from having a negative impact on the band, it could certainly be argued instead that this type of controversy only serves to raise awareness and strengthen the already radical image that Gorgoroth consciously and successfully has strived to create for itself. Moreover, one would surely not be entirely mistaken to single out the principal source of this controversy, that is, the explicit promotion of satanic and anti-Christian ideas, as a still particularly potent one. Although many metal groups dabble with satanic and anti-Christian themes and imagery in a playful spirit in order to raise the shock-value of their music, in the case of bands such as Gorgoroth, we find such themes and imagery being vehemently and consistently promoted in a way that makes it difficult to brush them off as mere shock-theatrics.



The apparent seriousness of these types of extreme metal themes and imagery has long been a much debated issue among researchers of metal music and culture. As Robin Sylvan (2002: 178) argues: 'Although the scholarship on heavy metal tends to downplay the Satanic element, the Satanic imagery in heavy metal is too pervasive to ignore.' True, some studies of metal may indeed have downplayed metal's satanic element, but one should also be wary of exaggerating or overstating it. As Partridge (2005: 235) points out, 'too often spoof adherence and theatrics, such as that exhibited by . . . heavy metal bands, are misinterpreted by some academics and uninformed observers as evidence of allegiance to Satanism.' In any case, it is worth pointing out that metal's 'religious element' as such has so far received only limited attention within research on metal as a whole. My argument here is that, when exploring the dissemination of dark alternative spiritual ideas within metal music and culture on a general level, to speculate about whether bands such as Gorgoroth are 'really' serious or not is quite beside the point. Here the band is merely taken as an example of how pervasive and explicitly articulated the satanic element in metal sometimes can be.

Although metal has been associated with satanic themes and imagery since its early days, far from all metal groups show any real interest in such things. The world of religion and myth in general, however, has remained an important source of inspiration for many metal bands to this day. Bands interested in exploring religious/spiritual topics often also choose to focus on various pagan themes and ideas. Indeed, various forms of pagan themes and imagery have since long become such a recurring feature of many forms of metal that, in addition to its 'satanic element', one could speak of metal's 'pagan element' as well. Although pagan themes and imagery have long appeared within many forms of metal, they are particularly common within the so called *folk* or *pagan metal* sub-genre that emerged in the early 1990s. Folk/pagan metal groups typically incorporate elements from the folk music traditions of their own native cultures, often adding instruments such as fiddles and accordions to an otherwise traditional metal sound of heavily distorted guitars, bass and drums.

While satanic themes and imagery sometimes seem to be used in a very serious manner indeed, pagan themes are usually explored in a much less confrontational spirit. In some cases, such as in the black metal sub-genre discussed above, satanic and pagan themes may overlap. In other cases, however, some particular pagan tradition instead functions as the primary inspirational source. Although Germanic, Norse and Celtic traditions tend to predominate, certain elements of other pagan traditions, such as the figure of

the shaman, are also relatively common. Some bands choose to focus on the particular pagan traditions of their own native cultures, writing most or all of their lyrics in their own native languages. For example, on the official website of the Finnish pagan metal band Moonsorrow, formed in 1995, one can find a biographical statement explaining that the creation of ‘epic metal art with a good touch of national romanticism and a distinctively pagan approach’ always has been one of the band’s main aspirations (<http://www.moonsorrow.com/moonsorrowcom/moonsorrow.html>). This ‘distinctively pagan approach’ is further elaborated in the band’s song lyrics. For example, their 2001 album *Suden uni* (Wolf’s Dream) contains songs such as ‘Ukkosenjumalan Poika’ (Son of the God of Thunder), ‘Köyliönjärven Jäällä (Pakanavedet II)’ (On the Ice of Köyliönjärvi (Pagan Waters II))’ and ‘Pakanajuhla’ (Pagan Feast). A good example of how the band’s pagan approach finds expression in their song lyrics can be found in the lyrics to the song ‘Pakanajuhla’:

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Veljet sekä siskot</i>                | Brothers and sisters              |
| <i>kokoontukaamme yhteen pöytään!</i>    | Let us gather at the same table   |
| <i>On meidän malja nostettava</i>        | A toast we need to raise          |
| <i>uudelle jumalalle.</i>                | to the new god.                   |
| ...                                      |                                   |
| <i>Ketkä asettivat sankarinsa</i>        | Who set their heroes to be        |
| <i>juhlittaviksi</i>                     | celebrated                        |
| <i>aina meidän pyhiemme aikaan?</i>      | always at our sacred times?       |
| <i>Ja he toistuvasti julkeavat puhua</i> | And they repeatedly dare to speak |
| <i>meistä häpäisijöinä!</i>              | of us as desecrators!             |

As noted above, many forms of contemporary paganism stress the importance of continuity with ancient traditions and, hence, often adopt a critical and sometimes openly antagonistic stance towards institutional Christianity. In my interpretation, such ideas and attitudes are clearly expressed in the lyrics cited above. It is quite evident, I would argue, that these lyrics criticize institutional Christianity for having usurped the pre-Christian pagan holidays and replaced them with its own. Moreover, the last line (‘And they repeatedly dare to speak of us as desecrators!’) also takes an apologetic tone as it accuses institutional Christianity of hypocrisy, ignorance, and historical amnesia. Moonsorrow has consistently continued to explore these types of themes on later albums such as *Kivenkantaja* (Stonebearer) released in 2003 and *Verisäkeet* (Blood Verses) released in 2005. However, with some exceptions, the band’s ‘distinctively pagan approach’ seems primarily directed at

investing the music with an 'epic' and 'larger-than-life' quality. Nevertheless, Moonsorrow's lyrics are still replete with pagan themes and references to ancient myth and legend. Indeed, as discussed in relation to the band Gorgoroth above, these themes constitute an integral and inseparable part of the band's image and identity.

The Finnish folk metal band Korpiklaani (Forest Clan), formed in 2003, provides an even clearer example of extensive and obviously playful use of themes and imagery inspired by native Finnish pagan themes and national romanticism. For example, their 2003 album *Spirit of the Forest* contains songs like 'God of Wind', 'Pellonpekko' (the god of ploughing fields, agriculture and beer in pre-Christian Finnish religion), 'Shaman Drum', and 'Mother Earth'. Some lyrics are also written in Kalevala meter used in old Finnish epic poetry. It should be noted, though, that the band often combines their interest in Finnish pre-Christian religion with other themes such as beer, women, and partying. Most of the band's album covers depict a shaman figure (often with reindeer horns on his head) in the midst of a typical northern Finnish natural setting. Other types of frequently used imagery include the reindeer, shamanistic symbolism, and the shaman drum itself. Such imagery also appears on band t-shirts and other band paraphernalia such as the handmade 'Korpiklaani pendant' which can be purchased through the band's official website. At concerts, reindeer horns are also usually attached to the lead vocalist's microphone stand. In this way, Korpiklaani's interest in pre-Christian Finnish mythology and religion surface at every level of their activity, making it an inseparable part of their image and identity as a band.

In addition to Satanism and paganism some metal bands also focus on esoteric and occult themes and ideas. The Swedish band Therion, formed in 1987, is an exceptionally good example of this. The band has created its own majestic signature sound through mixing metal with classical orchestral arrangements and large choirs. Therion's lyrics focus almost exclusively on themes relating to ancient mythology, legends, and Western esotericism. Thomas Karlsson, head and founder of the Stockholm-based dark magic order *Dragon Rouge* (Ordo Draconis et Atri Adamantis) has long functioned as the band's principal lyricist although he is not a formal member of the band (for more on Dragon Rouge, see Granholm 2005). The band also makes extensive use of magical and esoteric symbolism on album covers and sleeves, particularly the hendecagram or star of *Qliphoth* which is also used as the main symbol for the band. It should also be noted that Therion is the name for a god ('The Beast') in the teachings of *Thelema* as developed by the influential British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

Therion's interest in esoteric themes is clearly evident on their 2007 double album *Gothic Kabbalah*. Every single song on the album explores some kind of esoteric or mythological theme. The album cover depicts a human figure standing in front of a large eye resembling the symbol of the Eye of Providence (also known as the 'all-seeing eye'). In addition to the title song 'Gothic Kabbalah', the album also contains songs like 'The Perennial Sophia', 'The Wand of Abaris' and 'Adulruna Rediviva'. The notion of perennial wisdom (the idea of an eternal and universal philosophical truth) has for a long time been central to many forms of Western esotericism; the legendary figure Abaris the Hyperborean appears as a sage and priest of Apollo in book IV of Herodotus' *The Histories*; and the concept of Adulruna, or the 'Gothic Kabbalah', originates from the Kabbalah-inspired runic system developed by the Swedish runic scholar Johannes Bureus (1568–1652) (see Granholm 2005: 29).

It is worth noting here that these songs explore rather *specific* esoteric and mythological themes that might not be familiar to listeners with only limited or no prior knowledge of mythology and Western esotericism. There is thus arguably something of an *educational* aspect to Therion's music. To take another example, their 2001 album *Secret of the Runes* offers the listener an excursion through the worlds of the Norse mythological universe. The album starts with 'Ginnungagap' (the empty gap that existed prior to the creation of the ordered universe), continues through 'Midgård' (the world of men) and 'Asgård' (the world of the gods) and eventually ends up in 'Helheim' (the world of the dead). In addition to the lyrics, the record sleeve even contains short explanations of each of these mythological worlds. For example, the explanation to the epilogue track 'Secret of the Runes' begins as follows: 'The runes are the secrets of the universe. Their inner meaning is hidden and concealed to the uninitiated. When you learn the secret of the runes your eyes shall open and you will become a god.' In this excerpt, the mythological themes of the songs are clearly connected to notions of esoteric knowledge. As with the other bands discussed above, esoteric and mythological themes constitute an integral part of Therion's music and image as a band. Moreover, we find such mythological and esoteric themes being consciously circulated by the band and, to some extent, actively *promoted* as well.

## Concluding remarks

In this article, my main aim has been to illustrate the ways in which metal music and culture has played, and continues to play, an important role in the dissemination of a wide range of 'dark' alternative spiritual themes and ideas. Of course, it has been beyond the scope of this article to provide anything even resembling a comprehensive account of the relationship between metal music and religious/spiritual themes and imagery. Instead, this issue was approached through focusing on some contemporary and successful metal groups from the Nordic countries which are all characterized by their active engagement with particular sets of dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas. The spirit in which these bands explore such issues ranges from the evidently serious to the apparently serious to the obviously playful. This brings us back to the issue of the views of band members themselves. It could certainly be argued that metal's fascination for 'spooof adherence and theatrics' (Partridge 2005: 235) applies equally to all cases in which religious/spiritual themes and imagery are used in an apparently serious manner. This, of course, is *not* to say that dark alternative spiritual themes are not indeed explored seriously by some bands. Clearly, some of the bands discussed in this article appear to do precisely that, albeit in very different ways. The actual views of band members themselves may indeed play an important role in affording authenticity to the music of a band. Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that at least some members of bands such as Gorgoroth, Moonsorrow, Korpiklaani, and Therion, are indeed serious about the dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas that they explore through their music—especially when they express their views publicly in film documentaries or interviews for various forms of metal media. Nevertheless, my argument here has been that such themes and ideas have become so widely circulated and integrated with metal culture as a whole that they have taken on a life of their own.

In addition to these concerns, we also need to recognize the *commercial* and *entertainment* aspects at play here. After all, metal bands are creators of an art- and entertainment form that is, to a considerable degree, aimed at generating commercial profit through selling records, DVDs, concert tickets, band merchandise etc. Put another way, there is a sense in which dark alternative spiritual themes in metal music and culture are not merely explored and circulated but also *consumed*. Even so, the important point to note is that, through the efforts of bands such as those discussed in this article (and there are countless more), dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas have become widely circulated and familiar within metal culture as a whole. Of course, it

could be argued that many metal bands, including the ones discussed here, only explore such themes in a frivolous and superficial way. However, as increasing numbers of people are starting to look for religious/spiritual inspiration in popular culture, metal bands such as the ones discussed here may be seen to provide their audiences with important resources for the shaping of alternative cultural and spiritual identities (Partridge 2005: 248). And, if the 'messages and subtle themes' of popular culture 'influence us as well as reflect us', as is argued by Forbes (2005: 5) above, then it seems plausible to argue that the dark alternative spiritual themes circulating within metal culture may influence and reflect its audiences as well.

## References

### *Literature*

#### **Beckford, James**

1992 Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity. In: Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Religion: Contemporary Issues*; pp. 11–27. London: Bellew.

#### **Chidester, David**

2005 *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

#### **Forbes, Bruce D.**

2005 Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places. In: Bruce D. Forbes & Jeffrey H. Mahan (eds), *Religion and Popular Culture in America*; pp. 1–20. Berkeley: University of California Press.

#### **Granhölm, Kennet**

2005 *Embracing the Dark: The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge – Its Practice in Dark Magic and Meaning Making*. Turku: Åbo Akademi University.

#### **Hanegraaff, Wouter J.**

1998 *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. New York: State University of New York Press.

#### **Heelas, Paul, Linda Woodhead, with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski & Karin Tusting**

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

#### **Kahn-Harris, Keith**

2007 *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Oxford: Berg.

#### **LeVine, Mark**

2008 *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

**Lynch, Gordon**

2006 The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45 (4): 481–8.

**Mahan, Jeffrey H.**

2007 Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture. In: Gordon Lynch (ed.), *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*; pp. 47–62. London: I. B. Tauris.

**Martin, David**

2005 *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

**Moynihan, Michael & Didrik Söderlind**

2003 *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Venice, CA: Feral House.

**Partridge, Christopher**

2004 *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 1): *Understanding Popular Occulture*. London: Continuum.

2005 *The Re-enchantment of the West* (vol. 2): *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. London: Continuum.

**Pearson, Jo**

2003 'Witchcraft will soon Vanish from this Earth': Wicca in the 21st Century. In: Grace Davie, Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead (eds), *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*; pp. 170–82. Hampshire: Ashgate.

**Sylvan, Robin**

2002 *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. New York: New York University Press.

**Weinstein, Deena**

1991 *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Lexington Books.

*Websites*

Aftenposten. <http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article723414.ece> (accessed on 19 August 2008).

Gorgoroth. <http://www.gorgoroth.org/frameset.html> (accessed on 19 August 2008).

Korpiklaani. <http://www.korpiklaani.com/> (accessed on 19 August 2008).

Moonsorrow. <http://www.moonsorrow.com/moonsorrowcom/> (accessed on 19 August 2008).

*Discography*

**Gorgoroth**

2003 *Twilight of the Idols: In Conspiracy with Satan*. Nuclear Blast.

2006 *Ad Majorem Sathanas Gloriam*. Regain Records.

**Korpiklaani**

2003 *Spirit of the Forest*. Napalm Records.

**Moonsorrow**

- 2001 *Suden uni*. Plasmatica Records.  
2003 *Kivenkantaja*. Spinefarm Records.  
2005 *Verisäkeet*. Spinefarm Records.

**Therion**

- 2001 *Secret of the Runes*. Nuclear Blast.  
2007 *Gothic Kabbalah*. Nuclear Blast.

*Films*

***Metal: A Headbanger's Journey***

- 2005 Seville Pictures.



## Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism

### Introduction

In recent years, the thesis about a fundamental shift in Western religiosity has become increasingly prominent in the scientific study of religion. Many new phenomena of today's religious scene are seen as the manifestation of a resacralization/re-enchantment of the world, or even of spirituality/a spiritual revolution (Tacey 2003; Heelas & Woodhead 2005). With due acknowledgment of claims of the 'return of the sacred', it is impossible to ignore the fact that the last century has seen changes in the social form of religion as well as in individual religiosity, both having become more subjective and spiritual. In other words, the sacred is returning, but in an altered form, with only a superficial resemblance to its pre-modern shape. The new religious world-view that is taking shape presupposes an essential oneness of microcosm and macrocosm and a presence of the divine in man and in the world. The radical distinction between the temporal and supernatural worlds disappears, which seems to herald the advent of a new type of spirituality based on the idea of immanence. This new 'all-inclusive spirituality' has many forms of expression and is concerned with 'the sacredness of life, nature and the universe' and 'all pathways that lead to meaning and purpose' (Tacey 2003: 38).

This shift in Western religiosity, first depicted by Thomas Luckmann (1967) was later identified by Colin Campbell as the easternization of the Western cultural paradigm (Campbell 1999). According to Campbell, the phenomenon—coterminous with the decline of Christian culture—is not just the effect of a simple importation of Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. Receptiveness to such ideas was made possible by a reorientation of the Western world-view, which, by internal evolution, had developed a number of new elements coinciding with Eastern philosophy and way of life. These included belief in the unity of man and nature, a holistic concept of mind, body, and spirit, and an awareness of the limitations inherent in science and rationality (see Hunt 2002: 53).

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead proposed a new interpretation of this ‘tectonic shift in the sacred landscape’, which now goes by the name of ‘the spiritual revolution’. They claim to be in the possession of the “‘holy grail” of the contemporary study of religion, namely a theory which can at one and the same time explain the decline of some forms of the sacred and the rise of others’: the ‘subjectivization thesis’, based on Charles Taylor’s claim of ‘the massive subjective turn of modern culture’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2). This ‘subjective turn’ means ‘a turn away from life lived in terms of external or “objective” roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic)’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2).

All the above-mentioned explanatory frameworks to a certain extent employ the concept of individualization. In the following presentation I shall examine the usefulness of this approach for the understanding of today’s religious scene.

## Postmodernity and the culture of individualism

The alleged ‘return of the sacred’ is sometimes interpreted as a reaction to the pluralization of world-views which has shaken the foundations of socially generated ontological security and brought about a situation of generalized uncertainty. After the fiasco of the twentieth century lay ideologies, disgraced by the totalitarian systems, modernity gave up constructing all-encompassing world-views that could act as sense-building for individuals. From then on, the discourse was, *de rigueur*, anti-ideological and anti-utopian. We are no longer creating ‘grand narratives’, but only telling Kiplinguesque ‘just-so-stories’ (see Prickett 2002: 2).

This distrust of ideologies and visions of collective salvation is seen as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernity. I will not open a can of worms by referring to the manifold concepts of postmodernity and the immense volume of literature that followed Jean-François Lyotard’s proclamation of the end of the grand narratives, or Francis Fukuyama’s proclamation of the end of history. I would give the situation we live in another name: late modernity, high modernity, fluid modernity, or, preferably, ‘supermodernity’ (*surmodernité*). This neologism (derived from the term *surdétermination* used by Sigmund Freud and Louis Althusser, describing a situation which is too complex to allow for unambiguous interpretation) introduced by Marc Augé to avoid the decadent connotation, evoked by the prefix ‘post’, stresses

continuity rather than a break from modernity, which seems to be more adequate (Augé 2005).

For our (post/late/super)modern world may still be described by notions like transient and provisional—terms which since Charles Baudelaire (one of the most influential forefathers of the modernity concept) have been indispensable components of any definition of modernity (to recall Baudelaire's statement: 'By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', Baudelaire 1998: 23). These notions indicate an accelerated change in the social environment and its institutionalization; in other words, the elevation of change to the position of a cultural axiom, a programmatic feature. In pre-modern societies, change was descriptive of a departure from tradition, an infringement of the *nomos*, of the predetermined state of affairs. By contrast, modern man has to accept the fluidity of all that was, over time, perceived as fixed. Accelerated change results in a ruptured continuity of social memory and produces a sense of unpredictability. The world begins to appear as illegible, fragmentary, changeable and contingent.

Another constitutive component of modernity is reflected in notions of 'individualization' and 'individualism'. Individualization of personality and biography has become the main, widely understood and respected, postulate of Western societies. In other words, we are now living in the culture of individualism. Its sense is still well reflected in Emile Durkheim's century-old formula: 'a cult of the individual'; 'the cult of which he is at once both object and follower' (Durkheim 1898: 9, quoted in Pickering 1984: 483). Durkheim was convinced that this new cult will constitute the core of the new social form of religion: 'There remains nothing that man may love and honour in common, apart from himself. This is why man has become a god for men, and it is why he can no longer turn to other gods without being untrue to himself.' (Durkheim 1898: 11, quoted in Pickering 1984: 483)

Many contemporary scholars share Durkheim's conviction. According to Hans-Georg Soeffner, collective faith in and hope for an individual's autonomy is the common ground, a barrier against anomy, and the ideological equivalent of the contemporary social structure. This faith is the 'backstage religion' of our democratic visions of the world (Soeffner 2000: 102–3). The individualization thesis has also become a key to understanding the transformation of Western religion. Danièle Hervieu-Léger pointed out that recent sociological studies of religion in Europe gradually switch the emphasis 'to patterns of individualization of belief, leading individuals to independently evolve personal credos that would give meaning to their existence, according to their own frame of mind, interests, aspirations, and experience' (Hervieu-Léger 2006).

## Religious individualism

Although ‘religious individualization’ is one of the most frequently employed categories in reflections on contemporary religiosity, there is no agreement about the meaning of the term. Hubert Knoblauch distinguished three main types of statement concerning religious individualization: (1) From the stock of existing systems, individuals put together a religion of their own (individual syncretisms). (2) As ‘searchers’, individuals switch between religions, every time changing their world-view or identity. (3) They simultaneously harbour various religious convictions (Knoblauch 1999: 201–2).

The sources of religious individualization are usually sought in specific Western realities. Paradigmatic of this standpoint is Max Weber’s well-known position. Another influential exponent of this approach is Emil Durkheim, who also derives modern individualism as well as individualistic religiosity from Christianity. Durkheim categorically states that ‘individual religious phenomena which are legion are derived from “external, impersonal and public religion”’ (Pickering 1984: 203). This outlook is shared today by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who states that the contemporary ‘do-it-yourself approach to religious belief and practice’ does not mean a decline of conventional religious traditions, because they have ‘lost all their cultural relevance in European society. Those traditions simply began to increasingly serve as symbolic repositories of meaning, available for individuals to subjectively use and reuse in different ways’ (Hervieu-Léger 2006).

The religious individualism characteristic of contemporary religiosity may be defined as ‘the view that the individual believer does not need intermediaries, that he has the primary responsibility for his own spiritual destiny, that he has the right and the duty to come to his own relationships with his God in his own way and by his own effort’ (Lukes 1973: 94). This attitude has been radicalised in late modernity. Postmodern religion, writes Paul Heelas, ‘is very much in the hands of the “free” subject. . . The deregulation of the religious realm, combined with the cultural emphasis on freedom and choice, results in intermingled, interfused, forms of religious—or “religious-cum-secular”—life which exists beyond the tradition-regulated church and chapel.’ (Heelas 1998: 5.) These new forms of religious life are most often analysed under the umbrella term of ‘postmodern’ or ‘new’ spirituality.

## Defining spirituality

In recent years, the interest in spirituality has rapidly risen, creating a new 'megatrend' (Bucher 2007: 3). In spite of the omnipresence of the term, its semantic range is very wide and the content remains unclear, which severely diminishes its analytical usefulness. There are almost as many definitions of spirituality as there are texts about it. A very inclusive definition has been proposed by Paweł Socha, who sees spirituality as 'a socioculturally structured and determined attempt to cope with existential human situations. Thus interpreted, spirituality is a human universal appearing in many secular as well as religious forms' (Hay & Socha 2005: 589).

The semantic evolution of the word has been reconstructed by Christian Bochinger (1995: 386–9). Well established in the Christian vocabulary, the word 'spirituality' has since the late nineteenth century been used in the Anglophone tradition to describe an attitude toward religion that emphasizes an inner experience of deity as contrasted with blind faith in a dogma, as was characteristic for traditional Christianity. Later, when the notion is enlarged to cover other religions, it acquires the sense of the mystical core of religion, which, unlike theological or dogmatic expressions—can be experienced primarily, if not exclusively, in the individual, private religious practice of a 'God's seeker'. In the New Age vocabulary the term is associated with such phrases as 'mystical/direct experience', 'personal religion', 'direct connection', 'an inner search for meaning', 'the idea of God within', 'direct knowing', and so on.

The overview of some recent qualitative studies of spirituality (Bucher 2007: 26–33) shows that today spirituality is most often associated with connectedness and oneness, relation to God (or a transcendent being), connectedness with nature, relation to others and to selves, practice (especially prayer and meditation), paranormal experiences and abilities and, last but not least, as self-transcendence; in fact, according to Bucher, self-transcendence constitutes 'the heart of spirituality' (Bucher 2007: 45). This new spirituality has many expressions and is described by terms such as 'personal', 'subjective', 'eclectic', 'selective', 'postmodern' and, last but not least, 'individualistic'.

An understanding of a (post/late/super)modern form of spirituality may be helped by a reconstruction of its origins. To this end, I suggest a three-phase model metaphorically fashioned as a transition between three states of religious matter: from solid to liquid to ever changing ether, invisible to the observer. The inspiration for the model came from a common modernist trope. Beginning from Baudelaire's first definition of modernity (as the ephemeral), through the famous Marxian dictum *The Communist Manifesto*

(recently popularized again by Marshall Berman (1988: 15): ‘To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air”’), to Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of ‘fluid modernity’ (Bauman 2000: 3–6)—modern times have constantly been associated with melting and evaporating of all things petrified in tradition.

The model may seem diachronic, but in fact it is constructed to explain a rather synchronic picture, a panorama of contemporary forms of spirituality or a religious spectrum extending from ‘good old religion’ to ‘new spirituality’. All three states of religious matter demonstrably coexist in the world today.

### **From religion to spirituality**

In its steady state, religion is primarily communal action, performance, worship of God, a cult. An individual engages in socially defined actions, and whatever sense he attributes to it is irrelevant to the religion itself. An individual, as Durkheim sees it, must subordinate himself to the requirements of religion and cannot cut it down to his own size. A religious world-view is a type of knowledge of the world; it makes metaphysical claims about the ultimate nature of reality; good, evil, etc. To believe is to take certain things for granted about the world. The object of a religious cult is explicitly stated and lends itself to objectivization. This state of religious matter continued until early modernity, which is described by Zygmunt Bauman as ‘solid’. Contemporaneously, it exists in pockets of collectivist-oriented communities (for one, the widespread Polish cultural Catholicism).

During the Protestant Reformation a revolution took place. For Steve Bruce, the most important innovation of this Reformation was the rejection of the institution of religious professionals. ‘Luther insisted that every man be his own monk, do religion and piety’—and earn religious merit (Bruce 1996: 14). Another innovation was the ‘abandonment of rituals of periodic purification and the insistence on a regular religious and ethical life . . . Each individual had to take a passionate interest in assessing his or her conduct’ (Bruce 1996: 15–16). And here lies the breeding ground for the new form of Western religion, which I associate with the second, liquid state.

The liquid state involves the notion of religiosity: religion changes its state, evaporating inward. Although it remains tinted with the original substance from which it derives (e.g., a ‘Catholic tint’), it is the vessel that it fills, a human soul, which gives it shape and individual character. The foundation of religiosity is personal faith. The new formula of faith calls for constant,

sustained reflection; 'to believe' no longer means 'to know' and 'to be right' (Schelsky 1967). Religiosity maintains its links with the religion from which it derives—and not only semantically. The faithful still find no difficulty with religious identification or their declared membership in a wider community of believers in 'the same'. Yet here the question posed by Niklas Luhmann (1977: 307) enters the stage: What does one really believe when one says one believes in Jesus? According to Bruno Latour, the effect of the double exclusion of God, his confinement to metaphysics and to the inner man, makes for a God completely different from his pre-modern namesake, just as nature constructed in the laboratory differs from previous *physis* (Latour 1995: 48–9). Correspondingly, Charles Taylor speaks of a disappearing *Christendom* (a religion that organized the world order) and waxing *Christianity*—a personal attitude, a religiosity aware of alternatives (Interview with Charles Taylor).

Such a reflexive religiosity opposes reification of its object, thus preventing it from being objectivized. The object of belief assumes the form of 'empty transcendence', becomes increasingly less definite, ever more difficult to communicate, and therefore less 'public' as it grows more 'private'. We may call it spirituality, but with the adjective 'religious', because it still carries qualifications linking it with its original denominational tradition (such as Protestant spirituality, monastic spirituality).

The term 'new spirituality' today designates the third, gaseous, ethereal state of religious matter. This phase of religiosity turned into spirituality is intimately linked with individualization at its most radical. Individualist spirituality can only be spoken of when it becomes 'faith for someone': when it is purposely made by an individual for his own sake, in response to his 'spiritual needs' and fashioned after his personal idiom. Still, the culture of individualism contributes to such spirituality becoming consciously geared to expression of a person's deepest concerns and idiosyncrasies. Therefore, it may be called 'idiomorphic spirituality' or, better, 'idio-spirituality'—which reflects the ancient Greek meaning of the word 'idiot', describing the person who keeps out of public affairs (see Elias 1987: 212).

The proposed model is consistent with the general assumption that every individual form of religiosity or spirituality is deeply in debt to established, social forms of religion, which may be seen as a petrified effect of the collective (inter)action of many other people. From this point of view the religion is the source of religiosity (and spirituality). However, a diametrically opposed view is also possible. From this reversed perspective (individual) religiosity is the source of (collective) religion. This standpoint has its prominent exponents in Georg Simmel and Thomas Luckmann. Simmel explicitly states that

'it is not religion which creates religiosity, but the religiosity creates religion' (Simmel 1989: 120). He believed that religion answers an individual's impulse and desire for happiness. A desire for happiness in itself is not yet religion, but constitutes a kind of pre-stage of religious (or *religioid*) character. *Das Religiöide* makes up an individual foundation for religion, but it can also express itself in other cultural pursuits, such as science or art. It only becomes religion after it assumes a specific form in human interaction that produces patterns which then guide aims and means to satisfy the desire for happiness (see Knoblauch 1999: 66–7).

As Simmel noticed, the fabric of individual, 'made-to-measure' religiosity (or, as we would call it today, spirituality) is, above all, 'experience' (i.e., emotions, feelings). This involves 'turning toward experience', or even an 'obsession with experience' already observed by early theorists of modernity and becoming more radical today: 'Mass society has aroused and enhanced individuality. Individuality is characterized by an openness to experience, an efflorescence of sensation and sensibility' (Shils 1967: 3, quoted in Hall, Neitz & Battani 2003: 119). This 'experiential turn' is reflected in a new name which has been given to our mass/affluent/consumer society: 'the experience society' (see Schulze 1992).

Max Weber believed that the pursuit of experience was a sign of weakness, an inability to live a continual 'quotidian existence' which prevailed after the disenchantment of the old gods. He used to repeat after Nietzsche that the order of the day was happiness as invented by the 'last man'. If Weber only could imagine that in his homeland 'Happiness' will be taught in school as a compulsory subject (see <http://www.willy-hellpach-schule.de>).

According to Bauman, the focus on subjective experience is the defining characteristic of the modern liquid phase, a postulate of the culture of individualism and consumption (Bauman 2000: 78). It is also the distinguishing characteristic of the new individualistic spirituality. Here there is no need any more to believe anything; on the contrary, the need is to experience things. Classical faith is characterized by uncertainty and a distance to its object. The directness of emotional experience eliminates such distance. At any rate, one feature of 'experience' is that it is incommunicable. This quality helps bring about social individualization as it prevents the new spirituality becoming institutionalized. As Niklas Luhmann noticed, religion exists socially only as communication: 'What goes on in the heads of innumerable human beings would never have added up to religion if not for communication' (Luhmann 1998: 137, quoted in Kippenberg & von Stuckrad 2003: 94). But any communication about individualistic spirituality can only take the form of generalized statements on a broadly understood *sacrum*.



The very use (by the faithful and religious institutions alike) of the notion of *sacrum*, borrowed from the analytical vocabulary of religious studies leaves room for endless reinterpretations of the content of individual spirituality. This permits an individual to cultivate a sequence of ever new functional equivalents of religion without being encumbered by major re-evaluations reflected in rituals of conversion, or even changes in lifestyle. Instead of a firm position as epitomized in 'Here I stand, I can do no other', we may hear, 'all religions are good, each leads to God, but I like mine best' (a genuine statement I heard, surprisingly enough, from an elderly woman who professed traditional Catholicism). Exactly such may today be the faith of an individual and in this direction religious institutions are being reoriented (after all the Catholic Church officially condemned the blasphemy it saw in the publication of Muhammad's caricatures, while recently the German Church voiced its indignation at the Pope's call for missionary activity among the Jews). As a deliberate policy, the underspecified meaning of spirituality, its private orientation and, so to say, '*under*-institutionalization' all bespeak the nature of the fabric used in creating that 'made-to-measure spirituality'. Such spirituality is absolutely compatible with contemporary individualism and thrives in the 'culture of individualism'.

### Individualism reconsidered

Not every form of contemporary spirituality is individualistic. Moreover, it seems that individualistic spirituality has always been a minority programme. Weber, Durkheim, Troeltsch—every one of these founding fathers of the sociology of religion pointed out that individualistic and/or mystic orientation of religiosity correlates with a higher level of education. In groups cultivating new forms of religiosity one can observe a large, and often over-proportional, share of representatives of the social layer of intelligentsia. Colin Campbell even speaks of the formation of 'the secret religion of the educated classes' or an 'Invisible Church' of the educated layers of society (Campbell 1978).

As Stjepan Meštrović (1991: 40–1) put it: 'Alas, modern persons have the same need to escape into the world of social affect, but . . . less opportunity . . . This need may explain the fanaticism exhibited by fans of sporting, music and other events that capture what Durkheim called "collective effervescence" in postmodern life.' In his classic reconstruction of the development of Western individualism (seen as the ideology of modernity and the main distinguishing mark of modern societies), from the Christian otherworldly *indi-*

*viduum* to Calvin's this-worldly ascetic, all the way to Nazism, Louis Dumont makes a provocative claim that Nazism can be seen as derived from individualism as a holistic counterpoint to the individual (Dumont 1991: 160–91). However this concept may be judged, it is to Dumont's credit that he highlighted eruptions of collectivism in the history of Western individualism (see also Hietzge 2002: 237).

Revelling in individualism seems inappropriate in view of new collectivist forms of religiosity and flourishing neotribalism. As Michel Maffesoli put it: 'the constant interplay between the growing massification and the development of micro-groups, which I shall call "tribes". . . appears to me the founding tension characterising sociality at the end of the twentieth century' (Maffesoli 1996: 6). The limits and ambiguities of individualism had already been recognised by Robert N. Bellah. His words are worth quoting *in extenso*, especially today:

We insist, perhaps more than ever before, on finding our true selves independent of any cultural and social influence, being responsible to that self alone, and making its fulfillment the very meaning of our lives. Yet we spend much of our time navigating through immense bureaucratic structures – multiversities, corporations, government agencies – manipulating and being manipulated by others. In describing this situation, Alasdair MacIntyre has spoken of 'bureaucratic individualism'. . . A bureaucratic individualism in which the consent of the governed, the first demand of modern enlightened individualism, has been abandoned in all but form, illustrates the tendency of individualism to destroy its own conditions. (Bellah 1985: 150.)

It is no wonder that provocative voices can be heard thoroughly questioning the individualization thesis. Since the publication in 1961 of *Mensonge romantique, vérité romanesque* (see Girard 1976)—a brilliant study revealing the mechanism of mimetic desire—René Girard has continuously claimed that there is no individualism, nor has there ever been. None of us wishes anything for our own needs or desires. We always want what belongs to our neighbour. We want his wife and his life. Mimetic desire is the chief mainspring in human action, as may be suggested by the Bible prohibiting it in no fewer than two commandments.

## Concluding remarks

A need to treat religious individualization and standardization as complementary phenomena has recently been noted by James Beckford (2003). It is a fact that the spirituality of an individual develops in the one-size-fits-all consumerist culture. Individualism is a cultural postulate, but not a social reality. As Zygmunt Bauman noticed, a way to satisfy identity-related dreams and fantasies is found in buying ready-made components of an individual style (Bauman 2000: 83). Submitting to all-embracing shopping mania seems a condition of individual freedom, of the right to be authentic, special, different. This is well exemplified by the tag line, 'Be yourself, choose Pepsi'. Your unique identity can only be built of the stuff everybody else is buying. This pertains, perhaps, also to spiritual matters.

## References

### *Literature*

#### **Augé, Marc**

2005 Tourism could well be the last utopia. *Atopia* 8–10. <http://www.atopia.tk/index.php/en/terra8/Auge-TourismcouldwellbethelastutopiaAninterviewwithMarcAuge.html> (accessed on 21 November 2008).

#### **Baudelaire, Charles**

1998 *Malarz życia nowoczesnego*. Transl. by Joanna Guze. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz/terytoria. (Polish translation of *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, 1863)

#### **Bauman, Zygmunt**

2006 *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

#### **Beckford, James**

2003 *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: University Press.

#### **Bellah, Robert N.**

1985 *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

#### **Berman, Marshall**

1988 *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin Books.

#### **Bochinger, Christian**

1995 "New Age" und moderne Religion: religionswissenschaftliche Analysen. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser.

#### **Bruce, Steve**

1996 *Religion in the Modern World. From Cathedrals to Cults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Bucher, Anton A.**

2007 *Psychologie der Spiritualität*. Weinheim: Beltz Verlag.

**Campbell, Colin**

1978 The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes. *Sociological Analysis* 39: 146–56.

1999 The Easternization of the West. In: Bryan Wilson & Jamie Cresswell (eds), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*; pp. 35–48. London: Routledge.

**Dumont, Louis**

1991 Individualismus. Zur Ideologie der Moderne. Transl. by Una Pfau & Achim Russer. Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag. (German transl. of *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, 1983)

**Durkheim, Emilé**

1898 L'individualisme et les intellectuels. *Revue bleue* X: 7–13.

**Elias, Norbert**

1987 *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

**Girard, René**

1976 *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Transl. by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

**Hall, John R., Mary Jo Neitz & Marshall Battani**

2003 *Sociology on Culture*. London: Routledge.

**Hay, David & Paweł M. Socha**

2005 Science Looks at Spirituality. *Zygon* 40 (3): 589–612.

**Heelas, Paul**

1998 Introduction: on differentiation and dedifferentiation. In: Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*; pp. 1–18. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead**

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Hervieu-Léger, Danièle**

2006 The role of religion in establishing social cohesion. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-08-17-hervieuleger-en.html> (accessed on 28 October 2008).

**Hietzge, Maud C.**

2002 *Kaleidoskope des Körpers. Rituale des Sports*. Opladen: Leske+Budrich.

**Hunt, Steven J.**

2002 *Religion in Western Society*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

**Kippenberg, Hans Georg & Kocku von Stuckrad**

2003 *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft. Gegenstände und Begriffe*. München: C.H. Beck.

**Knoblauch, Hubert**

1999 *Religionssoziologie*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

**Latour, Bruno**

1995 *Wir sind nie modern gewesen*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

**Luckmann, Thomas**

1967 *Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

**Luhmann, Niklas**

1977 *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

1998 Religion als Kommunikation. In: Hartmann Tyrell *et al.* (eds), *Religion als Kommunikation*; pp. 135–45. Würzburg: Ergon.

**Lukes, Steven**

1973 *Individualism*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

**Maffesoli, Michael**

1996 *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage Publications.

**Meštrović, Stjepan G.**

1991 *The Coming Fin de Siècle: an Application of Durkheim's Sociology to Modernity and Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

**Pickering, W. S. F.**

1984 *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion. Themes and Theories*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Prickett, Stephen**

2002 *Narrative, Religion and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Schelsky, Helmut**

1967 Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar? In: Joachim Matthes (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft. Einführung in die Religionssoziologie*, vol I; pp. 164–89. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.

**Schulze, Gerhard**

1992 *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus.

**Shils, Edward**

1967 Mass Society and Its Culture. In: Norman Jacobs (ed.), *Culture for the Millions?*; pp. 1–27. Boston: Beacon.

**Simmel, Georg**

1989 Religion. In: Georg Simmel, *Gesammelte Schriften zur Religionssoziologie*; pp. 110–71. Ed. by Horst Jürgen Helle. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

**Soeffner, Hans-Georg**

2000 *Gesellschaft ohne Baldachin. Über die Labilität von Ordnungskonstruktionen*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.

**Tacey, David**

2003 *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality*. London: Harper Collins.

*Internet sources*

Interview with Charles Taylor. [http://www.dziennik.pl/dziennik/europa/article\\_100499.ece](http://www.dziennik.pl/dziennik/europa/article_100499.ece) (accessed on 21 November 2008).

<http://www.willy-hellpach-schule.de> (accessed on 22 October 2008).

## Magic Hat Economics

### Counter-cultural ideals and practices of the Nordic Ting Community

#### Introduction

The basis of today's spirituality is often seen as being individualistic in its eclecticism. However, this claim seems to originate in regarding religion mostly as a belief-oriented system. This is the way in which religion is still usually represented in cognitive religious studies and anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Understanding religion in this way leads to the following line of thought: the collapse of the great narratives means an individualization of religion and spirituality. In materialistic anthropology, however, Webb Keane (2008) and many others have criticized the belief-oriented theory of religion and instead focussed more on ritual, meaning-production and gathering around material objects in their definition of religion.<sup>2</sup> Others have seen strong collectivistic tendencies in postmodernity, particularly in connection to the so-called neo-tribes. I propose that looking at other aspects of religion than belief can provide us with a better picture of the role of individualization in today's religious life.

My anthropological study concerns one of today's communities with no shared belief system, but with a clear spiritualist orientation. This Nordic Ting Community does not have any defined or committing roles, specialized distribution of tasks, entrance fee to their two annual gatherings, membership or any formal hierarchy. This exiguity of structural differentiation could well be understood to represent 'subjective spirituality' if we consider the thesis of the subjective turn of spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). This thesis refers

1 For example Pascal Boyer (2001) still defines religion as a belief in the supernatural, although his definition is not explicit.

2 Another example is Talal Asad (1983) who has criticized ideational definitions of religion. Similar thoughts about the significance of rituals can be found also in symbolic anthropology (Douglas 1966).

to the decline of institutional forms of religion with, instead, an increase in subjective experience in spirituality.

But Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) mention that the subject of the subjectivization is rather 'a subject-in-relation' than a differentiated individual. In this way they put more stress on the subjective and also intersubjective aspects of spirituality, than on the mere individualization of it. This is also my understanding, as the claimed increase of individualism would actually necessitate an increase of social structures, at least if we follow the line of thought where individualization is seen to derive from an intensified distribution of work. This might hold true for today's labour market but when it comes to spirituality, social position is not of much significance. If we take the Ting Community as an example, we find that the significance of a person's social position in society at large holds hardly any importance within the community.

It is not, however, in my interest to contribute to the discussion on the increase of spirituality versus institutional forms of religion, since I believe that more or less socially structured forms of religion are represented in various cultural contexts and in various epochs. The problem of individualization leads us to the problem of social structure. I believe that those two concepts are best understood when studied together.

It may be relevant to briefly specify what is here meant by social structure. Quite simply, it is the system of the relations between differentiated roles, statuses and groups. This includes duties, obligations and customs connected to the system. Social structure has been understood to maintain all or at least nearly everything social. I believe, however, that social structure understood in this way is not the only way for communities to organize themselves. We will come back to this suggestion later.<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this presentation is to show that at least in my field of study, there hardly exists any increase in emphasis on individualism in spirituality. Instead my material indicates a relatively long continuum of a self-organized type of communality which could be understood as neither individualistic nor collectivistic. We will later see that the type of agency which can be observed in the social action of this studied network-like field could actually

3 With structure I do not refer to the concept of 'mental structure' advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963: 277-323) and others. Quite interestingly, Victor Turner (1974: 236) finds that 'structure' in the Lévi-Straussian sense is often maximized in the ritual contexts he himself calls liminal and describes them to lack social structure (i.e. anti structure).

often be described as being intersubjective, rather than subjective, since the participants are acting in formalized but still flexible contexts. It seems clear that this kind of social structurelessness<sup>4</sup>, which is both extremely communal and avoids most constraining social structures, is not easy for us to notice, especially when it is practiced in a 'western context'.

I have studied the counter-cultural Nordic Ting Community since 2003 using participant observation, where I have implemented several methods, such as keeping a fieldwork journal, discussions, interviews, and interpretive reading of the texts produced by the field. My goal has been to study how the ideals of the Ting Community are connected to the experiences of the participants. In my master's thesis I came to the conclusion that the Ting Community talks about their ideals and experiences without usually making a distinction between these philosophically separated worlds (Rantala 2007). The phenomena I observed there are also known from other cases and have been theorized most clearly by Clifford Geertz (1973) through his theory of holy symbols mediating the world of ideals (ethos) and world of the believed, and thus experienced, reality (worldview). In the Ting Community, however, ideals and experiences are understood as being identical in the context of the community's ethos of listening. This is often expressed, for example, with words such as 'community', 'unity', 'connection', 'closeness', 'feeling' or 'love'. The same terms are also used for describing experiences especially when the participants feel satisfied with the collective action. The ideals of listening are manifested particularly in the ritual talking circle of the community, where there is no custom of discussion but instead of listening while only one person at a time is speaking.

The other central conclusion of my study was that the special social world, created in the gatherings, is experienced as being strongly separated from society at large. This experience of course reflects the actual social relations in the studied field. I have used the concepts of liminality and *communitas* for describing this counter-cultural essence of the Ting Community (Turner 1969 and 1974: 47). Although I mostly find the theory of liminality and *communitas* useful for describing the social essence of the Ting gatherings, I will later add some critical remarks to the earlier understanding of liminality, and especially on the concept's relation to agency.

Later I have ended up with the hypothesis that the ritual circle of the Ting Community with its ideals and experiences, which become apparent in it,

4 Or 'anti structure' if we would refer to Victor Turner's (1969, 1974) concept.



does not mirror or underpin the social structure of the community, but actually maintains this type of communality, which is mainly constituted anti-structurally. This may, of course, sound paradoxical, because we are taught to think that it is social structure that maintains social forms. My suggestion, as I mentioned above, is, however, that social forms can also be maintained differently. A talking stick and a magic hat are the central material objects used in the structureless practice of the Ting Community. In this article I will focus on the use of the magic hat and the combination of ideals and practices, which I here call the magic hat economics. I believe that by looking at these kinds of intermediating objects, we will see the problem of individualization much more clearly.

### Contexting the field

I will now briefly describe the Ting Community at a general level and locate it in its wider social network and historical context. The network of people which is constituted around the Ting gatherings (*Tingmöte*) held twice a year, is here named the Ting Community. The gatherings do not have one shared exterior aim but we may well regard the gatherings as being their own (shared) aim. The gatherings usually last for two weeks and attract 200 participants on an average from all around the world; about 80 per cent of the participants come from northern Europe. Since 1979, when the Ting was first held, there have been more than 3,000 different participants. For many, these regular, and some occasional smaller, gatherings of the community are very important parts of their lives to which they regularly return.

The name Ting (Swedish, Norwegian, Danish) itself is taken from the name of the ancient North European assembly institution *þing* (transliterated also as *thing*) described for example in some Icelandic medieval sagas. Choosing this name in 1979 reveals some form of a revitalization of Nordic interests which has continued throughout the years. Amongst the Ting Community *þing* is understood as an early form of democracy where all free people were able to participate in decision-making. A well-known story amongst the Ting Community describes the Icelandic Free State between the years 930 and 1276. In this period, there was no king in Iceland. Instead there was a people's rule organized in regular assemblies in *Þingvellir*. Some members of the community have of course 'pilgrimized' this historical site. I now refer to the text by a Danish female informant (approximately 40 years old) addressed to the

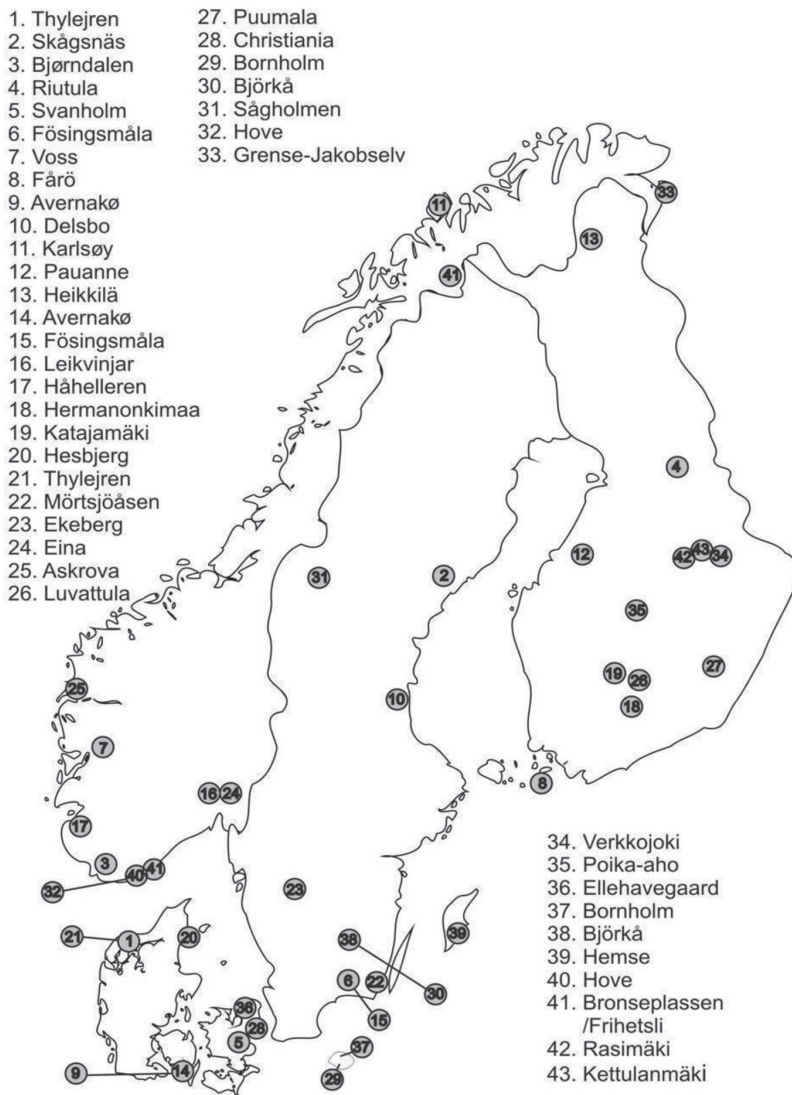


Figure 1. The map of Ting gatherings 1979–2006.

Icelandic environmental activists (e-mail received in June 2008) with the purpose of inviting them to the first Ting gathering organized in Iceland:

It is always hard to explain what Ting is like, because defining it means leaving something out. We have taken this name Ting in respect of our ancestors' democratic traditions, which ruled long before kings. It has special meaning for us to travel to Iceland where this tradition was kept longest.

For situating the field, it may also be interesting to know that the participants themselves sometimes compare Ting to a much larger counter-cultural phenomenon: the Rainbow gathering ([www.welcomehome.org](http://www.welcomehome.org)); but there is also a strong parallel tendency to emphasize their distinction from it and instead stress the importance of the Nordic locality. According to my material it would be too simplistic to regard Ting as the Nordic version of Rainbow, since the two phenomena have partially different histories.

### **Who founded Ting and why?**

By looking at Ting from the viewpoint of the history of social movements we find another way to contextualize Ting. The Ting Community has had annual summer gatherings since 1979 and winter gatherings since the late 1980s. Originally these gatherings were held as the forum for Nordic environmental and alternative groups such as urban free zones and countryside neo-communities. The host organization of these early years was called Nordisk Samaktion. It was a loose informal network of the mainly Danish and Swedish environmental activists of the time. Another way to locate the founders of the first Ting gatherings in their wider social networks is to mention that they became acquainted in places like the young free-town Christiania founded in 1972, in countryside neo-communities and in Alta in northern Norway, where huge environmental and indigenous rights protests were taking place at the time. A public meeting for organizing the first Ting gathering was held in Christiania and it was announced in spring 1979 in the weekly fanzine of the free-town *Christiania Info Bulletin*. Some of the Ting veterans who participated in the first gathering are over 50 years old today and are still active in the community, while some others appear occasionally at the gatherings. Some of them I know from my fieldwork.

The intended purpose of the first Ting was to organize a wide reaching co-operative effort to campaign for, and to present alternative forms of com-

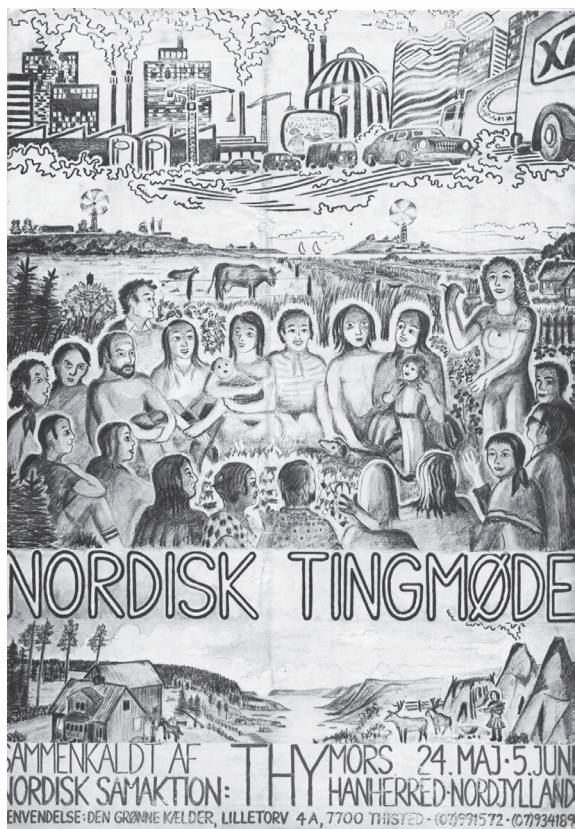


Figure 2. The very first Ting gathering invitation. *Nordsamlaren* no. 3, spring 1979.

munity. The invitation, or advertisement (Figure 2), was published in many Nordic environmental magazines, for example in the Finnish *Komposti* and in the members' magazine of *Pehmeän teknologian seura* (Soft Technology Association). Some of my Finnish informants got the information about the gathering from these two sources. Spiritual, anarchistic and 'green' themes were present in the poster: aware looking citizens are talking in a circle in an idyllic countryside landscape with wind energy production plants and happy looking animals, while the background of the busy city with lots of cars, factories and noise is shadowing their seemingly harmonious existence. The actual spirit is perfectly expressed in the spiritual and political manifesto published in various alternative media after this first gathering: 'The north for us is an organic system. The earth itself, Earth Mother, is self-organized.'<sup>5</sup>

5 Regnbuemanifest translated from Danish by the author (*Nordsamlaren* 1979, June).

Nowadays the gatherings are not directly political, but the strong combination of self-organization and spirituality has been kept. But what does this mean in the practice of camp life? There is no use of electricity or alcohol. The participants take part in discussions, walk in nature and organize their activities themselves in smaller circles and workshops. The most central self-organizing and self-organized activity is the Ting talking circle. The circle is strongly and explicitly a ritual event, but it also has its spontaneous performative sides.

### **The hat: practice and ideals**

I refer again to the same e-mail by the Danish woman, which was referred to above. As I mentioned, she wrote the text for the Icelandic environmental activists with the purpose of inviting them to 'the family'. I think this piece illuminates the Ting brilliantly from an insider's point of view:

So who are we? We could use the term hippie, but that is just a cliché. We are spiritual anarchists and also practical survivors in nature, whom we honor as our mother. We believe in community as a consciousness-expanding recipe. We find each other to be a soul-family. I could say we form a temporary Pippi Långstrump like community. We are all ages and with many beliefs (and disbeliefs), most participants are young. There are also a few who come from non-Nordic countries.—Our main form is the circle, where we meet and share our hearts. We have no leaders, but some people take more responsibility for organizing. We have workshops and circles in almost any thinkable subject. It is up to the participants to initiate what they want. We help each other with practical tasks. We don't sell and buy, we share. We finance by putting donations in the magic hat.

But what is this 'financing by putting donations in the magic hat' in practice? A hat-round is usually made in the context of a formal talking circle, which is held twice a day during the gathering. The round takes place between the shared meal and a very central phase of the circle, the talking circle.<sup>6</sup> The magic hat itself, as a material object, is a concrete and usually very colourful

6 At the talking circle each participant has the possibility to speak or express herself while holding the talking stick and while the others listen. Usually there is no discussion; instead people take turns speaking one at a time.



Figure 3. The posters in the summer issue show the context of environmental action at the time. Nordsamlaren was founded in 1979 by the Nordisk Samaktion network.

item. But also the entire economics of the community, and of the gatherings, along with the ideals of sharing is called magic hat. These two aspects cannot be separated.

Although I focus much on the ideals of the community I look at them through the use of concrete items. Objects like the magic hat and the talking stick have been called *fetishes* in earlier studies with the purpose of illuminating (superstitious) beliefs of the studied communities. The members of the Ting Community, however, mostly do not believe that the items themselves have special powers. Let me give you an example of the talking circle in December 2007: People reacted with surprise when I asked for permission to take the cone of a Norway spruce (*Picea Abies*) with me for the purpose of academic elucidation. The cone was being used as a talking stick at the ongoing Winter Ting in Sweden. In the following round most people accepted my request but some of them added that in their opinion there does not exist any special power associated to the particular object. Somebody even suggested: ‘You can of course take this and bring another cone to the circle.’ The speakers mostly shared my preliminary interpretation that the power of these objects was believed to reside in the socially shared ideals and meanings associated with the

objects and not in the objects themselves. Thus these objects can very well be understood as mental tools for social interaction rather than as fetishes.

Technically speaking the circulation of the magic hat can be compared to the collecting of money in a church. Also at the Ting gathering no specific amount of money is demanded. Nobody controls how much somebody contributes or whether she or he contributes at all. The money is usually put into the hat discreetly. The custom reveals the community's ideals of voluntariness and equality since no entrance fee is required. In this way all get an equal opportunity to participate. Social class or differences of income are avowed not to matter, since everybody shares the same meal and contributes to the magic hat equally and voluntarily. In the circles and other communicative situations structural roles such as profession, education, economic position and status in the wider society are rarely mentioned. Spatially this social liminality becomes apparent in the entrance to the space of the Ting gathering where there is usually a 'Welcome Home' sign (written in two or three languages) inviting all human beings to enter.

Magic hat economics is—and this cannot be exaggerated—extremely informal economics. State support and entrance fees for the gatherings are widely refused. The magic hat contains the whole budget for a gathering and for organizing it. But for what purpose is money collected? It is needed mainly for the rent of the place, and for the groceries. Sometimes foodstuffs are also donated to the gathering and some participants may, for example, reciprocally volunteer at an organic farm. Root vegetables, herbs, fruits, hunted rabbits, woollen blankets, fish, jams and other groceries, handicrafts like handmade soap, beautiful natural objects such as stones, artistic or practical works or even ideas, tea and coffee—and not the least musical and other kind of artistic performance are also contributed to the 'hat'. In these cases, however, the contributions are of course not necessarily put concretely into the hat. According to most participants one of the most valuable types of contribution are self and organically grown groceries.

Even though the magic hat economics principally do not require money or any particular object of value, there is actually a tension between the dependence of the market economics in reality and the quite hegemonic ideal of self sufficiency and living in harmony with nature. During the early years a significant amount of participants were from countryside neo-communities and there was some effort at community living.<sup>7</sup> Regular liminal ways of life—

7 In Nordsamlaren in June 1979 the percentage is 70 but I have not been able to check the validity of this claim. Personally I feel a bit sceptical that such a large percentage

for example as a wandering street performer ‘outside society’ is another ideal.<sup>8</sup> However, looking at collective address books collected at the gatherings it seems that nowadays the large majority of the Ting people are from relatively urban environments<sup>9</sup> where they live a regular life with paid work, studies or social benefits.

I now refer to one speech in a small 7-hour circle, which I recorded in January 2004 with the permission of its 13 participants. The upset reaction of a Danish middle-aged male on seeing people cooking for themselves in the common kitchen, is an example of how the communal ideals are expressed in Ting:

To come back to Rainbow and Ting. All those beautiful people come together and they can listen to each other. If this was something we had to pay for, we would need security companies and fences. It’s easier to simply come together as we do here. I really believe in the circles. But sometimes I become frustrated and hate everyone. Normally I just walk away, if I see bad things. If I go to the kitchen and I want to cook popcorn for everyone I see people cooking their own private foods. It is a rule—there are no rules—but this is my rule: if you cook, cook more than you need and share it with someone you don’t know.

The man’s comment makes it explicit that the work done in and for the gatherings, together with some principles of sharing is actually at least as important in the magic hat economics as the monetary contributions. Ting does not have a defined organization. An example of this would be that after the Summer Ting 2008 the Swedish Ting-family was most probably going to give the funds or also ‘the magic hat’ to the ‘Norwegian family’ for organizing the next two Ting gatherings. The next host could thus have a nest egg if there was money left in the ‘hat’. Sometimes, however, it is supposed that the next host

of the referred 250 participants (Nordsamlaren 1979) would be from countryside neo-communities.

- 8 Victor Turner (1974) and Ulf Hannerz (1992) would use the concept of liminoid when referring to the case in industrialized society. I prefer the concept of liminal because I do not think there is such an essential difference between ‘tribal’ and ‘modern’ societies, which Turner has been criticized for believing to exist (e.g. Drewal 1991).
- 9 That means towns and cities mostly on a Nordic scale which hardly include any metropolis scale urban environments (address books at Nordsamlaren 1979–2006).



**Magic hat materializes the ideals of equality and voluntariness in the Ting Community. There is no entrance fees for their gatherings, they are funded only by the magic hat offerings which include money and other kinds of contributions. This hat was used at the Norwegian winter Ting in 2008–9. Photograph by Merete Kilerich.**



will organize the whole thing from scratch. There are, however, some items of kitchen equipment (like big pots and tents) and dry groceries (like spices and beans), which have been left from earlier gatherings owned by the Ting Community.

The system of rotating the responsibility for hosting gatherings between the ‘families’ of the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland) has been practiced since the beginning in 1979. This also makes it easier to avoid defined roles and social positions in organizing. A certain nationality is not required: basically anyone can be involved in the families organizing the gathering and nobody is personally obliged to participate. There is no official form of economics in Ting and it is not organized for example as a formal association with formal positions and memberships. Some bank accounts have been opened in the four countries but the participants have not been willing to donate to these accounts nearly as much as to the hat.

For most members of the Ting Community money itself is not understood to be bad. But at the gatherings, and occasionally outside of them, the partici-

pants do not use money in their reciprocal transactions. One example of this was a situation when one informant offered to contribute to the cafeteria bill and the answer of the other one was: 'Please, put it to the magic hat.' In this case money has first to be sacralized through the magic hat. Sacralization happens by cutting the connection between money and its original owner. This practice is a bit paradoxical as it also produces boundaries in this principally very universally welcoming community, between the insiders and the people in the rest of society with whom exchanges are acceptable.

Some non-monetary contributions are also called magic hat offerings as has already been referred to above. These are cooking, heating water, cleaning, organizing, chopping wood, digging 'shit pits', making signs and decorations, composting, constructing shelters and building up tepees and saunas, buying and delivering groceries and other goods needed at the gathering. There are numerous other tasks, which are needed for a healthy and wealthy life in the camp. Of course, families with children and the single people, the cleanly and the bohemian, people who eat much and people who fast have different needs. Some are more work-shy than others and some are more used to camp-life than others. Some people naturally take more responsibility in some areas than others. The distribution of tasks is also voluntarily based and this fact sometimes causes frustration and arguments.

There are also arguments about the type of groceries used in the kitchen. Game or fish given to the camp as a gift can cause a long debate between participants who do not want the animal products cooked in the communal kitchen and participants who want to receive the gift and cook it. This kind of debate was held at the Summer Ting 2008 on the island of Samsø in Denmark as some hunted rabbits had been given to the camp by local people visiting it.

Charles Macdonald (2008) suggests, following Thomas Gibson (1985, 1986: 44–8), that there is a huge contradiction between the more theoretized reciprocal distribution practices like the rabbit case described above and the economy based on sharing. He describes sharing like this:

There is no exchange of any sort at least between humans: what is *shared* is not *given*. If there is a gift, it is one bestowed by nature, by unseen forces of the universe. Inuit say the seal has given himself to man. The only giver is the seal or the spirit of the seals. The Palawan say the Master of the pigs has given them one of his children. (Macdonald 2008: 13.)

The idea of economics totally distinct from reciprocal transactions is interesting although we cannot go deeper into this question here. However, it seems

as if the magic hat economics is more about sharing than exchange, as described earlier (the rabbit case). The meal in the circle is shared and not given. However, sometimes somebody announces to the circle what she or he has given 'to the hat' when she or he has just arrived. That clearly is gift giving and even in its most ceremonial form. But nobody talks about giving with reference to the monetary contributions to the hat. Magic hat money is anonymous and understood to be owned together, if owned at all.

Similarly, work done for and in the gatherings can be interpreted as an exchange as well as a sharing by the actor himself or the observer. Small details affect the interpretation. For example, it is easier to see the server of the meal as a giver when she or he has participated in cooking. In that sense 'sharing' and 'giving' are not objective categories but depend on the interpretation of the actors connected to their way of thinking, ideals and background information. Among the Ting Community there are no clearly defined rules for sharing but there are certainly many widely shared ideals concerning sharing, both expressed verbally and easily observed in action.

Macdonald (2008) essentially separates sharing from giving. I here agree with Kenneth Sillander's (2008) comment where he suggests that maybe there is yet a continuum between two different forms of sharing, the first allowing preliminary ownership, the second forbidding it. Looking at the Ting Community studied, the members of which know both economical principles, it is difficult to draw a strict line between the two distributive forms, that is, sharing and exchanging, which Macdonald supposes always exists. Neither is it easy to find any strict principles concerning ownership in sharing. It would be interesting to go deeper into these questions that are so closely connected also to the problem of social structure, where reciprocity clearly constitutes the structure, while sharing does not necessarily do so. While looking at the question of individualism I see strong collectivist ideals in the practice of the Ting Community and in how the association between actor (or preliminary owner) on the one hand and the contribution on the other hand is tried to be kept separate.

As with many counter-cultural ideas the magic hat economics also has models from past times.<sup>10</sup> With its idealization of the indigenous people the Ting Community is purporting to have some sort of 'stone age economics' with eternal affluence. This game of let's pretend occasionally reflects the reality of the participants. Despite evident differences between the situations and

10 This phenomenon is studied a lot. See for example Yinger 1982.

the members' attitudes, planning and timetables are seldom seen as important. The ideal is, instead, to have a natural free flow which supports the individualistic principle of freedom of choice. On the other hand, this is achieved in the shared context of common meals and collectivistic economics, which is an experimental alternative to today's capitalist world, also proposed to represent individualist economics by its ideologists.

The members of the Ting Community are of course conscious of the fact that the economic flow which goes through the magic hat primarily comes from the monetary system in which most participants get their salaries, business profits, social benefits and other kinds of monetary transaction. This fact ties the greatly anti-structural magic hat economics to its large-scale context in the economic macro structure.

Most members are of course very critical of the growth-based economics of our societies. This attitude can be seen in the practices where efforts to expand do not exist, either in terms of quantity of participants or in terms of quantity of magic hat monetary contributions. A few participants of course would like to stress the universally welcoming aspects of Ting, but this thought has not led to any regular increase of participants. The amount of participants has remained quite stable during the last few years.<sup>11</sup>

The spontaneous nature of the economics means that on some days a meal can be made of poor ingredients because of too meagre offerings to the magic hat. Another day dinner is served too late, because of lack of volunteers. On the other hand, after good offerings and excellent cooking the meal can be very abundant. The coincidental nature of the magic hat economics represents the counter-cultural principle of aimlessness, while the equal nature of the economics represents a ritual *communitas* type of liminality. Even though the use of the magic hat with all its details certainly is very unique, there is no reason to believe that it is extraordinary. These kinds of egalitarian practice can, no doubt, be found also elsewhere in the context of the today's social and spiritual movements.

11 The exception during the last years was the Winter Ting 2003/4 on Björkå in Sweden to where more than 300 different participants arrived. Actually the amount has been quite stable since 1979. The average amount has been around 200 participants with periodical peaks and falls. After occasional peaks in the amount of the participants some practical means have been used for the purpose of restraining the growth. One is an occasional avoidance to publish invitations on the internet.

## To conclude

In a western commonsense way of thinking it is widely believed that the significance of the individual is growing. Also the ideologists of the capitalist economy believe in developing individual efforts at producing an ever increasing amount of wealth. As a whole the individualization thesis is very much of a piece with common sense. Also in the counter-cultural Ting Community many people think that their gatherings are vehicles for this kind of individualization process. On the surface it really looks like individuality is a very central ideal in Ting although communitarian aspects are explicitly observable, too. Maybe the individualization thesis is attractive also because of its coherence with the western commonsense thinking shared both by ideologists of official economics and among idealists in counter-culture. It is evident, however, that individualization does not take place in the Ting Community. I presume that the situation inside the Ting Community indicates much wider themes in today's spirituality and that, at a general level individualization does not take place instead of communalization. There are several reasons for my position and I hope I can make some of them clear in the following.

I have followed Keane's (2003, 2008) method of studying 'ideational objects' such as ideals and meanings through material objects and bodily experiences. As is shown, in the Ting Community the material objects, such as the magic hat and the talking stick, are important mediators between the participants. People associate their ideals about sharing and listening to those objects. In mediating ideals and meanings between the participants they certainly are not items for individualistic spiritual action, but for a collective one. A focus on materiality has helped to study also abstract and sometimes idealized concepts like 'ideal' or 'experience', since they are revealed through the signified items, bodily reflections and spatial formations. Beliefs, too, could be equally observed through the concrete material forms and objects.

The beliefs of the participants expressed in the circles and elsewhere at the Ting gatherings are so wide in their diversity that they can be seen as individualistic. I hope, however, that it has become evident here that beliefs in the Ting Community do not have much relevance at the communal level. The meditative listening in the circle is the main spiritual practice of the gatherings regardless of the different beliefs expressed there. Spirituality is very much a shared thing in the Ting Community. Experience is widely shared in the countless circles and workshops, as is awareness. Beliefs are also shared but not in the sense that all have identical beliefs, but in the sense that the participants become conscious of the beliefs of others. Thus my material does

not support the argument that today's spirituality has become increasingly individualistic. The ritual of the gathering itself along with the particular form of its economic base is rather collective.

Self-seeking is usually associated with New Age spirituality (see Heelas 1996). It is certainly one obvious aspect of the spirituality in Ting, but not the only one and definitely not the most important one. A more important aim is to connect to each other and engage in discussion away from every day life. This can best be seen in the circles. The meeting in the Ting circle is about harmony, sharing, communality and oneness. The personal opinions are not seen as very important in themselves, but as a part of a common process. In the talking circles, which often last for several hours, it is commonly experienced that 'the circle talks—not the speakers.' Even though people also express themselves to a great extent, I do not see any sign in this of an emphasis on individualism.

These kinds of ritually formal aspects of today's spirituality can well be compared to the so-called traditional spirituality, because of the world-wide common importance of gatherings with and around material objects in religious practices. Examples of the latter in the Ting context are the magic hat and the talking stick, which have been discussed in this presentation. Other material objects to gather around are the central fire (in summer) and 'the altar' or also 'the centre' (in winter). These items are important means for Ting magic which functions highly socially and inter-subjectively. There might not be anything new or exceptional in this: people meet each other and mirror themselves, and they look for themselves in order to better connect to others. And for all this, people often use material items.

Despite the strong harmony orientation of the community it may be important to add that listeners are not the same as hearers. Listening, although it is a silent action, is not passive, but actually contains very strong moments of agency: focussed listening takes the words from the speaker's body through the listener's body. This process of course necessitates, on the part of the listeners, their own experience and reflection. On the other hand, it is sometimes strongly experienced that the focussed eye-contact of the listeners produces feelings of collective consciousness and mild but effective feedback to the speaker. This meditative listening is often expressed as a heavy bodily and spiritual practice. On the other hand, while experiencing strong groundedness, the participant's bodily being can be experienced as very easy-going and light. As the participant feels grounded in the circle she or he may not want anything else but to stay and to be there. The participants are tied to each other through that practice, certainly neither through the beliefs nor through the social structure.

Despite some ascetic interest in the community we cannot exaggerate how much the talking stick owes to the magic hat. While people sit and listen their bodily needs for food, protection and heat arise, and these are satisfied by the vital force of the magic hat regardless of the participants' own economical position or contribution. This helps the participants feel accepted and equal. Without the hat, listening would not be the same.

I see the ritual circle as a major vehicle for the community to transform the gatherings into a liminal stage where the participants' individual roles and statuses are temporarily suspended. In contrast with classic interpretations of liminality, agency is not at all limited, even though it is highly gravitated by the ritual forms. In the circle the strict form is also experienced to strengthen agency. People participate, because they feel free there and they find the circle safe and emancipating. Although the attraction to the circle is often strong, participants are free to leave at any moment. Even though I call this action ritual and liminal I would emphasize the activity and strong agency, instead of a passive following of tradition that is often associated with these terms. In this I agree with the remarks of Margaret Thompson Drewal (1991), Catherine Bell (1992, 1997) and others concerning ritual and performance.

Political pragmatists from left to right declare that we have to choose a point on the line between individualism and collectivism, while utopian models combine strong communality with an emphasis on freedom of choice. Maybe we should listen to those utopians while measuring their communities' level of collectivism and individualism. In the Ting Community, too, people stress a harmonious mutual existence where the person and the community are meant to strengthen each other. Similar utopian harmony-orientation can be found also elsewhere in the context of social and spiritual movements. The key word is neither collectivism nor individualism, but relatedness beyond social structure.

## References

### *Literature*

#### **Asad, Talal**

1983 Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz. *Man, New Series* 18 (2): 237–59.

#### **Bell, Cathrine**

1992 *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1997 *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Boyer, Pascal**

2001 *Religion Explained: the Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

**Douglas, Mary**

1966 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Drewal, Margaret Thompson**

1991 The State of Research on Performance in Africa. *African Studies Review* 34 (3): 1–64.

**Geertz, Clifford**

1973 *Interpreting the Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

**Gibson, Thomas**

1985 The Sharing of Substance versus the Sharing of Activity among the Buid. *Man, New Series* 20 (3): 391–411.

1986 *Sacrifice and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands. Religion and Society among the Buid of Mindoro*. London: Athlone.

**Hannerz, Ulf**

1992 *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Heelas, Paul**

1996 *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead**

2005 *Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality?* Oxford: Blackwell Publications.

**Keane, Webb**

2003 Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things. *Language and Communication* 23 (2–3): 409–25.

2008 The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (1): 110–27.

**Lévi-Strauss, Claude**

1963 *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

**Macdonald, Charles J.-H.**

2008 Order against Harmony. Are Humans Always Social? *Suomen antropologi. Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 33 (2): 5–21.

**Rantala, Janne Juhana**

2007 Piirissä. Kuuntelun rituaali pohjoismaisessa Ting-yhteisössä. Unpublished Master's thesis. Dept. of Cultural Research, University of Joensuu.

**Sillander, Kenneth**

2008 Comments on Charles Macdonald's "Order against Harmony". *Suomen antropologi. Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 33 (2): 22–6.



**Turner, Victor**

1969 *The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistrucrure.* New York: Aldine Publishing Company.

1974 *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society.* New York: Cornell University Press.

**Yinger, Milton**

1982 *Countercultures. The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down.* New York: The Free Press.

*Field material*

Christiania info bulletin (May 1979).

E-mail in June 2008.

Field diaries 2003–8.

Nordsamlaren 1979–2008.

Tape 1. December 30, 2003.

[www.welcomehome.org](http://www.welcomehome.org) (accessed on 26 August 2008).

## **Individual Belief and Practice in Neopagan Spirituality**

### **Basic components of postmodern spirituality**

Postmodern spirituality is basically characterized by a set of elements which constitute the framework of spiritual belief and practice: the underlying importance of subjective experience, the interpretation of this personal experience according to, for example, Eastern, occult or mystical traditions, a definite distancing from the dogma of religious organisations with a tendency towards anti-institutionalism and stressing the religious autonomy of the practitioner. This leads to an integrated interpretation of the world for the individual and to the notion of 'spirituality' becoming an alternative for the notion of 'religion' for the practitioner (Knoblauch 2006: 106–8). Based on these observations it can be postulated that all spirituality is temporary, as practitioners do not focus on a fixed aim in life, but rather on the ways and means to find and approach an aim like this (Ebertz 2005: 207). These components function as a map for spiritual individualism and for neopagan spirituality as well.

### **Two basic common characteristics of neopagan spirituality**

Neopaganism is one of the fast growing spiritual practices today. Estimations of numbers vary. Helen Berger estimates that there are about 200,000 neopagans in the United States and takes the figure of 300,000 posited by Aidan Kelly as the basis for her more conservative number (Berger 1999: 9). The National Census carried out by the Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom in 2001 found a total of 38,000 pagans including the most prominent group of Wiccans, with 7,000 members—which in comparison with, for example, Baha'i (5,000) is a significant number (Office for National Statistics 2004).

Neopagans are often placed in the field of new religions and new religious movements. When focussing on the world-view shared by these groups, this classification is correct. But when dealing with the individual shaping of neo-

pagan belief and practice, neopaganism unfolds as a complex field of personally coined spirituality, where the elements of belief and religious practice are based on individual experience: 'Witchcraft, and paganism generally, is a religion where experience is primary—the written word, whilst useful, is very much secondary' (Heselton 2003: 273). Experience must basically be seen as the permanent activity of processing impressions on the senses and dealing with always differing situational contexts, reverting to established and modifiable structures, anticipating future situations as well as the element of imagination as a way to build up a relation to the world (Laing 1971: 25). The result is that no neopagan practitioner believes and practices like another. Berger states that 'it is possible for each individual to have her or his own brand of Neo-Paganism' (Berger 2003: 3), and Margot Adler cites a neopagan who had written to her: 'I don't think Pagans share *any* beliefs! And no Witches think alike!'—as well as the journalist Susan Roberts who said: 'Witches defy categorization' (Adler 1997: 354).

Neopaganism has no dogma, but before focussing on the individuality of neopagan spirituality it is important to explain the two basic assumptions which constitute the world-view shared by most neopagans. The first element of neopagan belief is the assumption of the sacredness of nature and of the world. Whereas other religions differentiate between a mundane/material realm and a sacred/divine realm, neopagans believe in the structural correspondence of the sacred and the profane. To them the profane does not exist in so far as it is always identical with the sacred. Neopagans believe in the structural unity of the material world and the sacred space of the divine: to them the natural world human beings live in is sacred. The whole world is seen as a sacred system which includes nature, animals, humans and, depending on the personal spiritual concept, divine entities such as gods. For neopagans humans are not separate from divinity, but are structurally related to it. As it is semantically not satisfying to explain this concept in terms of negation (not separate), this structural relation is referred to by the positive notion of congruence (Rensing 2007: 130–4). According to Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas's distinction between 'religions of difference', 'religions of humanity' and 'spiritualities of life', neopagan spirituality belongs to the last category as it locates 'the sacred within the self and nature, rejecting the idea that the spiritual is essentially different from what lies within the very order of things' (Woodhead & Heelas 2000: 15). By focussing on the sacredness of nature and man the neopagan world-view is based on the structural identity of the sacred and the profane. In a clearly defined contrast to the 'religions of difference', neopaganism can be called a spirituality of congruence.

The second belief shared by neopagans concerns the divine being seen as both female and male. For them human experience in nature and world operates as evidence for this belief. Based on the concept of congruence many neopagans worship both goddesses and gods. This element is also very important to them, because it once more opposes their belief to the monotheistic dogma of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where the one exclusive god is described in terms of male characteristics (feminist theology being a section of theology as a complex field of study still may be called marginal; representatives are, for example, Elga Sorge, Christa Mulack and Mary Daly).

### **Composing poetry—expressing spirituality**

Apart from these two elements, neopagan spirituality is flexible and personal. This individual spirituality is expressed in the art of poetry. Since the early years of neopaganism, that is the 1940s and 1950s, poetry has played an important role. Especially Doreen Valiente, who is called the mother of modern witchcraft, produced poetry to express the basic elements and to create ritual lyrical texts of witchcraft. Today neopagans take this as a model for expressing their feelings, beliefs and experience through composing their own personal spiritual poetry. Lyrical art is a vital practice, as it is a way to deal with one's own spirituality, to clarify emotions and to point out troubling feelings. It basically helps neopagans to define their own place within the world:

Who needs poetry? Pagans do . . . For today's Wiccans and Pagans, poetry is essential. We have many books of ritual, but no standard liturgy. Instead, we have the freedom—and the responsibility—to craft our own rituals. We must choose words that connect us with the Divine, nurture our spirits, and challenge us to become more aware. Good poems do all this and more. (Raeburn 2003: ix.)

To neopagans composing poetry is a way of communicating with the divine and is a spiritual experience:

Unlike members of more conventional faiths, Pagans need not—often cannot—follow the book, sticking comfortably to another's words. We must choose the words we use to express our spiritual truths, must consider and study those truths, then search for ways to bring them to life. It is work, no

more and no less, though it is often work that feeds our souls, hearts, and minds. (Raeburn 2003: ix.)

Poetry in neopaganism may be composed for oneself alone, for others, to be used in a ritual context or just to be read in some place of calm during a moment of worship. It is a vital practice to ‘connect to the Pagan spirit’ and it is characterized by strong emotionality (Raeburn 2003: x). In this context poems are texts for use, spiritual texts and texts of communication. Arianna Moonlightshadow explains: ‘My personal Wiccan poetry does sometimes serve as communication with the Lord and Lady. . . Rhyming has an ability to make it meaningful. . . it requires you to draw on your inner creative spirit and helps to make a greater connection.’ (E-mail to the author on 6 July 2004.) And Zelda of Arel describes her state of mind while composing poetry: ‘I feel calm and serene. Sometimes like in a circle.’ (E-mail to the author on 5 August 2004.) Of course, the notion of lyrical ritual language does not imply that verses have to rhyme. Rather this kind of language differs from everyday language by the lyrical use of metre, choice of words, metaphors, the way of argumentation, strong subjectivity, which in this case I like to call religious/spiritual subjectivity, and the way of presentation, as for example, lyric iconicity (Müller 1995: 95). When shared between neopagans, which is very often the case, they function as vehicles of spiritual belief as they give rise to communication and interchange between neopagans. On the one hand they display the highly individual personal feelings of the composer/poet, on the other hand they may serve as texts of recognition and identification. Gavin Bone explains: ‘when one person starts to express that and put that down other people will. . . read it and go “Yes, that’s what I feel”’ (Farrar & Bone 2004). This poetry in neopaganism on the one hand mirrors the search for one’s own spiritual view in the present, and on the other hand gives impulses for the development of neopaganism in the future.

### **The characteristics and functions of neopagan poetry**

One important function of neopagan lyrical texts is the communication with the divine, that is, connecting to goddesses and gods and stabilizing this connection. Many poems dealing with the various functions and aspects of gods are introduced and structured by the rhetoric figure of apostrophe. By this the reader learns about the countless possibilities of combinations of goddess and god concepts. The following examples show this variety:

The goddess may be seen as Mother Earth, which may be combined with addressing the god, as in 'Dear Mother of the Earth and Seas,/ Dear father at her side' (*A Devotional*, 5f). Many poems include several verses that display an address to the divine: 'Divine Mother, Goddess of Light', 'Holy Mother, Queen of Heaven and Earth' and 'Heavenly Goddess' (*The Goddess is alive*, 21, 25, 27). Apart from this one finds invocations of various goddesses known from different pantheons: 'Demeter', 'Demeter, Mother' (*Honor to the Goddess, Lady of Many Names*, 13, 24), 'Hecate' (*Hecate Chant Invocation*, 5) and 'Homage to thee, Oh Sun Goddess./ O you glorious being' for the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, known as a central kami in Shinto (*Amaterasu II*, 1f). Readers get to know the 'Shimmering-throned immortal Aphrodite,/ Daughter of the Creatrix, Enchantress' (*Aphrodite II*, 1f) and the 'Honored Crone of change/ Ancient One of Transition' (*Honor to the Goddess, Lady of Many Names*, 12f). In *Four Invocations iv*, even a whole set of goddesses is addressed: 'Venus, Hecate, Persephone, Aphrodite' (4). One finds the 'Lyre-gifted Apollo', 'O farsighted father of prophecy' (*Song of Praise to Apollo*, 1, 9), 'Dionysus' the 'old voyeur' and 'Old deviant father, incestuous friend and jealous rival' (*Dionysus in the Curtains*, 1f, 19) as well as 'O Mighty Pan' (*We, The Enchanted*, 1).

In neopaganism goddesses and gods may be combined according to their classical function, the sound of their names and the partners with whom they share the pantheon. This combination especially depends on the situational needs of the individual practitioner. The possibilities of combination are innumerable. Each practitioner chooses her or his communicative divine opposite partner. The addressing phrase states which function of divinity is important for the practitioner at the very moment. The eclectic character of this individual neopagan practice becomes just as evident as the high emotionality mirrored by the emotive mode of expression realised by the 'O'.

Neopagans compose lyrical texts on various topics. Each text is created on a highly individual basis and deals with themes that are important to the author/poet. As we have already seen, poems may be composed as invocations to the gods or texts for occasions of prayer and worship. A significant number of poems deal with death and the lyrical I's way of coping with it. The poem *The Maiden, The Mother, The Crone* iconically evokes the picture of a flickering candle next to the scene of relatives sitting at an old woman's death bed, while the dying woman remembers how her goddess was always there to guide her through life. The poem *The Hanged Man and The Ten of Swords* relates the fact of inevitable death to the meanings of the two tarot cards which explain the message, that man has to let go of life—her or his own life and that

of others—one day. The poem tells the addressee that as the brown leaf at the end of autumn has to let go of the branch and fall to the ground, it is unavoidable for all creatures to face death eventually. This poem also points at the new beginning, the next spring following the coming winter, a topic which is the central theme in many other texts: the wheel of the year and the eight neopagan seasonal festivals. The year's turn including the basic elements of coming and going, growing, harvesting, being born and dying mirrors the cyclical time model of neopagan spirituality. Of the eight seasonal festivals Samhain, celebrated on the 31 October, seems to be the most popular date, because it is the main topic of many neopagan poems. Another important topic is the neopagan self-consciousness, which is dealt with in poems that comment on the strange appearance of neopagan spirituality to outsiders and on the feeling of being a neopagan. Some poems go deep into the mysteries of neopagan belief and spirituality and by this touch the obviously most important topic of all: nature.

### Nature in neopagan poetry

Neopagan belief is based on the assumption that everything on earth, including minerals, plants and creatures, is alive and that everything has its own spiritual power. The earth, the world, the whole universe is seen as a huge sacred living organism (Crowley 2001: 21). Therefore woods, lakes, mountains, all vegetation and nature are very important to neopagans. To them they are the source of the secrets of life and reveal the answers to all significant questions. This is explained in the poem *The Mysteries* by Doreen Valiente:

Here and now are the Mysteries.  
 Out of no stored and storied past  
 Of things long lost;  
 But the breathing moment of time.  
 Out of no twilight  
 But that which falls upon the hills this night.  
 The old trees partake of them,  
 And the voices of the grass;  
 The ghost-white blossomed elders,  
 And the first clouded glow  
 Of the rising moon.  
 If we can hear,

If we can see,  
 Out of no buried past they come;  
 But from the fields of our own home  
 Is reaped the grain  
 That makes the bread of their feast.  
 Out of the flowers of every summer  
 Flows the honey of their mead.  
 Look, between the stones is a blade of grass;  
 And all the rites of the high Mysteries,  
 And the runes of all witcheries,  
 Are written upon it.

The poem is structured by numerous anaphors and parallelisms ('Out of no stored and storied past' (2), 'Out of no twilight' (5), 'Out of no buried past' (14), 'But . . . (4, 6, 15)'). It tells the addressee that the mysteries of life and of man's existence cannot be discovered from past centuries and from antiquated ideas, which is phonologically expressed by the combination of alliteration and assonance in 'stored and storied' and 'long lost'. All answers are presented in the present, that is 'Here and now' and virtually 'breathing', which means in this very second, stressed by the focus on the [i:] sound. The text argues that the basis of all life is nature. By pointing at the regular and basic principles of man's relation to nature, the natural rhythm of day and night, harvesting, and blossoming, the poem invites the addressee to search for answers in his daily life. But it is important to 'hear' and 'see', and finally to 'look' closely, because each 'blade of grass' carries the relevant information, which has to be read by man. To neopagans nature not only gives, but itself is the answer to life.

Because of nature being the centre for neopagan spirituality, pictures and metaphors presenting elements from the natural world are almost omnipresent in neopagan poems, but their function and their metaphorical design always depends on the individual poet's preferences, moods and ideas. One element is the moon, which is connected to the goddess principle in neopaganism. The moon may be presented as a 'silver disk of light' (*Moon Song* 4), a 'torch' (*Hecate Chant Invocation* 9), which is an interesting picture, because it transforms the light-reflecting moon into a light-radiating moon, and as a 'half-eaten . . . yellow apple' (*Vigil* 1f). This metaphor-simile combination is interesting, because it explicitly presents an element of nature, the moon, by another element of nature, the apple. Another important element found in neopagan poems is the light/darkness and day/night contrast, which is also evident in the above-mentioned metaphors presenting the moon. In the short



and trenchant poem *In Broad Daylight* the author Candace Walworth plays with this contrast by creating a visually established paradox:

Night hides in the bark  
of pines under rocks and  
between toes

Like a stray cat begging  
for milk or a bite of fish

night lingers  
all day

This poem is a good example for focussing on the senses. Presentations of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching are important tools for neopagan poetry. In this context the poem *Blackberries* is an impressive attack on the sense of taste:

filled with the sweet, thick  
black-red blood of the dying sun-god,  
dark taste of lengthening nights  
in the full heat of summer.

...

those who do not ripen fully  
remain too red, too hard, too sour,  
on the vine, never entering  
the sharp gated, pink-tongued mouth,  
to be squeezed and shredded by desire,  
to enter the hot blood of the devouring creature  
whose opening and closing black center  
is ever-scanning for the next mouthful of perfect  
purply plumpness... (1-15)

One of the most important elements of nature in neopagan poetry is the tree. Trees function as symbols for nature and life in general and are basically characterized as living entities. Trees are often presented as having feelings and communicating with their environment: they whisper, sing, are peaceful, wise and graceful, they hail to the gods and wear their leaves like a dress. By attributing human feelings and habits to trees pagan authors use the poetic figure of

personification to place trees—and with them all other elements of nature—on a level with human beings. The poem *The Tree's Sight* by Zelda of Arel is an example for the personification of trees:

The spirit of Air  
Kisses the living  
Monument from Earth.

It speaks with  
The help of Wind  
Telling a story.

The spirit of Water  
Giving me drink  
From Air and Earth.

The spirit of Fire  
Destroying me  
With scolding flames.

Human hands  
Break my arms,  
Setting on fire.

They gather my  
Fallen dead arms  
Setting on fire.

I gaze on those  
Not hurting me  
Wondering a bit.

Stars shine around  
Their moving,  
Bowing necks.

They must be  
Riting Pagans  
From the city.

The interesting point of this poem is not only the expression of the tree's thoughts and feelings and the pain it has to suffer from man's attack, but also the idea that the tree is able to tell from their behaviour what kind of people they are, here namely pagans. By means of anthropomorphization the tree is presented as having self-awareness and consciousness and is presented as a thinking being able to differentiate between people. Here the tree functions as a representative for nature as a living organism and urges man not only to accept the common roots but also to act according to this insight.

### Neopagan ritual composition

The poem leads to another important element of neopagan spirituality: the element of ritual. Rituals can be held virtually everywhere, at any place that seems appropriate. According to the principle of congruence no place is better or more fitting than another, because every place is a sacred place. The individual chooses where to establish the sacred space for the ritual, which means that the place is defined as a ritual working space by establishing a ritual circle. Places may be chosen according to the individual's preference for indoor or outdoor locations, according to the current occasion or time of day. Many practitioners have their favourite places. The practitioner uses certain implements, may integrate personal objects and usually wears special clothes. Each ritual is planned and structured individually depending on the occasion and the purpose. Texts are written to be read or quoted from memory during the ritual, for making a request to the gods or for thanking them. For example, the pagan poet Zelda of Arel regularly recites the first lines of her poem *Wiccan Night* for casting the ritual circle: 'Warm lights awake/ In the cold depths of night./ One by one they/ Become a circle of rite. . .' (E-mail to the author on 5 August 2004). It has already been explained that the goddesses and gods and combinations of them as well as their degree of importance are individual for each practitioner. Considering the fact that more than 50 per cent of all neopagans are solitary practitioners creating rituals on their own it is easy to imagine the variety of possibilities (Berger 1999: 50).

The reason for a neopagan to practice alone may, for example, be the long distance to other pagans or ignorance about other neopagans in the surrounding area. But an important reason for being a solitary pagan is a tendency toward strong individuality. This individuality is not only characterized by the personal concept of divinity and the individual elements of belief, but also by the fact that these individual concepts may well change on the basis of

the practitioners' experience and the interest in trying and discovering new pagan traditions. Therefore it is not appropriate to speak of fixed concepts of belief, but rather of a permanent flow of modification of neopagan ideas.

However even solitary pagans usually meet on special occasions in order to get in contact with others to talk and exchange thoughts and ideas. Meetings may be arranged on the seasonal festivals or held once a year. For festivals and conferences at least one ritual is usually planned and prepared by the organization committee. Meetings and festivals that last several days often offer workshops on ritual planning and practice (Magliocco 2004: 122–30; Pike 2001: chapter 2). The first German conference of the Pagan Federation International took place in Witten, Northrhine-Westfalia, in 2004, and was attended by about 100 pagans who participated in several workshops such as 'Progressive Witchcraft', 'Ägyptische Ritualmagie', 'Santeria' and 'Modern Irish Druidcraft', just to mention some of the topics, to illustrate the variety of possible neopagan interests (Programme 2004). During the conference all visitors attended a group ritual that had been prepared by the board members. In the concert hall of Haus Witten in the middle of the room an altar had been put up, carrying various Wiccan and neopagan tools, for example, an *athame* (ritual knife) made of dark wood. All the participants formed a huge circle around the altar. A priestess and a priest led the ritual, which started by casting the ritual circle by the priest using the athame. The corners and elements of earth, air, fire and water were invoked by reciting verses written by Rilke, Goethe and Droste-Hülshoff. During the ritual chalices filled with fruit juice were passed clockwise while each person said a couple of friendly words to her or his neighbour. Eventually participants began to sing with increasing volume: 'Wir sind ein Kreis in einem Kreis, ohne Anfang und ohne Ende' (We are a circle within a circle, with no beginning and no end). To prepare a ritual like this one, participants have to negotiate not only their preferences but also have to consider what might be agreeable for the other unknown participants. Especially the cooperation in the circle and the inclusion of each participant has to be decided on. In Witten a strong sense of community was achieved by singing together and especially by helping to establish the ritual circle by saying some words and offering good wishes to one's neighbour.

Pagans working in a group have to deal with the phenomenon of negotiating rituals regularly. The planning of a ritual usually starts with the analysis of the purpose, aim or motivation and other determining factors such as, for example, the actual numbers of participants and the weather conditions. Then follows the collection of different ideas as to how the topic can be translated into ritual action. The participants discuss several suggestions and eventually

decide on certain elements. Ideas and suggestions that are not realized might later be incorporated into some other ritual. Other items of negotiation are the sequence of elements, the role of each participant and the preparatory work such as, for example, the use of candles, incense, semi-precious stones and other tools, which correspond with the theme of the ritual and which have to be purchased in advance. Participants have to decide on a date that matches the subject matter – for example, the phase of the moon or the planetary hour. Planning and negotiation in this or a similar way is the custom in neopagan group activities today.

### **The importance of art in postmodern spirituality**

The process of composing and performing a ritual, whether solitarily or in a group, is seen by neopagans as creating a piece of art. The practitioner/artist incorporates her or his personal feelings, thoughts and hopes during the phase of planning and especially when performing a ritual. The 'creative process of ritual invention' and the performance 'move participants towards transcendence and greater understanding chiefly through . . . aesthetic charge; this is what allows good rituals to become . . . vehicles for changing our consciousness' (Magliocco 1996: 97, 99). The same, as this article has shown, is true for neopagan poetry. Practitioners of this way of spirituality, where there are no texts or other sources telling them what to believe and how, turn to producing art for their personal spiritual development. While dogma is strictly rejected in postmodern spirituality, art obviously has become a very important element on the individual's way to find her or his place in life and in the world.

### **References**

#### *Literature*

#### **Adler, Margot**

1997 *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. New York: Penguin Compass.

#### **Berger, Helen A.**

1999 *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

2003 *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

#### **Crowley, Vivian**

2001 *Way of Wicca*. London: Thorsons.

**Ebertz, Michael N.**

- 2005 Spiritualität im Christentum und darüber hinaus: Soziologische Vermutungen zur Hochkonjunktur eines Begriffs. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 13 (2): 193–208.

**Heselton, Philip**

- 2003 *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration: An Investigation into the Sources of Gardnerian Witchcraft*. Milverton: Capall Bann Publishing.

**Knoblauch, Hubert**

- 2006 Soziologie der Spiritualität. In: Karl Baier (ed.), *Handbuch Spiritualität: Zugänge, Traditionen, interreligiöse Prozesse*; pp. 91–111. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

**Laing, Ronald D.**

- 1971 *Phänomenologie der Erfahrung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

**Magliocco, Sabina**

- 1996 Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art among Contemporary Pagans. In: James R. Lewis (ed.), *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*; pp. 93–119. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- 2004 *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**Müller, Wolfgang G.**

- 1995 Das Problem der Subjektivität der Lyrik und die Dichtung der Dinge und Orte. In: Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden: Eine Einführung*; pp. 93–105. Trier: WVT. (WVT-Handbücher zum literaturwissenschaftlichen Studium, 1)

**Pike, Sarah M.**

- 2001 *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Raeburn, Jane (ed.)**

- 2003 *The Pagan's Muse: Words of Ritual, Invocation, and Inspiration*. New York: Citadel Press.

**Rensing, Britta**

- 2007 *Die Wicca-Religion: Theologie, Rituale, Ethik*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag.

**Woodhead, Linda & Paul Heelas (eds)**

- 2000 *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

*Other sources***Farrar, Janet & Gavin Bone**

- 2004 Interview by Britta Rensing on the First Conference of the Pagan Federation International Deutschland, 9 October 2004.

**Office of National Statistics**

- 2004 National Survey for 2001. Published on 11 October 2004. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=954&Pos=&ColRank=2&Rank=192> (accessed on 3 January 2005).

**Programme**

2004 Programme of the 1st Conference of the Neopagan Federation International Deutschland, Witten, Northrhine-Westfalia, 9 October 2004.

*Poems*

*Amaterasu II* by Anna Livia Plurabelle. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/bog/bog11.htm> (accessed on 19 July 2003).

*Aphrodite II* by Anna Livia Plurabelle. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/bog/bog18.htm> (accessed on 19 July 2003).

*Blackberries* by Susan Kennedy. In: Raeburn 2003: 58.

*A Devotional* by Arawen. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/3781/> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

*Dionysus in the Curtains* by Frank Miller. In: Raeburn 2003: 141–2.

*Four Invocations: iv* by Tish Eastman. In: Raeburn 2003: 84.

*The Goddess is alive* by unknown author. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bos/bos376.htm> (accessed on 18 July 2003).

*The Hanged Man and The Ten of Swords* by Mary Ann Murphy. <http://www.feri.com/frand/shaman4.html#thehangedmanand> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

*Hecate Chant Invocation* by Lady Gueneva. [http://www.witchvox.com/poetry/dt\\_po2.html?a=uspa&id=702](http://www.witchvox.com/poetry/dt_po2.html?a=uspa&id=702) (accessed on 14 February 2006).

*Honor to the Goddess, Lady of Many Names* by Karen Etheldattar. In: Raeburn 2003: 15–17.

*In Broad Daylight* by Candace Walworth. In: Raeburn 2003: 52.

*Moon Song* by Ravenwitch. <http://www.members.lycos.co.uk/ravenwitch/487/linkso.html> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

*The Maiden, The Mother, The Crone* by unknown author. <http://www.wiccanway.im-ess.net/poetry.html> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

*The Mysteries* by Doreen Valiente. In: Doreen Valiente, *Natural Magic*; p. 12. Blaine: Phoenix Publishing, 1975.

*Praisesong to Apollo* by Elizabeth Barrette. In: Raeburn 2003: 33.

*The tree's sight* by Zelda of Arel. <http://www.wiccanlane.itgo.com/poetry/wiccan.htm> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

*Vigil* by Sarah Brown Weitzman. In: Raeburn 2003: 118–19.

*We, The Enchanted* by Doreen Valiente. In: Doreen Valiente, *Charge of the Goddess*; p. 44. Brighton: Hexagon Hoopix, 2000.

*Wiccan Night* by Zelda of Arel. <http://www.wiccanlane.itgo.com/poetry/wiccan.htm> (accessed on 10 August 2003).

## **Postmodern Messiahs**

### **The changing saviours of contemporary popular culture**

#### **Introduction**

The messiah myth is alive and well in the modern world. Contemporary science fiction film has taken the myth to heart and given us an endless stream of larger than life heroes. The heroes of the present are, however, not exactly the same as the heroes of the past. A changing world demands new things of its saviours. Using a textual and narrative analysis based on insights gained from feminist film theory and cultural studies, this article looks closely at the messiah theme in science fiction films and TV series from the last three decades. The study explores the changes that have occurred in relation to images of the body, the attitudes and personalities of modern heroes, gender, questions of power and ideas of the transcendent. The article then discusses what these changes both between newer and older heroes and between contemporary heroes and the traditional messiah story might say about religion and spirituality in the modern world. Finally the article explores the question of why the messiah myth still finds an audience today.

#### **Religion and popular culture**

Religion and popular culture have not always gotten along well. Religious groups have more than once criticized the images of popular culture, while popular culture has presented critical portraits of religion. Despite this sometimes conflictual relationship, the connection between religion and popular culture cannot be denied. The importance of popular culture today has made it clear that for an understanding of religion in today's society one must also look to popular culture. According to John D. Caputo, a lot of people today receive their religion via popular culture (Caputo 2001: 78–90). Scholars have also shown how people, for example, use films when creating religious sys-



tems of meaning (Axelson 2008). Films and other forms of popular culture may not mirror us directly or influence us in a direct manner, but as Adam Possamai puts it 'there will always be an element of truth in them' (Possamai 2005: 23).

In other words, by looking more closely at religion in popular culture and exploring how the media influences viewers' ideas on, for example, questions of meaning, we can receive important information about religion and spirituality in the world of today. By looking at recurring themes in popular culture, it is also possible to recognize trends that might reflect deeper issues in our society. These images should of course not be interpreted in a simplistic manner. Films can always be understood in many different ways, but when a story structure keeps returning, there is definite reason to be observant. One such recurring theme is, no doubt, the myth of a messiah. In the following it is therefore the messiah myth in science fiction that will be in focus.

It can perhaps seem odd to look to a genre that looks to the future for an understanding of today's world, but when the subject is spirituality and postmodernism this becomes quite natural. Science fiction has always been interested in religion and mythology (Mendlesohn 2003: 264–75). It is also a genre that, although often talking about the future and different worlds, still is a comment on the world of here and now (Hollinger & Gordon 2002: 4). It is also easy to find connections between postmodernism and science fiction. According to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, science fiction is 'perhaps the ontological genre par excellence. We can think of science fiction as Postmodernism's non-canonized or "low art" double' (Clute & Nicholls 1999: 950). This is not to say that all science fiction is postmodern, but the genre can still be seen as an interesting comment on a modern or postmodern world, and, as we shall see, its saviours.

## Messiahs and messiah myths

Before we continue with a closer look at messiah myths in science fiction, a short definition of what is meant here by the term messiah is in order. The idea of a messiah can be found in many religions. Often the myth appears among peoples who find themselves to be in a difficult situation, for example, set upon by foreign rulers. Naturally the beliefs differ somewhat in different cultures. However, the core of the myth is usually the same: someone will come and lead the people to a better life (Schäfer & Cohen 1998: 3–38).

The version of the messiah myth that we find in contemporary science fiction, has, quite naturally, borrowed many themes from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though it can sometimes be difficult to recognize under the layers of action and special effects. In the stories, humankind, planet Earth, or the whole universe is in danger, due to everything from asteroids hurling towards Earth, attacks by vicious aliens or robots, or evil humans scheming to take over the planet; in short, an apocalypse, of a sort, is expected. Luckily there is someone who can combat evil and save the day. This person is usually a young man, who after many struggles is ready to meet his destiny and become what he was meant to be. The hero's story often follows the journey of the hero as it is portrayed in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a work that seems to have inspired quite a few film-makers (Gordon 1995: 73–82). By means of, for example, self-sacrifice, however, a lot of heroes also show a clear connection to the Christian tradition. It has been pointed out that many of the heroes in the western world have been given somewhat messianic traits. This does not, however, mean that all heroes are messiahs or that every hero who stretches out his arms in a crucifixion-like manner is a Christ figure. For a better understanding of what constitutes a messiah, let us look more closely at the various saviour characters we can find in popular culture.

A hero is, quite naturally, a leading character who, by his or her actions, saves the day. Most saviour characters can be considered to be heroes. What kind of saviours they are, however, is a different matter. A division has been made between Jesus characters, Christ characters and messiah characters. A Jesus character is simply a character who appears in a Jesus film, that is to say a film about the historical Jesus. A Christ character is a character who in a more allegorical way can be related to Jesus. The character might for example sacrifice his life for others, or in a symbolic manner take the sins of others onto his own shoulders (Malone 1997: 59–60). A messiah character is a character that, in one way or another, saves the world or humankind and is, at the same time, surrounded by a clear religious theme. The character might, for example, be expected through prophecies, or in other ways be part of a religious world. A messiah character can be a Christ character but all Christ characters are not necessarily messiahs.

Quite a few different saviour characters can be found in popular culture then, but differences can also be recognized among the messiah characters, as we shall see.

## Bodily mass and bodily control

Let us start our analysis from the outside, with a look at the bodies of heroes and messiahs in popular culture over the last couple of decades. The issue of bodies and religion is a many-sided one. Religions present complex and sometimes contradictory ideas about the human body (Knauss 2007). The analyses here will, however, be restricted to a few basic themes in relation to bodies and ideals of the body in popular culture—ideas that can, nevertheless, be related to some of the more spiritual themes we will look at. The 1980s and early 1990s have become known for their ‘larger than life’ heroes, portrayed by actors such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. With their swelling muscles these characters can be said to reflect a male ideal of the time. The articulation of masculinity that they represent has, however, also been seen as a somewhat disturbing sign. As Yvonne Tasker has shown, these characters should not be understood in any simplistic manner. The characters break with the divisions of labour in classical cinema, in which the male character advances the narrative and woman functions as spectacle. The male hero of the 1980s and early 90s ‘controls the action at the same time as he is offered up to the audience as a sexual spectacle’ (Tasker 1993: 16).

The most obvious messiah character of this period is perhaps Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). In *T2* the characters are in many ways defined by their bodies (Nilson 2004: 43–4). And the most impressive body of all belongs to the machine-saviour. The Terminator in *T2* returns as a ‘cyborg messiah protecting a human messiah, John Connor’ (Kozlovic 2001). As John Lyden puts it, the Terminator ‘takes the burden of being humanity’s “saviour” off John by taking the sins of humanity on his own sinless self’ (Lyden 2003: 214). While the character Reese could be seen as a messiah figure in the first *Terminator* film (1984) despite the weakness of his body, it is quite obviously through his bodily strength and solidity that the Terminator becomes a saviour.

How then are the bodies of more contemporary heroes different? The super muscular heroes are, in many ways, a thing of the past. This does not, however, mean that the bodies of the heroes of today are any less impressive. In *T2* it is the solidity that makes the hero while the villain is characterized by his fluidity (Tasker 1993: 83). This more fluid body does at least to some degree seem to have been inherited by the messiahs of the last decade. In *The Matrix* (1999) we find a multi-dimensional messiah. This character is not only expected, he also suffers, dies, returns and even ascends to the skies (Ford 2000). Compared to the messiah in *T2* it is, however, interesting to see how

the body of this messiah is not defined by its obvious physical strength, but by the body's flexibility and ability to challenge the laws of physics without using brute force. This body is also defined by its ability to be penetrated, since it is by jacking into the matrix, a computer programme, via plugs in their bodies that the characters can help save humanity. In this way the messiah of *The Matrix* can be said to be feminized in a way that the Terminator is not.

It is not, however, just by becoming less muscular, or less defined by their muscles, that the bodies of modern saviours have changed. The gender of these bodies has changed as well. While in the traditional story it is woman who gives birth to a male messiah that then saves the woman and the world (Ortiz & Roux 1997: 142), in an increasing number of films and TV series the messiah is a woman. There is not room here for a detailed analysis of the bodies of female messiahs. It can, however, be established that female saviours, just as at least some male saviours, through their bodies challenge traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. In saving the world, they are often allowed to be physically strong and active, as, for example, Ripley in *Alien 3* (1992). In the stories there can also be seen a need to control and explain away the deeds of these women. Often they are shown to be driven by 'natural' motherly instincts. They are also often clearly presented as exceptions and not normal women and with their physical strength they can be said to put forward traditional masculinity as an ideal for all saviours (Inness 1999). In films such as *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Children of Men* (2006) women might be presented as the true saviours, but the stories are really about men. However, by their mere presence female messiahs are causing interesting changes to the myth.

How then have the attitudes of modern heroes changed?

### **Changing relations, changing attitudes**

The traditional hero is a lonely figure who takes on himself the destinies of others. He is also a character that seldom shows his feelings. In this way the traditional hero and saviour can be said to represent a quite traditional masculinity that sees emotions as unmanly and the loss of control as a failure (Ross 2004: 231). Many of the heroes in popular culture still fall into this mould. There are also several examples of heroes who fail due to their emotions. This attitude to feelings can, when the subject is messiahs, for example, be found in the *Star Wars* films. Anakin Skywalker in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005) becomes evil through his feelings, feelings that are also quite clearly connected to fe-

male characters. The women might not be represented as evil in these stories, but they are still indirectly made to carry the burden for the evil deeds done.

There are, however, also characters that break with this traditional image. It would seem that as the female characters have become stronger and have been given a more decisive part to play, the more important they have also become for the male heroes. And, as a consequence, more space has also been given to the emotional lives of heroes and saviours. For Neo in *The Matrix* it is the love of Trinity that drives him to the end. While this in itself is nothing new, a lot of heroes are paired up with women for whom they fight and die, still, the extent to which Neo is bound to Trinity is somewhat unusual as is the important part Trinity is given in the story. It is for her that Neo departs from the path set out for him and in this way risks losing the faith of humanity. While the story ends in quite a traditional manner, Trinity in the third film, *Matrix Revolutions* (2003), dies after giving Neo the strength to go on (Haskell 1987: 186–71). During the main part of the film it is still their love that is at the centre. Similar storylines can be found in films such as *Wing Commander* (1999) and *The Terminator*.

It can then be argued that the changes that are occurring are due to the parts played by female characters in the stories, or rather the changing attitudes towards what parts women can play and what is correct female or male behaviour. To some degree this is true, but clear exceptions can also be found. Not the least among female messiahs - just as female heroes have inherited the physical strength of the traditional male hero, they also, it would seem, have inherited their attitude. A female messiah such as Ripley in *Alien 3*, is in many ways one of the guys. She becomes a clear Christ figure in the story (Loughlin 2004: 120), but, as in the other *Alien* films, she saves the world in quite a traditionally male fashion. That is to say, she shows few emotions and for the most part keeps her feelings under control. A character with similar characteristics is Sarah Connor in *T2*, a character who is not a messiah, but definitely takes part in the fight against evil (Ortiz & Roux 1997: 145).

There are, however, also some interesting exceptions to this character mould. One such exception is Buffy in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). This character is in many ways allowed to be both traditionally female and male. In contrast to many female heroes preceding her, Buffy is given a clearly female name which, as Sara Crosby has pointed out, 'identifies our hero unequivocally with women' (Crosby 2004: 161). She is strong and active, but also sometimes emotional and in need of others. This need to trust others is, however, not represented as a weakness. As Sharon Ross has pointed out, it is rather the other way around. The times Buffy gets into trouble are the

times she is separated from her friends (Ross 2004: 231–52). Also in this way the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series breaks with the traditional way for the hero to do his deed. Even though Buffy is the main hero, she is not the only one. When the world is in need of saving, everyone, not just has to, but is allowed to, pitch in. Thus the hero is no longer a lonesome male, but a group of people, both male and female. This is also something we can recognize in the film *Deep Impact* (1998). Which brings us to our next question: that of power.

### The destiny within

In the traditional messiah myth, the messiah is usually sent from above. Behind his power is a divine power that chooses the saviour for humanity. Although the saviours of contemporary popular culture might have some god-like characteristics, their supernatural powers, for example, separate some of them from normal humans and their alien technology might make them seem god-like from a human perspective (Ruppersberg 1990: 32–7), God as such does not have a part to play in these stories. Instead the stories depend on a mostly human messiah, who becomes a saviour through his own struggles. Anakin Skywalker might be created by The Force, but this force is not God. Bryan P. Stone has compared The Force to the Holy Spirit in Christianity. There are some likenesses to be found, but as Stone points out, The Force is ‘impersonal and in no way is meant to serve as shorthand for the activity or presence of a supreme-being or deity’ (Stone 2000: 135). Neo in *The Matrix* might in turn be created by a, in some sense, supreme-being, the computer programme named Oracle. This Oracle is, however, not in charge of Neo and is, in the end, in need of saving, just as are the rest of the characters.

The saviours of today’s popular culture are, in other words, quite independent characters that through their own actions, or the actions of some other humans, become the chosen ones. This does not, however, mean that religion, or religious symbolism, also disappears from the stories. Instead the saviours of popular culture are very often surrounded by a clear religious language and religious symbolism (Ostwalt 2000). Many messiahs can be seen as religious seekers and their religious struggles are in turn given a central position in the story. It is not until the saviour characters face their spiritual heritage that they can become what they are meant to be. For example, Christopher Blair, in *Wing Commander*, does not become the saviour of the story until he has been able to face his pilgrim heritage. The pilgrims, in turn, are said to have travelled so far out into the universe that they have started to

see themselves as gods. In a similar manner, Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* film has to face his background and find his place as a Jedi.

Here we can see some differences between male and female messiahs. Female messiahs might have been given access to religious power by being allowed to save the world. But in the stories with female messiahs some more traditional power structures prevail. Gods or goddesses do not that often come into the picture here either, but it is noteworthy that the religious leadership in these stories usually stays in the hands of men. Female messiahs are in some ways not religious seekers in the same sense as the male messiahs are. The religious voices in these stories are instead given to male characters. In *Alien 3*, for example, Ripley says that she does not have a lot of faith. Faith instead becomes the sphere for the male prisoners. In a similar manner, Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* is clearly stated to be a world saviour. She does not, however, appear to be interested in religion, though her contact on Earth is a male priest. Max in the TV series *Dark Angel* (2000–2) shows an interest in religion, but the only choice she is given is a religion led by men. Max is also created by a male character, the mystical Father, whose messianic destiny, as Sara Crosby puts it, she in many ways fulfils (Crosby 2004: 156). This is something she in turn has in common with Buffy. However, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* there is to be found a challenge of the traditional power order, when the character Willow is eventually allowed to become the most powerful religious character.

### The faith of saviours

Many messiah characters, or at least several of the male messiah characters, are thus clearly religious characters that also can be seen as religious seekers. But what kind of religion is it that is represented here? Several messiah characters can, as we have seen, be related to the Christian tradition. In other words, they have characteristics that we recognize from the story of Christ. Neo, in *The Matrix*, who both dies and is resurrected in the first and in the third film, in a way saves the world by dying for it. It has also been pointed out that Neo is dead for 72 seconds on screen. If you translate that to hours you get three days (Nathan 2000: 37). The Terminator in *T2* in a similar manner gives his life so that the humans may live and, as John Lyden has pointed out, it is perhaps not by coincidence that John Connor has the same initials as Jesus Christ (Lyden 2003: 214). In the *Star Wars* films we also find a character who gives his life for

others. Of Anakin Skywalker we are also told that he does not have a father and that his mother was a virgin when she gave birth to him.

Despite these and other connections to Christianity, these characters are not Christian characters. During their struggles they are connected to several different religious traditions. According to William Sims Bainbridge, the religion in *Star Wars* can best be compared to scientology. In the attitudes of the Jedi masters, Bainbridge also recognizes Zen Buddhist themes (Bainbridge 1997: 399–406). The religious notes in *The Matrix* have similarly been compared to Zen Buddhism. The training Neo goes through to become the messiah comprises, among other things, several forms of Asian martial arts. The effect this has on how the character's body is characterized is then connected to religion, though not to Christianity. The attitude to the world that we find here, that reality is just an illusion, has also been compared to Buddhism. In the stories scholars have, moreover, found strong Gnostic tendencies (Dailey & Wagner 2001), but also challenges to a Gnostic attitude (Bowman 2003). In the circular structure of the world and the life of the One, themes from Hinduism can in turn be recognized (Fielding 2003).

If we turn to the female messiah characters, Ripley is not, as has been pointed out, a religious character, but she has nevertheless been compared to both the Virgin Mary and Eve and the fallen Christ (Loughlin 2004: 113–20). She is, in other words, not quite a typical Christ figure, but rather a character that because of her gender and through the story structure, gives us a darker version of the myth. Buffy, in turn, can be seen as a Christ figure to some extent, especially in season five, where she gives her life for her sister and for the rest of humanity. In this series an interesting mixture of religious themes, however, appear. The series borrows themes from several religions, but often also creates new religions, although there might be a majority of Christian characters. It is most interesting, however, that the religion that wins the day is a goddess religion, which is to some extent in the series connected to Wicca.

The religions we find in popular culture among messiah characters are, in short, often a mixture of themes from many religious traditions. This, in turn, makes the religious struggles of the messiah a many-sided affair. A final point, where the messiahs of contemporary science fiction break with the traditional messiah myth, is in relation to where the religious struggle is supposed to lead. Both messiahs of religious traditions and messiahs of popular culture usually, as we have seen, appear in an apocalyptic setting. The world is about to come to an end. And both groups of messiah save the day in some way. The difference is that the messiah in the traditional myth usually leads the people into a different world or time—a world or time that is clearly connected to



the transcendent. As heroes in general, the messiahs of popular culture strive to achieve a form of change, but this change is very directly connected to life here and now. This concern with life here and now is one thing that, as we shall see next, the popular cultural version of the myth has in common with religion in the real world.

## Film and the real world

To say that film directly reflects our reality or affects us in a straightforward manner is, as has been pointed out, not a correct assessment of the relationship between film and reality. To state that film and other forms of popular culture say nothing about us or do not influence us at all, is, however, just as incorrect. This is also true of the relationship between religion and film. Phenomena such as the Jedi religion clearly show us that film can influence people's religious views. Though most people who state that their religion is Jedi are probably not entirely serious, there still seem to be quite a few for whom being a Jedi plays an important part (Possamai 2005). What then can the stories of saviours that we have looked at here possibly say about religion in the world of today?

If we start with the later part of the analysis, that is to say with the presence of a mixture of religious themes in many films with a messiah theme, a quite obvious reflection of religion in the modern world can be found. First of all, religion has not disappeared. The religion we find is, however, not always the form of religion that traditional religions represent. The mixture of religions in the films can be seen to reflect the idea of a spiritual supermarket where consumers can 'pick and choose the spiritual commodities they fancy', a phenomenon that is common when talking about New Age, but is not limited to this movement (Hanegraaff 2002: 258). Religion in short appears as a commodity in today's world. The root of a certain religious theme does not seem to be as important as that, in some way, it fits into the believer's world view. Religious ideas are mixed to create a whole that makes sense for the individual. The religious world of, for example, *The Matrix*, in the same sense appears as a blend of ideas from several religious traditions.

On a deeper level the films reflect tendencies in the religious world of today. As Paul Heelas, among others, has shown, we can at least in advanced industrial societies nowadays see a clear turn from 'religion' as 'defined in terms of obedience to a transcendent God', to 'spirituality' defined as 'experience of the divine as immanent in life' (Heelas 2002: 358). As we have seen, God

does not really play a part in the films and TV series that we have analyzed here. The times when gods appear they are, as in the fifth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, not always represented as good and also as beings that can be defeated. According to Conrad Ostwalt, what we see in many contemporary apocalyptic films, in relation to how God is portrayed, or rather not portrayed, is a postmodern spiritual tendency. 'The secular apocalypse in film is postmodern in that it has undermined the binary opposition of God-human' (Ostwalt 2000). If we define postmodern spirituality, as Wouter J. Hanegraaff among others has done, as the religion of the self (Hanegraaff 2002: 258), then the religion or spirituality we find in many contemporary science fiction films with a messiah theme, is most definitely postmodern. As we have seen, the personal struggle of the messiah, in these films, becomes a major theme and this struggle is not about finding one's position in relation to a greater force, but instead to find power and strength in oneself.

In several contemporary science fiction films and TV series we can, in short, find reflected the phenomenon of detraditionalization. Traditional religion gives way to new forms of spirituality and authority is no longer found in an external authority, but in the individual self. We can also see reflected here the turn to life in the here and now rather than life after death which also is a part of the spirituality of today (Heelas 2002: 357–75). Still other modern trends in relation to religion can be found in the material. The presence of female messiahs reflects an interesting change in today's religious world. As Susan J. Palmer has pointed out, the 'feminizing' process today seems to take place in religions outside the mainstream. 'A wealth of utopian literature has appeared in the 1980s and 1990s that exalt women as world saviours and rulers of the future' (Palmer 1997: 160). This is clearly a phenomenon that modern popular culture has taken to heart. To some extent the material also reflects what Linda Woodhead has called the sacralization of the feminine (Woodhead 2002: 341–2). In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as we have seen, we can find the Wiccan tradition represented together also with other forms of religion. At the end of the series, the character Willow for a moment herself becomes a goddess of light.

If we look to popular culture, it would seem then that postmodern spirituality, if we choose to use that term, has made a clear breakthrough in our society. There are, however, also some themes in the material that rather reflect a more traditional view of religion and spirituality. These themes do not perhaps make the religion in the films and TV series less postmodern, but it does, to an extent, limit the challenge to traditional religion that can be said to take place. This limit is interesting in itself, as it too can be considered to say

something about religion in the modern world. The themes I am thinking of relate to questions of power and gender.

Firstly, although a religious authority in the form of a god or other supreme being is mostly lacking in the material, this does not mean that all forms of traditional religious authority have been erased. On their journeys towards becoming messiahs the future saviours are usually educated by an older religious specialist, of a sort. Anakin and Luke Skywalker are both trained by Jedi masters. Neo is educated by the believer Morpheus. Christopher Blair learns about his heritage from the pilgrim Taggart and Buffy has the watcher Giles at her side, who at least tries to educate her about her role. These religious specialists then represent an older tradition. This tradition is to some extent challenged in the stories, but a great respect is still often shown the old masters. The idea of a religious hierarchy, then, exists in these stories and the appearance of the messiah does not, as such, change this hierarchy, it just puts someone else on top.

Secondly, though the spirituality of the messiah can best be described as a religion of the self, where the individual is at the centre, it is worth pointing out that in almost all of the films and TV series, it becomes quite obvious that the position of a messiah is not open to everyone. It is not just the religious hierarchy that prevails: so does the idea that some people are chosen and some are not. In other words, though the messiahs bear similarities to other spiritual seekers in the real world of today, their stories still tell us that we cannot all become saviours. This position is still usually given to a chosen one, someone who is human, but not exactly like everyone else. An exception could here, again, be *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where, in the end, everyone, chosen or not, is given a central part to play in the struggle against evil and where the essential hero also chooses to share the powers given to her with a whole group of others. Usually the stories make it clear that it is not just anyone's spiritual journey that is represented here. The modern messiahs of popular culture may have broken with God, then, but the stories still tell us that someone is closer to the spiritual realm than the rest of us, and more importantly, this someone is almost always male.

Thirdly and finally, these stories, as we have seen, make it quite clear that the religious sphere is not open to anyone and it is more often open to men than to women. In many ways contemporary science fiction films and TV series challenge the traditional myth of a messiah. Even though they present us with some female messiahs it is still clear that gender structures are harder to break down and change than some other structures—especially, it would seem, when they are connected to religion. This, in turn, reflects some import-

ant tendencies when it comes to religion in our world. Even though equality between men and women is something that is seen as obvious in many areas of our society, religion is still often left out of this attitude. There are today, of course, many religions and religious groups that give women the same access to religious positions as men. However, a lot of traditional religions and new ones still restrict women to traditional roles such as that of mothers (Palmer 1994). That not even science fiction, a genre known for challenging ideas, can seem to break through these structures, points to how deeply rooted they are. It is also interesting to see how the spiritual development that the male messiahs go through is left out of the stories of the female messiahs. Not even the changes that have occurred in the messiah myth in popular culture lately would thus seem to be enough to really make a place, other than as mother and victim, for women in this myth.

### **Conclusion: the need for saviours**

The messiahs and messiah myths in contemporary popular culture have, as we have seen, gone through several changes. Today we meet characters that are different from the traditional hero and messiah, both when it comes to the body and when it comes to attitudes. The body has not lost its importance, but it has rather become even more impressive as the audience's demand for mind-blowing action has increased. The heroes' gender has also changed and as female characters have been given a more important part in the action, the emotional lives of heroes have become more complex. The stories also reflect many attitudes to religion and spirituality that we can find in the real world. The messiahs of contemporary popular culture are not sent from above, their spiritual struggles instead become struggles within and the spirituality they represent is a spirituality of the self. The stories, however, also make it clear that gender still makes a difference and gives us different stories for men and women.

In all of this, we can perhaps find a beginning to the final question explored here: why is the messiah myth still so popular today? I would like to conclude this article with five possible answers. The first has a lot to do with what has become clear above. The messiah myth that we find in the popular culture of today is not exactly the same myth as the one we know from religions such as Christianity. The myth has been changed and challenged so that it better fits the world as we see it today and the ideals we believe in. The authority is not placed beyond, but within. By letting go of its ties to a deity or supreme being

the myth has become more human. In this way it has also perhaps become increasingly directed towards issues that directly concern us. Here we can, in turn, find a possible second answer to the popularity of the messiah myth. The messiah myth, as we meet it in contemporary science fiction, allows us to reflect on actual issues in our world. Machines might not be taking over the world today, or asteroids might not be hurling towards Earth right at this moment, but this does not mean that people do not feel threatened by the various changes that are taking place.

The way the messiah myth solves these problems might in turn give us a third answer. While the turn to the individual and the self might be something that inspires us, the fact that the stories usually also make it clear that we are not all meant to be messiahs can perhaps be quite reassuring. We might live in a culture that tells us that it is up to us to make things happen, but it can perhaps still be nice, once in a while, to dream ourselves away to a world where it is actually up to someone else to save the day. A fourth answer can, in turn, be found in the way the messiah characters in popular culture are portrayed. God might not be present here, but the special abilities that the saviours very often portray and the difference the aliens, monsters or machines represent still brings the transcendent or non-human to life. In this way the stories perhaps fulfil a human need for something that is more than what we can explain.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the messiah myth still finds an audience today because of its ability to entertain. In its modern form and combined with everything that special effects today can do, the myth often becomes two hours of action-filled enjoyment. It is perhaps not pleasurable to everyone, but for large audiences it seems to do the trick. In the darkness of the cinema, or on the softness of the TV sofa, there will, however, always be something else than just entertainment that meets us, something that might say more about us than we think.

## References

### **Axelsson, Tomas**

2008 *Film och mening. En receptionsstudie om spelfilm, filmpublik och existentiella frågor*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

### **Bainbridge, William Sims**

1997 *The Sociology of Religious Movements*. London: Routledge.

### **Bowman, Donna**

2003 The Gnostic Illusion: Problematic Realized Eschatology in The Matrix Reloaded. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. IV. <http://www>.

usaks.ca./relst/jrpc/art4-matrixreloaded-print.html (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Caputo, John D.**

2001 *On Religion*. London: Routledge.

**Clute, John & Peter Nicholls**

1999 *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Orbit.

**Crosby, Sara**

2004 The Cruellest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines. In: Sherrie A. Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Women in Popular Culture*; pp. 153–78. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Dailey, Francis Flannery & Rachel Wagner**

2001 Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix. *The Journal of Religion and Film* 5 (2). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gnostic.htm> (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Fielding, Julien R.**

2003 Reassessing The Matrix/Reloaded. *The Journal of Religion and Film* 5 (2). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol7No2/matrix.matrixreloaded.htm> (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Ford, James L.**

2000 Buddhism, Christianity and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema. *The Journal of Religion and Film* 4 (2). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm> (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Gordon, Andrew**

1995 Star Wars: A Myth of our Time. In: Joel W. Martin & Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*; pp. 73–82. Boulder: Westview Press.

**Hanegraaff, Wouter J.**

2002 New Age Religion. In: Linda Woodhead *et al.* (eds), *Religions in the Modern World*; pp. 249–63. London: Routledge.

**Haskell, Molly**

1987 *From Reverence to Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

**Heelas, Paul**

2002 The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality’. In: Linda Woodhead *et al.* (eds), *Religions in the Modern World*; pp. 357–75. London: Routledge.

**Hollinger, Veronica & Joan Gordon**

2002 *Edging into the Future Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**Inness, Sherrie A.**

1999 *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**Knauss, Stefanie**

2007 The Sensuality of Sense Reflections on the Bodily Dimensions of Filmic and Religious Experience. In: Stefanie Knauss & Alexander D. Ornella (eds),

*Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society*; pp. 197–216. Wien: Lit.

**Kozlovic, Anton Karl**

- 2001 From Holy Aliens to Cyborg Saviours: Biblical Subtexts in Four Science Fiction Films. *Journal of Religion and Film* 5 (2). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/cyborg.htm> (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Loughlin, Gerard**

- 2004 *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Lyden, John C.**

- 2003 *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press.

**Malone, Peter**

- 1997 Jesus on our Screens. In: John R. May (ed.), *New Image of Religious Film*; pp. 57–71. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward.

**Mendlesohn, Farah**

- 2003 Religion and Science Fiction. In: Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*; pp. 264–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Nathan, Ian**

- 2000 The Matrix. *Empire. The Greatest Sci-fi Movies Ever*: 37–8.

**Nilson, Maria**

- 2004 Mammor, monster och maskiner. Representationer av kvinnor i science fiction-film. *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 4: 39–51.

**Ortiz, Gaye & Maggie Roux**

- 1997 The Terminator Movies: Hi-Tech Holiness and the Human Condition. In: Clive Marsh & Gaye Ortiz (eds), *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*; pp. 141–54. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

**Ostwalt, Conrad**

- 2000 Armageddon at the Millennium Dawn. *The Journal of Religion and Film* 4 (1). <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/armageddon.htm> (accessed on 1 August 2008).

**Palmer, Susan J.**

- 1994 *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*. New York: Routledge.
- 1997 Woman as Savior: The Feminization of the Millennium in New Religious Movements. In: Thomas Robbins & Susan J. Palmer (eds), *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*; pp. 159–71. New York: Routledge.

**Possamai, Adam**

- 2005 *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*. Brussels: P.I.E., Peter Lang.

**Ross, Sharon**

- 2004 “Tough Enough”: Female Friendship and Heroism in Xena and Buffy. In: Sherrie A. Inness (ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*; pp. 231–55. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Ruppersberg, Hugh**

1990 The Alien Messiah. In: Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Film*; pp. 32–8. New York: Verso.

**Schäfer, Peter & Mark Cohen**

1998 *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*. Leiden: Brill.

**Stone, Bryan P.**

2000 *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.

**Tasker, Yvonne**

1993 *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. New York: Routledge.

**Woodhead, Linda**

2002 Women and Religion. In: Linda Woodhead *et al.* (eds), *Religions in the Modern World*; pp. 332–56. London: Routledge.



## A Matter of Balance in a Fast Paced Society

### Performing Ayurvedic health counselling

This paper concerns the practice of so called 'Ayurvedic health counselling' in Sweden today. It is a case study involving semi-structured interviews with six practitioners in the Stockholm area. The focus is on how the practitioners construe the therapeutic processes involved in their practice. The aim of the case study is to develop theoretical interpretations of these processes in terms of a performance perspective based upon Catherine Bell's concept of 'ritualization'.

Ayurvedic health counselling is one example of the multifaceted practice of Ayurveda in Sweden today. Different aspects of this ancient South Asian 'knowledge of longevity' are common in products and services related to holistic health and fitness. It is related to what Paul Heelas (2006) calls 'spiritualities of life', that is ways of life in the modern Western cultures 'which attain importance to the cultivation of the quality of one's own life; the quality of one's subjective well-being' (p. 224). The Sanskrit scholar Kenneth Zysk has called this 'New Age Ayurveda' (2001) to distinguish these 'globalized' Ayurveda from how it is described in the classical textual sources.

Deepak Chopra is probably the most well-known exponent of these forms of Ayurveda. In a number of publications Chopra has included elements of Ayurveda in an approach for the promotion of 'physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social wellness', which purports to integrate Western and Eastern ideas and techniques (The Chopra Center 2008). A few of Chopra's publications are also available in Swedish translation, for example his first book *Perfect Health*. The practitioners interviewed in the present study acknowledge the importance of Chopra, but make reservations against what they call his 'commercialization' of the practice.

Another very influential approach of this kind of 'globalized' Ayurveda is *Maharishi Ayurved*. This approach is very influential in the Swedish context, as the supplier of the majority of the products in the market. This model of Ayurveda was founded in the 1980s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the leader of the Transcendental Meditation movement, in an attempt to revive the

Ayurvedic tradition to suit the Western cultures (e.g. Humes 2008; Jeannotat 2008). The practitioners in the present study do not identify with Maharishi Ayurved, but they report that they primarily use these kinds of product. This is because they claim that the products from Maharishi Ayurved are safe, that they do not contain any poisonous substances, as for example heavy metals. Recently, this has been a controversial question in relation to Ayurvedic preparations in the Swedish mass media. As the interest in Ayurveda is increasing, new businesses are being established, businesses that import products from new manufacturers, some directly from South Asian manufacturers.

As a system of health care, Ayurveda is also a part of the field of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as a part of Western medical pluralism (Saks 2008). Degree programmes for training as an Ayurvedic physician are not available in Sweden. Training is offered in some other European countries, for example in Great Britain, where universities have exchange programmes with South Asian Ayurvedic colleges. In South Asia a 'modernized' form of Ayurveda has been established as a formal medical system. This form of Ayurvedic medicine displays influences from its complementary status in relation to biomedicine, with college programmes for the training as an Ayurvedic physician (*vaidya*), hospitals and a pharmaceutical industry (e.g. Banerjee 2008; Leslie 1992).

As to the field of CAM in general in Sweden, there are neither official or legislative regulations for practicing Ayurveda, nor a consensus for a minimum level of training. As a consequence, the practice of Ayurveda shows a rather multifaceted picture. Commonly, one or another aspect of Ayurveda, such as Ayurvedic massage, health counselling or diet, is combined with other techniques of personal/spiritual development or practices of maintaining fitness and well-being. Often these are integrated in the sphere of activities of various centres for personal development, fitness, health and well-being (e.g. yoga studios, spas). However, there do exist a few organizations that specialize in Ayurveda proper. These organizations sell Ayurvedic products, offer different kinds of treatments or counselling, and host courses, workshops and events to promote the knowledge of Ayurveda.

Since the early 1990s two ten-week courses for training in 'Ayurvedic health counselling' have been established in Sweden by two organizations specializing in Ayurveda. The practitioners interviewed in this study all have been trained in Ayurvedic health counselling at one of these ten-week courses.

## A case study generating a performance model

The research strategy used in this study is a case study approach. The purpose is to obtain in-depth knowledge of the specific case of Ayurvedic health counselling and the aim is generating theoretical tools in terms of a performance model for interpreting (some of the) processes involved.

The case study includes semi-structured interviews with six practitioners. The interview subjects were found by searching the Internet for web-pages offering Ayurvedic health counselling in the Stockholm area. Each interviewee was asked for further appropriate interview subjects. This overview of the field made it clear that the persons advertising Ayurvedic health counselling usually had their training from one of the two ten-week courses available in Sweden. Finally, three men and three women that had trained at the same ten-week course were selected. They all combine Ayurvedic health counselling with other activities of mind-body healing, for example yoga, spa-treatment, etc.

There exists a range of various performance approaches, with different epistemological bases. Common to the performance approaches to health and healing is that they call for recognition of action and process (e.g. Csordas 2002). Here I will use a practice-oriented performance perspective inspired by Catherine Bell (1998, 1992), specifically the concept of 'ritualization'. This perspective could illustrate how the practices involved in the case of study are constituted, and how these practices make a person engage in and experience transformations.

Thus, it is not in the scope of this study neither to assess the efficacy of the treatment, nor to scrutinize the metaphysical discourses involved in the Ayurvedic tradition. These questions are 'kept in the background' as the processes involved in the practice (as they are construed by the practitioners) are 'put at the forefront'. In this way, I am concerned with certain dimensions of the consultation process (not the entire system of Ayurvedic health counselling) that could be seen as psychological side-effects of the treatment. But, as will be shown, these dimensions are not unknown to the practitioners, and are explicitly attained to in the treatment process. The practitioners attribute this to the holistic nature of the treatment.

The following sections of this article will concern the activities of the practitioners concerning what sorts of conditions are treated, how the afflicting forces are understood, what recommendations are given, and how the conditions are explained. The final section of the article will develop analytical arguments in terms of ritualization.

## Why does one seek Ayurvedic health counselling?

The practitioners interviewed report trends similar to what have been found in recent research about CAM in Sweden. The prevalence of the usage of CAM is increasing generally and is higher among women, individuals with higher education and in the age group of 30–59 years (Hanssen *et al.* 2005). The practitioners interviewed in the present study report being usually booked up and the courses that are given are usually quickly fully booked. An interesting detail is that the practitioners report a clear increase in the numbers of phone-calls in connection with Ayurveda being mentioned in the media, for example when it was a part of Anna Skipper's programme on channel TV3 in 2004. All the six practitioners also report that women form the majority of their clients, but two of the interviewees report that these gender differences have been decreasing in the last couple of years, with male clients being almost as numerous as the female.

Based upon what the practitioners interviewed report, the clients can be divided into three broad categories according to their motives for seeking Ayurvedic health counselling:

The majority of the clients seek Ayurvedic health counselling as a direct complement, or alternative, to biomedical treatment. The client wants to try alternative treatment(s) in conjunction with conventional medical treatment, or the client experiences the ongoing treatment as not effective, or that it has negative side-effects. These clients typically have diffuse, vague complaints that are not easy to diagnose in conventional biomedical terms, such as sleeping disturbances, weariness, fatigue, uneasiness, or anxiety. These clients may also suffer from persistent problems that are difficult to cure, such as digestive disorders, obesity, allergic disorders, asthma, or musculoskeletal problems. The practitioners claim that they attend to the whole person, in contrast to the biomedical approach. Therefore they should be better equipped to deal with these conditions, as they consider the holistic view, not only the symptoms.

A second category of clients have no specific problems, but seek counselling in response to a wish to keep fit, to find an appropriate diet or just out of curiosity. They are interested in hygiene, diet and self-help in health, and want to see what Ayurveda is and what it can give them.

Some (but not all) of the practitioners report of having had a few clients of a third category: clients with serious conditions, such as diabetes. Obviously this is not very common, and when we touched upon this subject all the practitioners interviewed were very careful to emphasize that it is not within their competence area to cure these kinds of conditions. They restrict themselves

to support and rehabilitation in complement to biomedical treatment, for example restorative treatment after medication or after surgical operations. One interviewee says that it is important not to give the client the impression that Ayurvedic health counselling can be a means of curing these kinds of diseases, and refers to risks of charlatanry and laws which restrict medical quackery.

### **How are the consultations carried out?**

The practitioners interviewed usually use 1.5 hours for one consultation. The total number of visits of the client depends upon the nature of her/his problem. It is most common that the clients are recommended one further visit in about two to three months, for a follow-up interview. It is common that people come for one consultation only, and do not take the opportunity of a follow-up visit.

More visits are needed for certain types of problem, such as obesity, which require a greater effort on the part of the client. A few of the practitioners also have some clients that make visits regularly or occasionally. Several of the practitioners are also available on the telephone or through email, if the client has any further questions.

Usually the first part of the consultation is used for 'anamnesis'; to learn to know the client's mind-body constitution (*dosha*) and her/his present way of life. This is done through a pulse diagnosis and an interview. The other part of the consultation is used for recommendations, prescriptions and dialogue with the client. I will consider the two parts separately.

### **The first part of the consultation: pulse diagnosis and interview**

At the beginning of the first consultation all the practitioners interviewed let the client fill in a form on the general state of her/his health and situation in life. This information is used as a background for the rest of the consultation. After the form has been filled in, a pulse diagnosis and an interview is conducted.

The principal purpose of this first part of the consultation is to establish the mind-body constitution of the client and in addition to this, to learn about the client's way of life. Ayurveda recognizes three humors (*dosha*) that are derived from five fundamental elements of nature. These are *vata* (wind), *pitta* (bile) and *kapha* (phlegm) and they exist in various combinations in

all forms of life, which make up the variability and diversity of the material world. Therefore an individual is born with a particular constitution of the three *dosha* as they are combined in specific ways in the individual person's mind and body.

Pulse diagnosis is a common technique in many Oriental medical traditions. By taking the pulse the practitioner claims to be able to get a picture of the functioning of the entire mind–body system of the client and to establish the humoral balance of the client. In traditional Ayurveda the practitioner might not only examine the client's pulse, but also the client's skin, hair, eyes, tongue, etc. In some expressions of 'modernized' Ayurveda these procedures are left out, for example in college educations in India. It is interesting to note that in this Swedish postmodern version of Ayurvedic practices, pulse diagnosis have become a common ingredient.

The interview lets the practitioner supplement what she/he has found through the pulse diagnosis. However, in addition to establish the humoral balance of the client, the aim of the interview is also to learn about the client's way of life. Primarily, the focus is upon habits of diet, sleep and physical activity. One of the interviewees says:

Mostly it [the consultation] is about a dialogue with the client: What is your problem? What symptoms have you got? What do you think has started this? How do you live? How do you eat? How do you sleep? How is your stomach working? How is your life working?

Second, the participants stress that it is important to take a comprehensive view and discuss the client's everyday life situation. One practitioner says that he always tries to ask about family circumstances and the situation at work:

Because that is also quite common, that yes, alright it was perhaps only . . . you find out that this stomach-ache was really about that I wanted to get a divorce, or to change my job, or whatever else it might be.

I will not scrutinize the appropriateness of the metaphysical ideas and concepts involved in the consultation process, but will view them as 'conceptual tools'. According to this, the important features are the emphasis on the interactions of a mind–body (i.e. an embodied agent) and a physio-social environment.

The holistic emphasis of the practitioners' approach is in direct correspondence with the South Asian categories of the person. The constituents of the person are not conceptualized according to the Cartesian dualism that

is characteristic to biomedicine. Instead, the individual mind and body are seen as being in constant exchange with the larger social and physical environment. This can be viewed as processes in dynamic interaction, through the ways of life of the person, as for example diet, hygiene, sleeping patterns, physical exercise, specific regional ecology, season of the year, and so on (e.g. Trawick 1992; Marriott 1990).

Gananath Obeyesekere (1977) points out that the view of mind–body contingency implies that there is a recognition of psychosomatic illnesses, for example, that fever can be caused by grief and anxiety, stomach problems by grief and fright. But an important qualifier is that this is ‘somato-psychics’, not psychosomatics, because the body is seen as central through the emphasis on humors. The mind is seen as dependent on physiological factors (p. 160 f.).

Other scholars (e.g. Kakar 1991; Nichter 1981) have noted how this view of the person involves the psychosocial, as well as the physical, aspects of illness in the treatment process.

## **The second part of the consultation: recommendations and prescriptions**

The second part of the consultation focuses on recommendations and prescriptions by the practitioners. This naturally concerns advice on the same principal areas that have been covered in the first part of the consultation: diet, sleep, rest and physical activity. It also includes general advice on lifestyle and, if needed, specific prescriptions or plans of actions to follow. This might (but does not necessarily) include preparations or medicaments.

The practitioners view health and illness in terms of balances between the specific inborn mind–body constitution (*dosha*) of the client and her/his ways of life. The principal cause of affliction is attributed to disturbances of these balances due to the fast pace of the Swedish society of today.

The advice given on eating habits concerns how you eat and what you eat. One practitioner says:

In this fast paced society people often need to be reminded of the importance of eating in peace and quiet. To chew well and concentrate on the eating, not to read the newspaper or watch television at the same time as eating. And not to use too much coffee, and to drink a sufficient amount of water. A common problem is not to drink adequately, to drink too little during the day.

Sleeping habits concern the vital balance of activity and rest. The practitioners stress the importance of sufficient sleep and at the adequate time. This is according to the theory that different times of the day are governed by the different *dosha*. And this, one of the informants claim, is in concordance with modern medical research on sleep:

The best is to ease off and move into low gear in the evening and go to bed early, preferably before 10 pm, and to rise early, preferably before 6 am. After 10 pm there is an increase in *pitta* that promotes deep sleep, but this will give the reverse result and give you more energy if you are awake. After 6 am there is an increase in *vata*.

The recommendations on physical activity also emphasize that rest should be in balance with activity. To begin or to continue regular physical exercises is recommended. The practitioners stress that this should be in line with the individuals' own preferences. This can be any kind of physical exercise that the person feels is good for him/her, from regular walks and habits of taking the stairs instead of the elevator, to practices of yoga and aerobics. But at the same time, there is a tendency that the practitioners advocate meditation and yoga. This is most obvious among the practitioners that combine their Ayurvedic practice with teaching yoga. One of the interviewees is a yoga teacher and usually includes yoga postures in the recommendations to the client:

Here in Sweden we have lost the knowledge that you actually have to take care of yourself and your body. People think that you can work 60 hours a week without this hitting back at them, that you can sleep at weekends instead of the weekdays, that you can skip lunch without it having any consequences, and such things.

The changes that are sought are supposed to be moderate, step-by-step processes. It is important to begin with the client's situation today and make small changes in the right direction. One of the practitioners stresses that the clients should not strain themselves too much or be over-ambitious, but the recommendations should successively be integrated in the client's everyday habits:

Small, small changes are enough to get significant effects in the long run. It is important to take the long view and see one's condition as a part of a greater whole. In ten years we will see effects of small changes today.



In this there is a tendency to try to avoid rationalization and over-emphasis on cognitive aspects. Instead, the practitioners refer to 'natural ways' of being, a 'naturalness' that is equated with health and well-being. As one of the practitioners says, the forms of advice given are not to be followed 'like an idea'. The clients' 'ideas' about food, as, for example, through different dietary programmes, sometimes prevents them from listening to the 'natural' ways of eating.

### **A matter of coaching, not of therapy**

In addition to this, the practitioners stress that it is important to link the symptom to the situation of life at large, or, as one practitioner expresses it, to take 'the emotional element' into consideration, because emotions will have effects on the physical health. It is important to help the client to cope with the problem emotionally. How thorough this conversation is depends upon the client, if the client is willing to share this with the practitioner. As one interviewee puts it: 'some *pitta*-persons have a more instrumental turn of mind and only want concrete plans of action and medicaments'.

In this way the practitioners underscore their roles as a coach or guide of lifestyle, rather than as a therapist in the manner of a medical doctor. They also underline that they are not involved in some kind of psychotherapy, they can recommend the person to change his life, but how to do it is up to the client. One practitioner explains:

A significant group of clients are people who are in a situation of life where they are not able to take care of themselves for some reason, because of stress or something; they feel that they are stuck in their situation of life and are frustrated. And, I mean, this I cannot do much about but to say that: 'You are starting to get ill from your situation of life, and you have to do something about it. You know yourself that it is your situation of life that is the problem, and I cannot tell you what to do, but you have to do something, since now you are beginning to get ill because of it.'

The role of the practitioner as a coach rather than as a medical doctor or psychotherapist becomes even more pronounced in their attitude towards Ayurvedic medicaments. Usually, but not always, the consultation includes prescriptions of Ayurvedic preparations, medicaments or other products. Commonly, the client is given a programme to follow which includes Ayur-

vedic oils for massage, herbal teas, and various household remedies (e.g. squeezed lemon in a glass of water, etc.). In some cases Ayurvedic medicaments are prescribed. The purpose of these preparations and products is to assist in the re-balancing process, for example there are different types of oils and *vata* is characterized by dry skin.

There is no scientific basis of evidence for most Ayurvedic medicaments, but the practitioners interviewed stress that Ayurvedic medicaments have strong effects, for example with indigestion or arthritis. However, there is a tendency among the interviewees to down-play the importance of the Ayurvedic products and medicaments in the treatment process. Instead there is a focus upon the clients' own responsibility for a health promoting lifestyle. As one interviewee puts it:

I see myself as a guide, a coach, who is helping them to understand themselves, to create a control of their own. It is about how you live your life, not about giving medicaments.

Actually, it is a common view among the practitioners that their emphasis on lifestyle advice is quite contrary to the dominant way of practicing Ayurveda in India today. Several of the practitioners interviewed claim that the more authentic Ayurveda is preserved in the West, where this emphasis on holism is more pronounced. In India it is common that prescription of medicines is the principal part of a consultation and that advice on lifestyle is not even included. One practitioner says:

It is of course very different depending on the person, but even if there are no big changes that need to be done, I always start by talking about food and eating and how important it is, these . . . sort of . . . basic sides: the food, how much you are awake, what you do during the day, which activities, physical exercise, how you sleep at night, what time you go to bed, what time you get up, all this basic stuff, I talk with the patient about it. I also prescribe some household remedies or medicaments, if needed. But often it is these basic forms of advice on lifestyle that many persons need. The kinds of advice on lifestyle that exist in Ayurveda, but which are not mentioned in the Western medical practice.

## **A matter of balance in a high-speed society**

In the preceding parts of this article I have tried to describe the processes in Ayurvedic health consultation through the descriptions and comments of six practitioners in Stockholm. I have tried to highlight that the practitioners are engaged in the psycho-social as well as the physical well-being of their clients. In the presentation it has also become clear that the way Ayurveda is practiced is 'tuned in' to the postmodern Swedish culture. I have tried to show how the practitioners view health and illness in terms of balance; mainly in terms of an innate constitution of the body that is affected by the individuals' ways of life. This is seen by the practitioners as a 'natural' homeostasis, where a state of health is attained when the ways of life are concordant with the innate constitution. The principal causes of imbalance are attributed to the fast pace of the postmodern Swedish society. The practitioners clearly state that the Ayurvedic health counsellor is primarily engaged in health promotion and life-style advice, not in the treatment of chronic conditions. The aim of the practitioner is to serve as a guide to move from a condition of imbalance to one of increased well-being and health.

In terms of a performance perspective, I would argue that the practitioners' activity in relation to the client implies two interdependent processes: First, it involves the contextualization of the client's symptoms in the association of illness and health with the lifestyle and the context of the client. Second, it implies the practical grounding of the symptom in the efforts of the practitioner to make the mind-body connection explicit and to increase the client's awareness of the concrete ways of life that promote health.

In the following and final part of the article, I will consider how these processes can be analyzed from a performance perspective using Catherine Bell's concept of 'ritualization'. I will argue that the activities of the practitioners and their (actual or proposed) clients can be interpreted in terms of a ritualized space, a space which is constituted by the practical participation by both the practitioners and the clients, in which the clients are invited to engage. It is in relation to this engagement of the clients that the treatment can be said to have transformative abilities.

## **Employing Catherine Bell's practice-oriented approach**

To conclude, I will turn to a more analytical perspective and see how (some of the aspects of) the Ayurvedic health counselling can be interpreted in terms

of a practice-oriented performance approach, specifically the concept of 'ritualization' developed by Catherine Bell (1998, 1992). Applying a practice-oriented performance perspective it is possible to recognize the interconnectedness of mind, body and environment. And, since this interplay is seen in terms of embodiment and action, this kind of perspective also makes it possible to conceptualize the principal focus on bodily processes and everyday habits, rather than cognitive meaning, in Ayurvedic health counselling.

Bell's approach to performance is practice-oriented in that she underlines the need to approach action as action, 'the very doing of the act within the context of other ways of acting' (1992: 74). She uses the term 'ritualization' to get beyond the tendency to project pre-established (intellectualized) understandings of ritual on particular activities. Therefore, in Bell's approach the task of the researcher is not to discern ritual-like meanings in activities, but to attend to how a particular activity 'does what it does' according to the particular circumstances and cultural strategies that generate the very same activity (1992: 74). Critical to this is that the activities in a specific ritualized space implicate a differentiation of the performed activities from other similar activities. In the words of Bell, ritualization 'involves the very drawing, in and through the activity itself, of a privileged distinction between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed or implicated somehow' (1992: 90).

Following Bell, I will first consider the ritualized space involved in the process of consultation. Specifically, I will focus on how this environment is structured according to distinctions that are based on the performances of the actors engaged in the space. Second, I will consider the ritualized agency implicated in the participation of the clients.

## **The ritualization of space**

Many parts of the activities of the practitioners are related to a focus upon 'alternativeness'. Most fundamentally this can be seen in the claims of taking the best from (and combining) the knowledge of the East and the West, a claim that rests upon a fundamental dualism of Eastern spirituality versus Western materialism.

This is also repeated on another level in the claims of holism as distinct from the one-sided nature of biomedicine; the emphasis on taking the whole lifestyle of the clients into consideration rather than only focusing on symp-

toms and medication; the acknowledging of the mind–body connection and not just focusing on either bodily or mental aspects.

More concretely this is expressed in the consultation process when the practitioners, by reference to taking the comprehensive view, primarily attribute the cause of ailments to imbalances in the clients' situation of life in the postmodern Swedish fast paced society.

Not considering the appropriateness of this practice (there could be good medical reasons for this), this positioning as 'alternative' can be seen as structuring a ritualized space that is associated with coveted features, which in the end signify health and healing. To the extent that this ritualized space is invested in and identified with, the Ayurvedic practitioner is positioning her/his practice as 'the Other' in relation to the fast paced society and, as an extension to this, also biomedicine. The client can be said to 'be invited' to participate in this 'alternative' ritual space. The practitioner is on the client's side as a counterpart to the illness-producing factors of the one-sided Western/Swedish fast paced society.

This 'alternative' quality of Ayurvedic health counselling in 'resistance' to the fast paced society is probably very decisive in the treatment process. This makes the practitioners context-sensitive and 'tuned in' to people's experiences in the late-modern Swedish society. The types of complaints are typical of this context with the majority of the clients having vague, diffuse complaints that are seen as stress-related. The majority of the clients are persons that 'fall through' the conventional health care system. The majority of the clients are also women.

However, this alternative quality is not to be seen as something 'outside' or in opposition to the Swedish postmodern society, but as one of the trends that are part of this pluralistic society. This connects to anti-modernistic trends that are an intrinsic part of the complex postmodern culture. These discourses are commonly employed in what Heelas calls 'spiritualities of life'. Heelas (2008) has shown that this is an intrinsic part of the European history of ideas; it has its historical antecedents in the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and can be traced back to the Romantic philosophy of the 1800s and its opposition to the Enlightenment thinking.

In this way, this 'alternative' nature is probably not something that is thoroughly 'alien' to the client. On the contrary, it is probably in some way 'recognized' by the client, even if this 'recognition' requires seeing life in novel and alternative ways, and therefore could have transformative, 'eye-opening' characteristics.

## The ritualization of agency

Thus far I have discussed how a ritualized space is inhabited. Now I want to go further, to discern how ritualized agents are implied by their (actual and potential) participation and investment in this ritualized space. This takes the distinctions of 'alternativeness' to another level, associating it with active agency, in contrast to passivity, in relation to illness (and health).

The cause and cure of the illness is attributed to the 'naturalness' of the relation between the mind–body and the environment (both physical and psycho-social). The 'natural' harmony and balance have been disturbed. The focus of both the cause and the cures of the illness are primarily related to everyday habits of diet, rest, sleep, and physical activity, paired with a suspicion of intellectualism. The changes sought are small, step-by-step changes, appropriate for the client's constitution and situation of life. The practitioners take careful steps to explain the various parts of the treatment to the client.

In this way the clients' responsibility for and control of the treatment process is stressed by the practitioners. From a performance-perspective, what is involved here is a change in the attribution of illness that is establishing the person as an active agent in relation to the illness, not a passive victim of disease. Thus, one of the performative dimensions of the consultation is that this provides the client with a coping strategy, a plan of action, in relation to illness and health. This could have transformative abilities and beneficiary effects on the clients situation in itself, in that this could provide a sense of practical mastery of the situation.

This practical mastery is structured according to the ritualized space of the practitioners. There is a negotiation about the character of the illness with the client and explanations are emphasized to the client. It is also acknowledged by the practitioners that the effectiveness of the treatment is dependent upon the involvement of the client, as they recognize that the more the client invests in the treatment, the more efficacious it tends to be.

Another aspect of this is that it positions the individual person in authority, in contrast to the health care professionals. To consult different, alternative health care professionals increases the person's chances to get 'second opinions' and alternative interpretations of her/his illness. The person is made an authority in how her/his illness (or health) is to be approached, that is, an active subject in a pluralistic context of many alternatives.

This is in concordance with the ideals of individualism in pluralistic societies. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead call this the 'subjective turn of modern

culture' (2005: 3). The authority is attributed within the individual, and it is the individual that has responsibility for his/her own life in all its aspects:

The subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority. Here the good life consists in living one's life in full awareness of one's states of being; in enriching one's experiences; in finding ways of handling negative emotions; in becoming sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one's own life – alone or in relation – may be improved. (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 3–4.)

To sum up, the performative dimensions of Ayurvedic health counselling can be interpreted in terms of ritualization in the following way.

The practitioners inhabit a ritualized space that the clients are invited to participate in. This participation might have transformative potentialities of its own, in that participation implies changes in how agency is accrued and that certain ways of life are strengthened and others undermined. Activity and control are related to an alternative counter-position to the postmodern, fast paced Western/Swedish society. The latter is associated with passivity, not being in control, and a materialistic, unhealthy lifestyle. This distinction employs an orchestration of common cultural discourses.

The client's participation can be interpreted as a ritualized agency with a sense of practical mastery of the specific ritualized space. The cause and cure of the illness is attributed to concrete factors through the emphasis on body and habits, a contextualization and embodiment of the illness. By being recognized as a person that is active in relation to her/his life problems, a person with responsibility and control of the illness, the client's engagement in (and recognition of) the ritualized space is made an integral part of the ritualization.

## References

### **Banerjee, Madhulika**

2008 Ayurveda in Modern India: Standardization and Pharmaceuticalization. In: Dagmar Wujastyk & Frederick M. Smith (eds), *Modern and Global Ayurveda*; pp. 201–14. Albany: SUNY Press.

### **Bell, Catherine**

1992 *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1998 Performance. In: Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*; pp. 205–24. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Chopra Center**

2008 Home page of the Chopra Center. <http://www.chopra.com> (accessed on 31 October 2008).

**Csordas, Thomas J.**

2002 *Body/Meaning/Healing*. New York: Palgrave.

**Hanssen, B., S. Grimsgaard, L. Launso, V. Fonnebo, T. Falkenberg & N. K. Rasmussen**

2005 Use of complementary and alternative medicine in the Scandinavian countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Primary Health Care* 23 (1): 57–62.

**Heelas, Paul**

2006 The Infirmary Debate: On the Viability of the New Age Spiritualities of Life. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21: 223–40.

2008 *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Malden: Blackwell.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead**

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Malden: Blackwell.

**Humes, Cynthia-Ann**

2008 Maharishi Ayur-Veda: Perfect Health through Enlightened Marketing in America. In: Dagmar Wujastyk & Frederick M. Smith (eds), *Modern and Global Ayurveda*; pp. 309–32. Albany: SUNY Press.

**Jeannotat, Françoise**

2008 Maharishi Ayur-Ved: A Controversial Model of Global Ayurveda. In: Dagmar Wujastyk & Frederick M. Smith (eds), *Modern and Global Ayurveda*; pp. 285–308. Albany: SUNY Press.

**Kakar, Sudhir**

1991 *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Leslie, Charles**

1992 Interpretations of illness: Syncretism in Modern Ayurveda. In: Charles Leslie & Allan Young (eds), *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*; pp. 177–208. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Marriott, McKim**

1990 *India through Hindu Categories*. New Delhi: Sage.

**Nichter, Mark**

1981 Negotiation of the Illness Experience: Ayurvedic Therapy and the Psychological Dimension of Illness. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 5: 5–24.

**Obeyesekere, Gananath**

1977 The Theory and Practice of Psychological Medicine in the Ayurvedic Tradition. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1: 155–81.

**Saks, Mike**

2008 Plural Medicine and East-West Dialogue. In: Dagmar Wujastyk & Frederick M. Smith (eds), *Modern and Global Ayurveda*; pp. 29–42. Albany: SUNY Press.



**Trawick, Margaret**

1992 Death and Nurturance in Indian Systems of Healing. In: Charles Leslie & Allan Young (eds), *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*; pp. 129–59. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Zysk, Kenneth G.**

2001 New Age Ayurveda, or What Happens to Indian Medicine When It Comes to America. *Traditional South Asian Medicine* 6: 10–26.

## Necessary and Impossible

### On spiritual questions in relation to early induced abortion

What happens to people's existential and spiritual needs in the most secularized country in the world?<sup>1</sup> Only one thing is sure: no matter how technically developed and medically sophisticated our society becomes, in the end we are all going to die. In other words, as human beings we are, from time to time, forced to deal with situations of existential significance. Existential and spiritual questions remain relevant—even in a country where most people have abandoned institutional forms of religion. But how do people deal with these questions?

Sweden continues to uphold an extreme position, from a global perspective, when it comes to religiosity and traditional values. No other country in the world has, to such a great extent, left traditional and survival values on the behalf of those based on rationality and self expression (Inglehart & Baker 2000: 35). Religious and ethnic minorities have brought new forms of piety to the Swedish scene, but secularization and religious privatization dominate. Ideas based on religious dogmas have a marginal place in the Swedish culture, whereas science and medicine are fundamental to the Swedish approach to life. In this situation, it is important to study people's ways of dealing with existential life situations. What do people think, feel, believe and do in the presence of the ultimate questions—when there exists no common ground for meaning-making?

If the term existential is defined as 'experiences and issues related to the meaning of life, and/or to the decisive situations and borders of life', abortion makes up one of the existential situations modern people are confronted with. In this article I will use abortion as a case study to discuss existential and ritual needs in contemporary Sweden. I will do this by presenting material from a pilot study on women's existential needs in relation to early induced abortion. This will include what could be called secularized examples of existential

1 Some parts of this paper are translated from an article published in the Swedish journal of Social Medicine: Liljas Stålhandske 2008.

confrontation, spiritual negotiation, and ritualization. The project works from a feminist perspective and aims at bringing a difficult question connected to female reproductivity into the arena of scholarly discussion.

I begin my article with an outline of the state of religion in Sweden, against the backdrop of the contemporary climate in Western culture. This is followed by an introduction to abortion in Sweden, and to abortion research of interest for this paper. Ritual participation is the next topic, leading to concepts of importance for the pilot study: existential homelessness and individualized rituals. In the rest of the article I focus on the pilot study and a discussion of its results in relation to the existential situation in Sweden at large.

### Sweden—a religious outlier

The labelling of sociologists varies: late modern or postmodern—the Western context of which Sweden is a part is generally described as unstable and changing (e.g. Giddens 1990; Bauman 1993). The foundations of modernity are shaking, and it is increasingly up to each individual to find some firm existential ground to build one's life on. Existential and ritual issues are being moved to the private sphere, and there no longer exists a common meaning-making foundation (Palmer 2008; Bäckström *et al.* 2004; DeMarinis 2003; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Gustafsson & Pettersson 2000). At the same time the church—and predominantly the former Swedish State Church—retains some of its position, upholding a vicarious religious function, carrying the 'religious memory' for a people that does not want to be institutionally led (Davie 2000; Hervieu-Léger 2000). Discussing the British context, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead distinguish between religiosity as 'life-as', focusing on transcendent sources of significance and authority—and spirituality as 'subjective-life', focusing on inner and individual sources of significance and authority. Talking about the subjective turn Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 5 f.) imply a cultural tendency where the spiritual forms of world view are growing, while the religious forms are declining. As their analysis also has a bearing on the Swedish context, I want to make use of their perspective for my analysis.

Heelas and Woodhead conducted their research project in the British town of Kendal. Here, theistic worldviews are declining, and more personally based or individual versions of spirituality are growing within an overall framework of secularization. Holistic spiritual milieus are growing, but not enough to compensate for the decline of the larger congregational arena (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 48). The changes in the Swedish context are simi-

lar, and in a Swedish research project following the Kendal investigation—the so called ‘Enköping study’—the overall picture is that of a secularized people with little interest in religious or spiritual issues (Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008). Sweden, as Valerie DeMarinis (2008: 61) notes, is an outlier ‘representing the most extreme combination of both the secular-rational value dimension and the self-expression dimension.’ In the World Values Survey, Sweden has one of the lowest response rates to the question of the importance of God, and in the RAMP study only 18 per cent of the Swedish population said that they believe in ‘a God with whom one can have a personal relationship.’ However, 56 per cent indicated beliefs in some sort of spirit or life force (Bäckström *et al.* 2004: 64). Furthermore, in relation to other parts of Europe, the Nordic countries are special in that the populations, in Grace Davie’s terms, can predominantly be described as ‘belonging’ but not ‘believing,’ when it comes to the Protestant (former) state churches (Davie 1994 and 2000).<sup>2</sup> Secularization is the overall picture, combined with a general sense of belonging to the Church. Simultaneously, the private beliefs of Swedes are moving from the theistic and churchly forms towards what could be described as a more spiritual direction.

Summing up their analysis and pointing towards future research areas, Heelas and Woodhead make another interesting point: while the subjective turn is clear within the private areas of contemporary Western life, within work and public life the culture seems (still) to be dominated by life-as regulations, through the demand for efficiency in the modern workplace. This, Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 128) point out, makes up a ‘fundamental clash of values’: a strictly targeted and standardized working life, combined with the cultivation of unique subjectivities in private. This might also be one of the factors behind the declining interest for life-as forms of religion, the authors reflect, since people prefer to seek liberation from externally imposed targets when out of the office.

In their research in Kendal Heelas and Woodhead focused on activities of a more or less spiritual character. The abortion research I want to present here works from a different angle. The common Western citizen of today is generally not active in any spiritual or religious community. She lives her life with other things first and foremost in mind. Swedish culture places an emphasis on the material and rationalistic aspects of life, and people are most of all

2 Membership in the Church of Sweden is, by Swedes in common, still to a large extent understood as being an aspect of being a Swedish citizen, which both Bäckström (2000: 142) and Sundback (2000: 17) point out.

concerned with their health, family, working life and economy—rather than existential or spiritual experiences and practices. The Enköping study shows, as have other Swedish studies, that only a small minority of Swedes regularly engages in explicitly religious activities (such as church services, prayer, worship etc.). Finding that only 2–3 per cent take part in ‘other religious activities’, Jonas Bromander (2008: 92) in the Enköping study also concludes that new forms of ritual do not exist to any larger extent. However, is it possible to detect private ritualizations through a question about ‘religious activities’, when people in common do not describe themselves as religious (which is true of 80 per cent of the population in this study)? Would it not be more likely to find new forms of existential activity outside the frames of religious, or for that matter spiritual, organizations and formulations?

The idea behind this study of abortion is that it might be possible to detect movements relevant for religious studies by studying situations where people are more or less forced into the existential domain. Situations when the individual needs to take care of those questions that the overall culture mainly ignores. In these situations, the idea is, it might be possible to discover personal attempts at meaning-making that arise at the moment of the subjective turn. Outside the frames of both traditional religion and alternative therapies people are still hit by life and death. In the absence of overarching spiritual references the individual is forced to make meaning out of the bits and pieces that lie at hand. Thus, in the research presented here the focus is not on specifically religious, spiritual or ritual activities, but on a situation that existentially challenges the individual, in order to see how she handles this, where she goes to find support, how she interprets the situation and expresses her sense of meaning.

### **Abortion—necessary and impossible?**

What is abortion? Before using the situation as a case for religious studies, it is necessary to get a glimpse of it from the clinical, legal and political perspective. It is also important to place the discussion within the frames of current psychological and sociological abortion research. To begin with, induced abortion is, in Sweden, mainly understood as an uncomplicated operation. About every fourth pregnancy in Sweden is ended through abortion. According to the Swedish abortion law of 1974, abortion is free up to gestation week 18. Until this point it is up to the pregnant woman herself to decide whether she will carry the pregnancy to full term or not. More than 90 per cent of the

abortions are labelled ‘early’, which means they are executed before gestation week 12, and later abortions are often carried out for medical reasons.

To study abortion from an existential perspective, or from the point of view of the psychology of religion, is not commonplace, and research in the area is limited. Although it might seem obvious that the abortion situation involves an existential decision, the political, ethical and historical sentiments around the issue have made the existential aspects very difficult to approach. In the Swedish cultural climate existential questions are easily connected to confessional religiosity, at the same time as religion to a great extent is associated with abortion resistance—while free abortion is commonly understood to be a self-evident right in a modern society. The right to termination of pregnancy has been understood as an important tool to safeguard women’s sexual liberation and emancipation. Thus, the existential and emotional issues surrounding the operation have disappeared from the public discussion, where abortion has been portrayed mainly from a clinical point of view. This has resulted in creating a climate where it can be experienced as risky to make feelings of grief, regret and loss visible in relation to abortion, since this could be used in arguments against the right to have an abortion.<sup>3</sup>

However, current Swedish abortion research points to the fact that women themselves often experience the abortion situation in existential terms. This is shown in the strong as well as contradictory emotions that women connect to the situation. Positive experiences are for many women mixed with feelings of apathy, grief, emptiness and pain. It is not unusual that women experience conflicting feelings—such as relief and regret—simultaneously, which put them in a particularly vulnerable situation (see e.g. Mattsson 2003: 25–9 and Kero 2002: 33 f.). However, and this is important to note, the painful experiences women can have around the experience do not have to be connected to a questioning of the right to have an abortion. Even when the abortion decision appears obvious for the woman to make, the abortion does not have to be easy to go through—from an existential or emotional point of view. A young woman from my research material gives voice to this complexity. She became pregnant at the age of 24. The pregnancy was not planned, and she immediately decided to have an abortion. She supposed the whole thing would be quickly and easily dealt with. Soon, however, she experienced the situation as much harder than she had imagined it would be. Although she is fully convinced that she made the right decision when she chose to have the abortion,

3 Both Anneli Kero (2002: 37) and Yvonne Terjestam (1991: 13–14) point out this complication.

she can still today, four years later, feel that the decision making process was extremely difficult—although it was necessary: ‘. . . this is . . . beyond what one really can demand of a human being to be forced to make such a decision’ (Liljas Stålhandske 2006: 56).

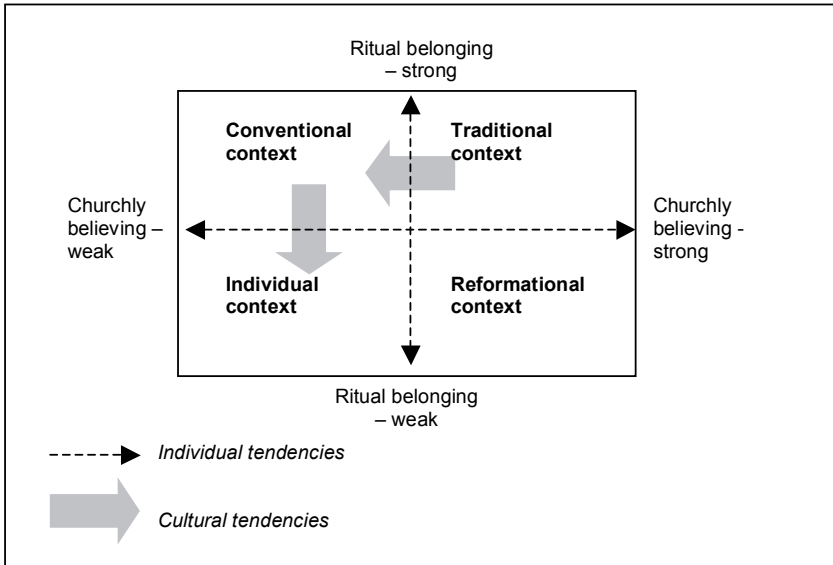
To discuss abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion is not about engaging in its ethical aspects—and certainly not about questioning the Swedish abortion legislation. Rather, the interest lies in listening to experiences like this one, and trying to understand its implications for women’s well-being in relation to the abortion situation. More specifically, the aim of this research is to investigate what meaning-making experiences and practices can be found in Swedish women’s stories about their abortions. The overarching interest is to see how secularized people’s health is affected by the lack of common expressions and interpretations for the existential aspects in life, and here the abortion situation works as a case study.

### Swedes—belonging but not believing

Although Sweden easily can be described as the most secularized country in the world, it is also a much more pluralistic country than it used to be. When it comes to a small Swedish town like Enköping, this plurality is not visible in terms of different forms of confession, which Bromander (2008: 76 f.) points out—here the culture is still, on the surface, rather homogeneously Christian. However, in terms of beliefs and relationship to the Church of Sweden, even a town like Enköping presents a great diversity. In order to discuss and interpret people’s existential and ritual needs within the Swedish culture it is necessary to point out the dimensions that determine an individual’s existential and ritual approach. Here I would like to develop the model of ritual context, presented in 2005, by making use of Davie’s terms ‘belonging’ and ‘believing.’<sup>4</sup> In this model I use two dimensions to describe the different existential positions, possible in the Swedish context, focusing on the portion of the Swedish population that are still members of the Church of Sweden (which in 2007 represents 74 % of the population).<sup>5</sup> The first dimension concerns what I label churchly believing, and the second dimension ritual belonging (figure). Churchly believing represents the aspect of a churchly identity.

4 For the original model, see Liljas Stålhandske 2005: 122.

5 All statistics about the Church of Sweden is collected from its official homepage: [www.svenskakyrkan.se](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se).



**Figure. Churchly believing and ritual belonging. Model over ritual contexts through the individual's relation to the Church of Sweden and its rituals within late modern Sweden.**

Describing oneself as Christian, in a religious and theistic sense, represents a strong churchly belief in this model.<sup>6</sup> Ritual belonging represents the use of traditional life cycle rituals within the Church of Sweden. An individual who makes use of all the churchly life cycle rituals (baptism, confirmation, wedding and funeral), in their traditional form, constitutes a person with a strong form of ritual belonging.

The model visualizes the point that Grace Davie makes—belonging is not necessarily related to believing. While the British population to a larger extent are believers but not belongers, the Swedish context is marked by the opposite. The largest ritual context in Sweden is thus the conventional context. Although the majority of the Swedes, as presented above, do not describe themselves as religious or Christians (in a stronger sense)—nor as believing in a personal God—the majority still make use of churchly rituals like baptism and funeral. In 2007, 62 per cent of all newborn children were baptized and 83 per cent of all the deceased were buried within the Church of Sweden (table). However, the statistics are rapidly changing. The trend that has been

6 For the difference between more or less religious Christians, see Bromander 2008: 75 f.



|   | 1970  | 1997  | 2007  |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| Baptized according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all newborn       | 80.6% | 77.8% | 62.3% |
| Confirmed according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all 15-year-olds | 80.7% | 48.4% | 35.0% |
| Weddings according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all weddings      | 79.3% | 61.6% | 46.2% |
| Funerals according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all deceased      | 95.5% | 89.4% | 83.4% |

**Table. Ritual participants in the Church of Sweden.**

mostly discussed within secularization theories is of course the decline in believers, but although the numbers are still high, the Church of Sweden is also losing its ritual participants, as the table makes clear. Within only the last ten years, the Church of Sweden has lost about 15 per cent of its ritual participants in all its life cycle rituals, except for the funeral. Moreover, many of the ritual participants that remain do not interpret the churchly rituals from a confessional point of view, but understand them as ceremonial and festive ways of celebrating important steps in life (Bäckström 200: 151).<sup>7</sup> This means that while the conventional context has been growing during the last decades, because of the decline in believers, today it is possibly the individual context that is growing most rapidly, a change visualised by the block arrows in the figure.

Bromander (2008: 87) also speaks about a ‘ritual turn’, when discussing the declining use of churchly life cycle rituals. In the Enköping study half of the citizens had no contact with the traditional Christian practice that has dominated the Swedish country for centuries. Bromander continues: ‘Since other types of ritual do not seem to replace this loss, there is reason to believe that fewer and fewer people will go through life cycle related rituals’ (2008: 92, my translation).

This is what defines the individual context, where people neither believe in nor belong to the Church in ritual terms, although they might still be members. Some of these people find more adequate ritual forms elsewhere—for example in one of the new religious movements. But, as Bromander points out, most Swedes are reluctant to take part in organized forms of spirituality.

7 Only 32 per cent of the Swedish population motivates the churchly wedding in specifically churchly or religious terms.

As existential issues are increasingly referred to the private domain, quite a few people stand outside the support and stability that a functioning ritual framework can offer. It is thus possible today to speak of a growing existential homelessness. While this homelessness might spell 'freedom' for some, others might rather experience it as existential marginalization or confusion. These changes are also something Valerie DeMarinis makes clear through her Existential Worldview Typology in Postmodern Sweden. This typology, developed from David Wulff's reasoning, relates the transcendent dimension to the dimension of symbolic versus literal interpretation, resulting in four worldview categories. What is new with DeMarinis's typology is that it includes two more categories, specifically developed for the postmodern Swedish context: the mixed existential world view—which represents a conscious rejection of a single meaning system; and the lack of functioning world view (DeMarinis 2008: 66; see also DeMarinis 2003). Both Bromander and DeMarinis point out that for many Swedes there is a deficit of a world view since childhood, leading to a lack of structuring operational narratives and health-promoting ritual expressions. Or, as DeMarinis (2008: 67) puts it: 'There is a crisis of meaning in terms of access to cultural knowledge or existential resources.'

In relation to the Enköping study, Brian Palmer (2008: 281) describes one of the main experiences in the current Swedish context as a mixture of exhaustion and worry—people constantly need to develop personal strategies to keep going, and are constantly worried that these strategies will fail. Almost all of the interview subjects in the Enköping study expressed a constant lack of time, and a workload experienced as too heavy. This makes up the background for Palmer's interpretation of private explanations and examples of spirituality in the Enköping population. Organized forms of spirituality are not common, but when people are asked about their own examples of spiritual moments and experiences in their lives, another picture emerges. Spirituality, in this sense, is the moment when you are alone and free from the pressures of everyday life. It is to walk alone with your dogs in the woods; to rest with the cat in your lap in your favourite armchair; to get out onto a lake in your boat with nothing else to do but exist for a moment. Acts like these seem to work as important breaks in a stressful world—moments of individualized rituals. In other words, to be spiritual in terms of individualization, Palmer (2008: 289) argues, means 'to stop'.

What do people seek through the individualized rituals, or private spiritual moments described in the Enköping study? Palmer (2008: 288) sums up the characteristics that people seem to look for in these situations:

- To get away from people, media and information into a secluded space.
- To get away from scheduled time.
- To find a refuge from people's expectations and demands.
- To alternate from responsibility to passivity and receptivity.

This, indirectly, can also explain why churchly services attract so few of the churchly members today, Palmer points out. If you seek time of your own outside the scheduled frames of everyday life, it is not likely you will give priority to organized and regular church visits. Palmer's results also confirm Heelas and Woodhead's speculations about the clash of values, and people's need to get away from the increasing demands of public life.

### **Can abortion be ritualized?**

What about abortion? Can an event like abortion initiate activities that might be understood as spiritual or ritual? The examples which will be presented here are based on the results of a qualitative pilot study conducted at Uppsala University 2005–6. The data consists of ten semi-structured qualitative interviews, supplemented with data from two Swedish websites about abortion experiences. Six of the interview respondents were personnel who in their profession meet women considering and going through abortion, four of the respondents were women who had had early induced abortions. The personnel were recruited partly with the aim of interviewing professionals with a specific focus on the decision process or existential issues connected to abortion. Thus three women working with abortion counselling were interviewed, and three women working within the Swedish Hospital Church (the Health Care Chaplaincy in Sweden). Two hospitals in different parts of Sweden were involved, and one non-profit organization partly working with abortion issues. The research material of the pilot study is thus in no way representative. Instead, the main purpose of the pilot study was to establish whether existential issues could at all be understood as a part of a woman's abortion process, and what the kinds of existential issues that might be relevant in relation to abortion.<sup>8</sup> It is important to make clear initially that a lot of women experience the abortion decision as easy to make, and that the existential thoughts,

8 For a closer description of the pilot study and the data collected, see Liljas Stålhandske 2006.

doubts and practices that the study detects only represent some of the many ways in which abortion can be experienced and handled.

The main result of the pilot study, including a thorough research overview, is that women's experiences in relation to abortion are extremely diverse, and that this also is true for existential experiences. Although the material of the pilot study is limited, the interview stories include a number of interesting examples of how women are confronted and deal with existential issues as they go through abortion. The results indicate that the need for existential and/or ritual processing is dependent upon the degree to which the abortion decision was experienced as difficult or ambivalent by the woman. When ritualizations of the event occur, they also seem to take different forms depending on how the woman relates to the aborted foetus. In the following I will present some examples of this, focusing on issues of labelling, making meaning and ritualizing the abortion event, beginning with the first of these.

The labelling of the abortion seems to be of great importance. This fact is the first to indicate the existential character of the situation. In the pilot study, two of the personnel and two of the women choose to speak about that which is aborted as a 'foetus', while the rest mostly use the word 'child' or 'baby'. The choice of labelling is far from arbitrary. A middle aged woman from the study, who is satisfied with her abortion, uses the word 'child' when she is talking about the event, and reflects about how old 'that child' would have been today, if she had not had the abortion. For a younger woman, also satisfied with the abortion, such a labelling is unthinkable: 'I think I'd rather not think about it. Or . . . it would be very difficult if I made it into a human being because . . . it would only make it worse.'

The difference in attitudes towards that which is aborted also becomes clear when you look at ideas and acts related to the abortion. One meaning-making theme that appears in the interviews, as well as on websites about abortion, is exactly that which the middle aged woman in the example above mentions: thoughts about the child that might have been. Some women fantasize about the foetus as a child, and have inner images of it—in more or less concrete forms. A few women give the aborted foetus a name and regularly think about it—especially when the time of the calculated delivery is getting closer, or on the anniversary of the abortion.

Another thought that appears in the interviews is connected to some sense of reincarnation. In this case, the woman believes that the foetus might return in a future pregnancy. An older woman, looking back at an abortion she went through when she was young, might view one of the children she later had as exactly the foetus that she aborted. As an example, one of the interviewed

women believes that the foetus 'returned' as one of her sons, because it absolutely wanted to 'have her as his mother'. For a younger woman the same kind of thought can be expressed like a wish, directed to the foetus itself—as in this example from the website Abortkyrkogården (The abortion cemetery): 'My Little Angel Child! . . . I hope you want to come back to me one day, Soon! OK? . . .'

Moving to women's meaning-making practices and ritualizations, the pilot study also gives several interesting examples that illuminate the complexity of the abortion situation. The study used the concept of meaning-making practice, with the definition: 'activities that are emphasized and rendered a specific value by the woman, in relation to existential experiences'. This includes, but is not synonymous with, the concept ritualizing. That meaning-making practices or ritualizations could be important for some women's recovery after abortion is suggested by results of the questionnaire that was distributed to the women who had had abortions, in addition to the interview. These show that three of the four interviewed women had felt a need to do a special act to mark/manifest, close, make public, grieve and/or thank for that which had happened in relation to the abortion.<sup>9</sup>

Although there are no traditional forms for ritualizing abortion, the pilot study also shows that some women find and create different forms of expressions for their experiences. Furthermore, the material indicates that it might be relevant to distinguish between two different types of practice: foetus-centred and woman-centred. This implies practices through which the woman focuses on the foetus and her experience of, for example, grief or loss, or practices where the woman focuses on herself, her decision and her experience around this. The distinction is sometimes ambiguous and some women seem to employ practices of both forms. Yet, the characterization is important, since it becomes clear that women can react in very different ways to different modes of relating to the situation.

The most explicit example of a foetus-centred practice is of course some form of funeral. The preliminary results of the pilot study indicate, through the interviews with abortion personnel to no surprise, that regular funerals

9 This result can be compared with the result from a pilot questionnaire study, which is part of a larger ongoing abortion study at Uppsala University, presented below. In this pilot study 8 of 23 respondents indicated that they wanted to do, or had done, a specific act to mark, close, grieve (etc.) the abortion experience. The percentage is not significant in either of these pilot studies. What the study makes clear is that it is relevant to pose the question: to what extent and how do women need and develop meaning-making practices in relation to abortion?

of aborted fetuses are very rare, even if they do occur. However, the idea of a funeral can exist in other forms, for example when one of the women tells about a symbolic funeral she carried out several years after the two abortions she had had. This woman describes how she created little figures of clay representing the fetuses. In relation to a bigger life crisis she travels out to the countryside to ‘bury old stuff’, and the clay figures are buried together with other items. In this woman’s story the burial practice appears as an important part of her attempt at recovery after abortion experiences that in her case were partly traumatic. The woman-centred practices that appear in the data are of more diverse character. Some are examples of emotional abreactions, as when a young woman tells about how she broke furniture and decorative objects in her despair over the situation, and how important it was for her to do this. Other practices are examples of symbolic acts, like embracing a tree for gaining strength, sending out a basket on the sea with items connected to the pregnancy, or anonymously throwing a rose into the corridor at the clinic where the abortion had taken place.

Let me return to the distinction between the fetus-centred and the woman-centred practices here, and point out why it might be highly relevant to reflect on the distinction. A woman who expresses a need of a woman-centred practice can experience a fetus-centred practice as highly provocative. One of the young women in the pilot study makes clear that the thought of some kind of funeral feels horrible to her, since she believes it would make her into ‘a murderer’. A funeral would ‘make the fetus human’, and this woman strongly resists such an interpretation. The complexity here is thus also connected to the issue of labelling. From a psychology of religion perspective what is important here is not the status of the fetus. While the ethical discussion around abortion has mainly concerned the question of when the fetus should be understood to be a human being with human rights, the discussion within the psychology of religion must focus the woman’s viewpoints and the importance of these for her handling of and recovery after the abortion. From this perspective, what the pilot study suggests is, simply but significantly, that while some women want to avoid both notions and acts that humanize the fetus, such notions and acts seem to be central and even necessary for other women.

The importance of the secularized context becomes specifically clear in parts of the data. Two of the women—one older and one younger—point out the lack of an existential community, and describe this as problematic in relation to a situation like abortion. These women feel the lack of an arena where the experience of abortion can be shared and expressed. They also lack both

the ability and possibility to express experiences of life in a symbolic way. The young woman expresses it in the following words: 'In some ways, maybe, I would like there to be something, because when difficult things happen in life one would, if one could, turn to something that wasn't human . . . it would feel safe . . . and I don't feel I have that kind of safety.'

The results of the pilot study show that the need for symbolic acts or ritualizations exists, and that some women also enact specific practices to deal with their experiences of abortion. As this was a qualitative pilot study, the data are of course far too limited to say anything about how common these needs are among women going through an abortion. The data are also not detailed enough to give a clear picture of what forms of meaning-making practice might be part of a woman's coping process, and what forms might be detrimental to it. The stories told by these women, both those who have gone through abortions themselves, and the personnel who have encountered many women in the same situation, only point out that existential issues are an important part of the abortion process for some. The relation between meaning-making practices and the woman's coping and recovery after abortion needs to be further examined, and thus a larger qualitative and quantitative study on abortion experiences is presently under way at Uppsala University, as is described below.

### **Private solutions to an existential challenge**

Before I leave the pilot study, I would like to return to my main question in this paper: What do people in a highly secularized context think, feel, believe and do in the presence of the ultimate questions? In relation to the abortion research presented here I want to deal with this question through the following four sub-questions:

- What can we learn about abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion?
- What can we learn about individualized forms of meaning-making from the case of abortion?
- How can the issues discussed here contribute to the understanding of religiosity in contemporary Sweden?
- How can the pilot study inform further studies in the field?

As the two first questions are intertwined, I will present my discussion about them together, and move to the last two questions in the concluding parts of this article.

Looking at abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion brings out aspects of the event that are not obvious from the clinical perspective. First of all it makes clear that there exists no common existential understanding of abortion. Instead, the medical point of view prevails. This is not a surprising result in a secularized and welfare-focused country like Sweden. But what the pilot study makes clear is that the clinical perspective cannot be understood as sufficient for understanding all the aspects that the abortion experience can involve. The situation includes making a serious decision, and many women experience strong emotions in relation to this. Today women have to find private forms of understanding and handling the event, and they mainly do this alone.

In the pilot study the word 'spirituality' is not used. However, looking at the study from Heelas and Woodhead's perspective, it becomes clear that when trying to create and express meaning out of the existential experiences related to abortion, the subjective life attitude completely dominates. All the examples of meaning-making in relation to abortion in the pilot study are of the subjective kind. Furthermore, neither the women who had had abortions nor the personnel interviewed referred to some overarching (life-as) meaning system in order to understand and interpret the event. Instead, the personnel displayed a subjective focus in following the labelling and interpretation of their patients or clients, not trying to force any kind of perspective on them. The same is true for meaning-making practices, and the examples in the study are thus both private and diverse in character. Let me point out also that the importance of the ideas and practices to the women that the study displays does not seem to be related to their proximity to the medical understanding of abortion, or their ability to otherwise rationally explain what happens when a woman goes through an abortion. Rather, ideas such as reincarnation, or practices such as a symbolical funeral seem to function as attempts at bringing comfort and existential comprehensibility to a complex situation—irrespective of their rational quality. The situation is thus rather paradoxical: we have here a rational culture that includes a high degree of religious privatization—which seems to lead to irrational forms of private meaning-making.

In the Enköping study Palmer found that to be spiritual in the individualized Swedish context could mean 'to stop'. His interviewees expressed a need to get away from people, information, schedules, expectations and responsibility. This is also discernible in most of the examples of meaning-making



practices in the pilot study. The practices that are described are carried out by the woman alone, or at the most, together with her partner. It is difficult to say, however, how much this is because the women want to get away from people, and how much it is a question of having no other options. Since public abortion rituals do not exist, and since abortion is a highly private experience, which is not easy to share for everyone, women probably have little alternative but to ritualize individually. In the Enköping study, Brian Palmer (2008: 291) points out that one effect of individualization is that we are forced to find private solutions to problems that have collective, as well as individual, roots. This, it seems, is also true for women going through abortion—in more than one sense.

The examples of meaning-making practices that the pilot study offers provide support for Palmer's understanding of individualized rituals. In order to get away from the everyday spaces of people, media and time schedules, the women describe how they go out to the countryside to hug a tree or bury figures of clay, or how they travel to the seashore to send out a basket over the water. They seek a secluded space of some kind and find a moment apart from scheduled time where they can focus on what they have gone through. One example is different in this sense: the woman who threw a rose into the clinic corridor. The space she chose was not secluded, but public, and she seems to have been compelled to quickly 'do her thing' and get off before being observed. Instead of getting away from scheduled time, she seems to have been performing her act in a rush. This example gives a picture of how public spaces can be employed for private meaning-making ends, perhaps because of the lack of better options. Individual forms of ritualization seem to exist in the tension between the power and the burden of ritual creativity. On one hand, individual ritualization opens up for a focus on ritual function in relation to the individual's experience and taste. On the other hand, individual ritualization also depends upon the creativity of the individual, who might be quite uncertain of how and where to express herself. The practice becomes an isolated event and if the individual lacks energy, so also in all probability will the act she performs.

This leads onto the case of existential homelessness of which the pilot study also gives examples. Needing some form of meaning-making practice does not necessarily lead to creating it. In relation to an existentially challenging event such as abortion, some women express a lack of direction and knowledge. Yes, some form of ritual to end this process would be a great idea, but how do you do it? Where do you go? The pilot study gave examples of ritual homelessness in the following three aspects: (1) a lack of ritual com-

petence, (2) a lack of comforting beliefs, and (3) a lack of a meaning-making community.

The effects of existential homelessness have not been studied, but an interesting topic for further research would be to look into the relationship between late modern medical phenomena such as stress-related disorders and the lack of meaning-making competence and possibilities in dealing with them.

### **Is there a spiritual revolution in Sweden?**

How can the issues discussed here contribute to the understanding of religiosity in contemporary Sweden? Here I would like to return to the Enköping study, and Heelas and Woodhead's discussion of a spiritual revolution, and give some input to it out of my experiences from the pilot study, and my continuing research in the area.

Reporting the results from the Enköping study, Bromander argues that Enköping presents a picture of a religiously and spiritually disinterested Sweden, where the Christian tradition still keeps its dominant position. Bromander thus dismisses the idea of a spiritual revolution in the terms of the subjective turn. He continues to point out how what he calls an immanence religiosity—where spiritual beliefs have changed from the belief in a personal God to the belief of God as something within—has grown relatively strong (Bromander 2008: 76). However, Bromander (2008: 100) argues that this immanence religiosity does not seem to have made any particular impact on the lives of the Swedes. In the light of other parts of the Enköping study, as well as the abortion research presented here, this conclusion seems to be a bit premature. To begin with, although few of the Enköping citizens characterize themselves as 'religious' (only 6.5 %), about half of them report having had an experience outside the everyday forms (for example spiritual experiences in nature; experiences of answers to prayers, or experiences of contact with a deceased person). Erika Willander (2008: 268) also points out that there is a crucial difference between identifying oneself as spiritual and having spiritual experiences. What I want to argue here is that the subjective turn in Sweden should be understood in terms of two vital changes: (1) the change in beliefs—to more immanent forms of religiosity, and (2) the change in loyalty when it comes to organized meaning-making, both in terms of traditional religion and newer forms of spirituality.

In other words: more than half of an average population in Sweden still believe in something, and the same amount have had experiences that go beyond the ordinary ones. However, most people do not believe in a personal God and few want to describe themselves in either religious or spiritual terms. Especially if Willander's and Palmer's analyses are correct, and Swedish spirituality first and foremost should be understood as searching for moments to get away from the everyday rush, I believe there is good support for at least parts of Heelas and Woodhead's theory—the subjective turn is happening in Sweden. In spite of Bromander's analysis, I also want to argue that the immanent form of religiosity holds a tremendous importance in the lives of Swedish individuals. Believing in a God that reigns within, or an impersonal universal power gives little reason to take part in organized religious and spiritual practices. The best way to connect to what is sacred in life, if you uphold an immanent version of belief, is to turn inward—and thus what you need most of all is 'to stop', and to shut out other forms of input. I understand this as a kind of silent revolution—but an important one. It is a revolution that has great impact on people's lives—not so much in terms of new and exotic forms of spirituality, as in terms of what is being abandoned and why.

## Future research

Finally, how can the pilot study presented here inform further studies in the field? The abortion field, as well as other existentially significant fields, presents numerous questions and possibilities for future research. My main interest after the pilot study was to investigate the representativity of the results, as well as collect more data to create a fuller picture of what forms meaning-making in relation to abortion can take.

Today, thus, a larger abortion project, organized as a cross-disciplinary collaboration between three institutions is being realised at Uppsala University. The institutions taking part are the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society, the Department of Women and Children's Health and the Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences. The project is also a part of the larger Impact of Religion programme at Uppsala University, involving several other faculties and institutions. The project is designed as a mixed method study with a qualitative interview study with 20–30 female patients from the Student's Healthcare Centre in Uppsala, combined with a quantitative questionnaire study including 1,500 abortion patients from 13 Swedish public abortion clinics. Hopefully, this project will provide a better

picture of women's experiences of abortion, as well as new insights into how people make meaning out of existentially demanding situations in a highly secularized society.

## References

### **Ahlstrand, Kajsa & Göran Gunner** (eds)

2008 *Guds närmaste stad? En studie om religionernas betydelse i ett svenskt samhälle i början av 2000-talet*. Stockholm: Verbum.

### **Bäckström, Anders**

2000 De kyrkliga handlingarna som ram, relation och välbefinnande. In: Göran Gustafsson & Thorleif Pettersson (eds), *Folkkyrkor och religiös pluralism – den nordiska religiösa modellen*; pp. 134–71. Stockholm: Verbum.

### **Bäckström, Anders, Ninna Edgardh Beckman & Per Pettersson**

2004 *Religious Change in Northern Europe: The case of Sweden*. Stockholm: Verbum.

### **Bauman, Zygmunt**

1993 The Fall of the Legislator. In: Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism. A Reader*; pp. 128–40. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

### **Bromander, Jonas**

2008 Enköpingsstudien: En religionssociologisk analys. In: Kajsa Ahlstrand & Göran Gunner (eds), *Guds närmaste stad? En studie om religionernas betydelse i ett svenskt samhälle i början av 2000-talet*; pp. 53–102. Stockholm: Verbum.

### **Davie, Grace**

1994 *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.

2000 *Religion in Modern Europe: A memory mutates*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **DeMarinis, Valerie**

2003 *Pastoral Care, Existential Health, and Existential Epidemiology: A Swedish postmodern case study*. Stockholm: Verbum.

2008 The impact of postmodernization on existential health in Sweden: Psychology of religion's function in existential public health analysis. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 30: 57–74.

### **Giddens, Anthony**

1990 *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

### **Gustafsson, Göran & Thorleif Pettersson** (eds)

2000 *Folkkyrkor och religiös pluralism – den nordiska religiösa modellen*. Stockholm: Verbum.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead, with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski & Karin Tusting**

2005 *The Spiritual Revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Hervieu-Léger, Danièle**

2000 *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

**Inglehart, Ronald & Wayne E. Baker**

2000 Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values. *American Sociological Review* 65: 19–51.

**Kero, Anneli**

2002 *Paradoxes in Legal Abortion: A longitudinal study of motives, attitudes and experiences in women and men*. Dissertation. Umeå: Department of Clinical Sciences, Obstetrics & Gynecology, Umeå universitet.

**Liljas Stålhandske, Maria**

2005 *Ritual Invention: A play perspective on existential ritual and mental health*. Dissertation. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

2006 *Ett avgörande beslut: Om existentiella behov och uttryck i samband med tidig abort*. Diakonivetenskapliga institutet, Uppsala. (Diakonivetenskapliga institutets skriftserie, 15)

2008 Omöjligt och nödvändigt: Kvinnors livsfrågor och psykiska välbefinnande i samband med abort. *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift* 85 (2): 139–49.

**Mattsson, Ingrid**

2003 *Som ett stygn: Intervjuer med kvinnor efter abort*. Dissertation. Göteborg: Nordiska hälsovårdshögskolan. (Avhandlingsarbete i folkhälsovetenskap, 2003:4)

**Palmer, Brian**

2008 ”Ryck ut jacken!” Andlighet som paus i livsstressen. In: Kajsa Ahlstrand & Göran Gunner (eds), *Guds närmaste stad? En studie om religionernas betydelse i ett svenskt samhälle i början av 2000-talet*; pp. 277–92. Stockholm: Verbum.

**Sundback, Susan**

2000 Medlemskapet i de lutherska kyrkorna i Norden. In: Göran Gustafsson & Thorleif Pettersson (eds), *Folkkyrkor och religiös pluralism – den nordiska religiösa modellen*; pp. 34–73. Stockholm: Verbum.

**Terjestam, Yvonne**

1991 *Pregnancy and Abortion: Psychodynamic correlates of the women's experience of elective early termination of her pregnancy*. Dissertation. Lund, Sweden: Department of Psychology, Lund University.

**Willander, Erika**

2008 Avslappnad och berörd. Synen på hälsa och andlighet bland hälsofrämjande företag i Enköping. In: Kajsa Ahlstrand & Göran Gunner (eds), *Guds närmaste stad? En studie om religionernas betydelse i ett svenskt samhälle i början av 2000-talet*; pp. 241–76. Stockholm: Verbum.

## The Problem of Capitalism in the Scholarship on Contemporary Spirituality

Capitalism has been a rare theme in the scholarship on spirituality. However, some very interesting attempts to think spirituality in relation to capitalism have been made. The focus in this article will be on four examples: Kimberly Lau, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, Slavoj Žižek and Gordon Lynch. This list of scholars is not exhaustive, but I have chosen these on the basis that their works have contributed to recent discussion and that I have found them stimulating. All the chosen scholars are critical of contemporary capitalism. Lynch understands spirituality to be progressive and an anti-capitalist ideology, while all the others deem contemporary spirituality to be somehow capitalist in contributing to its ideology, practice and consumerist ethos. By describing and analysing these positions, it will be argued that although the scholarly works have been strong in either describing the spiritual practices or theorising capitalism, these two dimensions have been fairly distinct. Therefore, there is still space for scholarship which could connect detailed empirical descriptions with theories of capitalism.

### Consumerist spirituality

Kimberly Lau has analysed books and practices related to aromatherapy, macrobiotic eating, yoga and t'ai chi in the United States. In her book, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (2000), she argues that although these practices portray themselves as critical towards capitalism, they are perfect products of consumer culture. They present themselves as tools for personal transformation through a non-western paradigm of health and wellness. All this is introduced as an anti-materialist project, but it is fully commodified: macrobiotic eating is expensive, Yoga Zone costs \$1000 USD annually (p. 17) and the aromatherapeutic antidote for the inner emptiness that cannot be filled with external prosperity requires external prosperity to be acquired (p. 34).

The problem with spirituality is its unrealistic nostalgia for an ancient and non-western world and the romanticisation of nature and naturalness. Lau argues that this is precisely the operation which makes it an attractive option as a consumer item.

Another problem is that spiritualities adjust the American self-reliance and individualism in themselves, thus not only recontextualising some Eastern traditions into a 'pick'n'mix' style, but also carving off space from addressing public and social issues and maintaining the common good. In this discourse social crises appear to be individual crises, or, to put it in other words, it encourages us to seek biographical solutions to systemic problems. It is primarily the responsibility of the individual, not that of society, to pursue happiness, and using the products of spirituality is offered as a way (or even *the way*) to achieve the ultimate goal of happiness.

The reader is tempted to ask, is there something wrong with spending money on spiritual practices and products, and if so, where should we put our money? It is noticeable that in the acknowledgements, the author thanks her mountain-biking friends and builds a hierarchical opposition between New Age discourse and mountain-biking. At this point, it would be possible to analyse the ways in which mountain-biking itself is commodified. There are magazines to buy and read, different products from designer gloves to helmets to choose from, and various trails to travel to. Therefore, mountain-biking cannot provide the context for resistance. In addition, if the author's preferred choice is itself thoroughly commodified, the consumerism itself cannot be the main aim of the critique.

Lau does not tell us what she thinks would be the best way to resist capitalism, or whether that is even the point. She just seems to be annoyed because in contemporary spirituality there is a gap between the product and its promises and a discrepancy between the product and the stated ideology. She argues, contrary to the advertisement of spirituality, that purchase is not a political act (p. 14), especially because it bypasses the issues of class and equality. The real problem is the *belief* that consumption is political action. However, if that is the case, then the critique of consumerism is secondary to the problem of believing something which is not true and which might have unwanted social consequences. At least mountain-biking is sincere, because it is not advertised as an alternative to consumer capitalism.

The author does not present an explicit theory of capitalism. Capitalism is a more general catchword in writing about consumerism and consumer culture. Therefore, the outcome is simply a critique of consumerist spirituality and the problem of capitalism itself remains in the background. This is

the major problem, despite the rich description of some of the contemporary spiritualities. What makes Lau's account important, in addition to being an empirical description, is its identification and analysis of individualising tendencies in both spiritual practices and society in general.

### **Individualising spirituality**

Individualising tendencies in contemporary spirituality have been analysed more thoroughly in Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005). It is an example of a critical pamphlet on the discourse on spirituality. The authors mainly use books as their primary data. The focus is not exclusively on the bookshops with their 'mind, body and spirit' shelves, but also on corporations and on the public sector (for example healthcare and education), which have become important locations for the discourse of spirituality.

The authors argue that what we used to know as 'religion' has become commodified and re-branded as 'spirituality' in the 1990s. What might be an even more important issue than commodification is that in spirituality old traditions are privatised or individualised by leaving questions of community and social justice off the agenda. This is exemplified in the analysis of Deepak Chopra's bestsellers. The authors quote the list of Chopra's ten key steps to happiness from *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* (1993) and show that there is some superficial resemblance to the Buddhist tradition, but what is more important from a critical point of view is that none of the steps point toward collective action and stopping social injustice. Instead, the steps are fully located in the private self (Carrette & King 2005: 100). This is an example of contemporary life which individualises both risk and success. According to the authors, this re-branding and individualising is concomitant with—and even instrumental to—neoliberal capitalism's emphasis on private individuals and the decline of the collective dimension.

There are some problematic assumptions which help Carrette and King to develop their critique. At some points they seem to construct an opposition between tradition and spirituality and also between religion and spirituality. Although at other points they resist these oppositions, they seem to immerse into those as if a tradition is worth saving and 'quoting' only as a whole. Furthermore, 'religion' is valued somehow more than 'spirituality'. I find this problematic even though their most interesting message in relation to tradition is the fact that in spirituality the issue of social justice is almost absent.



In spirituality everything is tailored according to the needs of the individual, not the community. Previously the authors have been criticised for assuming the existence of some kind of authentic religion or spirituality outside or behind commodified versions (McCutcheon 2003: 8–9, 233–40).<sup>1</sup> Despite this impression, which is easy to get, their work, however, should not be read as an argument for the heavenly nature of strong traditional communities.

The authors emphasise that there is no truly authentic thing behind different versions of religiosity or spirituality and that their project is ‘not motivated. . . in order to appeal to some privileged space of ancient religious authenticity, some nodal point where “true religion” or “true spirituality” might be found’ (p. 171). However, at the same time they seem to pose traditional communities as a counter-force to spirituality—the richest intellectual examples we have of humanity’s collective effort to make sense of life, community and ethics’ (Carrette & King 2005: 182). The authors might mean that there is no authentic religion or spirituality, because everything is already immersed in power relations. However, they contend that traditional religious communities are the best antidotes to neoliberal and individual spirituality. This is how it is possible to make sense of the two different arguments as: (1) individualist, consumerist, corporatist and capitalist ‘spirituality. . . is a hidden form of social manipulation of the same order as oppressive forms of thought-control associated with religious traditions in previous eras’ (p. 84) and (2) ‘it is the religious traditions themselves that are in the best position to provide alternative conceptions of “spirituality” and resist neoliberal takeover’ (p. 139). According to these arguments, ‘religion’ is the historical poison and contemporary medicine. The problem is, however, that the authors partly neglect the fact that traditional religious communities are sometimes in contemporary societies still hierarchical, sexist, racist, homophobic and pro-capitalist constructs and are therefore also present rich examples of collective oppression and control.

It is easy to present some further questions to the authors. What is wrong with buying things? Is it worse to spend your money on Deepak Chopra’s books than Carrette and King’s? Is there any difference between the two? Is there even a target of the critique? Should the proper target be the Prosperity Gospel instead? If these kinds of question are valid, the authors are not offering a plausible justification for their critique. However, I think that these

1 The targets of McCutcheon’s critique are Jeremy Carrette’s *Foucault and Religion* (2000) and Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), not *Selling Spirituality* which was published later.

questions, while easy to pose, are partly misleading. Despite the catchy title of the book, it is successful in obscuring its most vital point, which is not the lament that people buy books or spirituality products, or that religion has been taken over, but that the discourse on spirituality is enhancing the kind of individuality which is favourable to the triumph of neoliberal capitalism. The ideological critique is more important than the critique of consumerism and commodification as such, although both aspects are present in the study.

## The spirituality of global capitalism

The Slovenian psychoanalytic and philosopher Slavoj Žižek has dealt briefly with spirituality, Western Buddhism and New Age in many of his books and articles (see for example Žižek 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003). He does not analyse any systematically collected material when he writes about spirituality and New Age. Instead, he refers to the popularity of Western Buddhism, Taoism and New Age discourse.<sup>2</sup> His interest in spirituality derives from the willingness to think deeply upon global capitalism and its ideology.

The emergence of contemporary spirituality and its relation to capitalism is narrated in terms of post-industrial or post-Fordist society: if in Weber's analysis of early modernity in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* the Protestant work ethic was seen as stimulating the emergence of Western capitalism, the contemporary situation, according to Žižek, should be analysed under the title of *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism* (Žižek 2001: 13).

Žižek sees the emergence and popularity of New Age, Taoism, Western Buddhism and different kinds of spiritualities as ideological supplements of global capitalism. He perceives Christianity, and especially St Paul's theology, in a more positive manner, as an ally of Marxist politics. He also deems Buddhism to have a similar radical potential in *The Fragile Absolute* (2000),

2 In addition, he deals briefly with James Redfield's bestseller *Celestine Prophecy* (in Žižek 1999: 384–5). The analysis on Redfield's bestseller is somewhat different from the analysis of Taoism and Western Buddhism, albeit no less critical. The main idea in Redfield's book is that encounters carry a secret message by which we come to know our inner self. According to Žižek, we lose the Other itself and reduce it to a means in our journey of self-realization (2004: 127–8). This structure is similar to a self-sufficient consumerist self who finds from the Other only messages concerning himself. Therefore he writes that 'New Agers are not giving us even an ideal spiritual supplement to commercialized everyday life; they are giving us the spiritualized/mystified version of this commercialized everyday life itself. . . .' (1999: 385).

but he changes his view in the following books, *On Belief* (2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003) in particular (see Kotsko 2008: 71–2). The attitude towards spirituality and Western Buddhism has been consistently negative. According to Žižek, spiritualities function as a supplement, which means they offer a territory for relaxation and for gaining distance from the frantic pace of capitalism. Žižek (2001: 12) writes that ‘although “Western Buddhism” presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of the capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement.’ Spiritualities offer a way out of the frantic pace of contemporary life with which we are unable to cope psychologically and work as sustaining the belief that ‘you are not really playing the game.’ This view is based on the idea of fetish: in the same manner as fetishist attachment embodies a lie which helps one to carry on, spirituality enables people to sustain the unbearable truth and to cope with, and ultimately accept, the real and crude world of global capitalism.

According to this view, fetishists, or practitioners of spiritualities in this context, are not ‘dreamers lost in their private worlds’ (Žižek 2001: 13), as especially Lau seems to think of people who consider spirituality as resistance to consumer capitalism. They are fully participating in the hegemony of global capitalism. This is the ‘social involvement’ of spirituality. Elsewhere Žižek (2008: 18) suggests even that there is a connection between ‘spirituality’ (as distinct from ‘old-fashioned religion’) and what he mockingly calls ‘liberal communism’ which supports contemporary capitalism despite its ostensibly anti-capitalist disposition.

There are differences and similarities to be observed in Žižek’s work in comparison to other critiques of spirituality. The basic difference is that his is not a critique of buying goods. There is no moral advice given that you should spend your money better on the items or services that are delivering what they promise. The similarity is that the analysis implies what Lau, Carrette and King stress: that the spirituality discourse facilitates the understanding according to which collective social and political problems are seen as if they were individual and subjective matters (Bowman 2007: 32).

There are two basic problems in Žižek’s account of spirituality as a fetishist supplement of global capitalism. First, he does not offer any detailed or systematic empirical examples of analysis. When Simon Critchley (2003: 66) claims that Žižek’s critique of multiculturalist and leftist politics is not approached according to political categories based on people’s everyday lives, I propose that it is possible to apply the notion to this case: the critique of spirituality is not based on a detailed account of people’s practices, but on very

general and casual evidence. Second, his theoretical position in which everything comes down to economics after scratching the surface is too simple. These two issues are interconnected in the sense that the first is a consequence of the latter, because the theoretical position provides all the answers. As a result, the analysis tells us more about the fetishist mode of ideology—in contrast to the symptomatic mode of ideology where repressed trauma returns in the symptom—in contemporary capitalism. The fetishist mode of ideology may intersect with spiritualities, but it is not the same thing as to say that they fully overlap.

Žižek has a persuasive interest in debating the role, function and form of global capitalism, but he is not convincing in his knowledge of the empirical details of spirituality. Furthermore, Žižek's overall position as a commentator of the global system of capitalism gives him the excuse to abstain from a detailed analysis of particularities (Bowman 2007: 40). This critique of Žižek's position is based on the idea that the economic system is contingently and politically instituted and modified. This implies also that the discursive practices related to spirituality cannot be completely outside of the economic system. Therefore, the question of the relation and interconnectedness of global capitalism and spirituality is highly relevant for any study of discursive practices labelled 'spiritual'. To put it briefly, even if scholars of spirituality can easily point out the weakness of Žižek's knowledge on the subject, there are still lessons to be learnt, as he is asking the right question. Žižek's contribution lies in him explicitly posing the problem of the relation between spirituality and capitalism.

### **Progressive spirituality?**

All of the three examples I have dealt with above agree that spirituality supports capitalism. Only Carrette and King emphasise that there are other kinds of spirituality in addition to the capitalist one. The other side of capitalist spirituality has been mapped by Gordon Lynch in his book entitled *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century* (2007).

What Lynch describes is a loosely associated meaning-system which shares the idea of an immanent divinity. It is located mostly, but not solely, outside or beyond institutionally organized and established practices which are labelled as religions. According to Lynch, it can also be found across institutions and established traditions, but the examples he chooses are mostly situated out-

side of these. This contemporary 'spirituality' does not form a theologically coherent belief-system, but it has shared values and recurrent patterns—the unity of ineffable and immanent divine, pantheism/panentheism, mysticism and the divine feminine, the sacralization of nature and the sacralization of the self (Ch. 2)—found in books, websites and meetings. Because the values of the spirituality described are somewhat green, left-wing, pro-science and often include a critical attitude towards capitalism, Lynch decides to call it progressive. It is thus analytically separated from the wider field of spirituality which includes a range of liberal and conservative attitudes. The phenomenon certainly exists, and its description and an examination of its roots is convincing. The main issues concerning this are the questions as to what it should be called and what its relation to capitalism is.

One problem with the term 'progressive' is that the author does not clarify whether it is an emic or etic concept. It seems to me that it is partly an insider concept, but Lynch widens it somewhat uncritically and without further reflection to his own vocabulary. First of all, does the fact that something is in accordance with modern knowledge and cultural norms mean that it is progressive? If it is connected to 'green and left-of-centre political concerns' (p. 19) as Lynch puts it, it might do so. However, if it typically 'defines itself over and against forms of religion that are both theologically and politically conservative' (p. 20) as Lynch suggests, then it is not necessarily different from liberal spirituality or religiosity<sup>3</sup>—not even when its limits of toleration are 'assumptions about the divine, nature and the self' (p. 61).

My point is this: the author cannot substantiate the progressive side of the phenomenon described. This becomes evident in noticing that the examples are seldom anti-capitalist and practically never linked to anti-capitalist social

3 It would be important to analyse the motivations in choosing the word 'spirituality' instead of 'religiosity'. Why is the term 'spirituality' now flourishing and being taken as more attractive than 'religiosity'? Some decades ago things were different. For example, the North-American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey made a distinction between 'a religion' and 'religious' in his *A Common Faith*, originally published in 1934. He suggested that 'a religion' refers to a belief system and body of practices which have some kind of relation to institution or organisation, whereas 'religious' referred to experiences that bring adjustment in life. The 'religious' was about 'morality touched by emotion', about having moral faith in ideal ends. It was about seeing humanity as a part of a larger whole in this world (Dewey 1960: 1–28). The majority of people would not characterize that as 'religious' today, but rather as 'spiritual' or perhaps as the 'sacralisation of life'. In the case of Lynch, the term 'spirituality' is used in emphasising the distance between conservative institutions (religion) and progressive individuals and networks (spiritual), but a comprehensive study would go beyond individual scholars to analysing the emergence of the discourse on spirituality.

movements and networks. Therefore, the anti-capitalist or progressive nature of the phenomenon itself remains vaguely articulated. Lynch writes that progressive spirituality is 'often at the forefront of critiquing the economic injustice and environmental harm caused by capitalism' (p. 66). If it is there at all, it definitely is not at the forefront with other explicitly anti-capitalist social movements.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that I am not informed well enough, but the author does not offer evidence either. Most of the examples of social and political activism are taken from the United States and deal with the attempts to change religious organisations, to gain public recognition for holistic spirituality and to support the victims of hurricane Katrina (pp. 79–82). There is nothing specifically progressive or anti-capitalist in that. This is partly understood by the author himself:

Given that much of the literature on progressive spirituality has been concerned so much with defining its theological/theological position, it is perhaps not surprising that writers on progressive spirituality have not always gone on to offer so much by way of detailed social and economic analysis (Lynch 2007: 158).

This is true but there are no good reasons to assume that theological problems will be solved and social and economic issues will therefore appear more explicitly on the agenda. Therefore, the progressiveness itself is a kind of future wish or virtual potential, not an evident part of the actual phenomenon. Furthermore, if the anti-capitalist attitude remains at the individual level and is not connected to practices of other movements, it easily turns into a commodity, as is the case with what Kimberly Lau calls New Age capitalism.

To put it simply, the new spirituality described by Lynch seems to lack a theory of capitalism and a theory of resistance. Therefore, it is not easy to

4 As Paul Heelas emphasised in his response to the early version of this article, a major proportion of 'spiritual' people are middle-aged women whose attitudes and values are mildly, not radically, counter-cultural. One example even suggests that the old-fashioned religious institutions might be more active than spiritual seekers in anti-capitalist and anti-globalist demonstrations, even though the statistics are not reliable or comparable between religious institutions and spiritual groups. *The Economist* magazine reported on the World Forum meeting in Nairobi in January 2007, where the biggest single group of anti-poverty campaigners were Roman Catholics, who gathered approximately 20,000 people for a protest march (see 'Kingdoms of this world, and otherwise' in *The Economist*, 25 January 2007, [http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=E1\\_RGDNJQQ](http://www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_RGDNJQQ)).

agree with its progressive nature. Although it is another issue to deal with the concept of spirituality, I would call the phenomenon a liberal religiosity which is located mainly outside institutionalised, organised and established traditions. Lynch himself is openly pro-spirituality and critical towards contemporary capitalism, but in the analysis of the phenomenon there are not many signs of serious anti-capitalism.

### Theorising contemporary spirituality in the societies of control

Although my aim is not to provide a fully developed alternative framework for the already existing and previously used approaches, it is useful to try to avoid the two extreme alternatives that are reminiscent of the study of fandom—one which sees every kind of politically correct dimension in the discourse on spirituality as progressive or anti-capitalist and the other which deems every kind of reference to spirituality or Eastern wisdom as a surrender to consumer culture or neoliberal ideology.<sup>5</sup> What seems to be a more urgent task is to analyse the interaction of capitalism and spirituality and to see how the changes in social formations of power provide a space for the discourse on spirituality to emerge and flourish.

It is suggested that the main traits in postmodern spirituality are an emphasis on the individual, a rejection of the idea of a pure tradition, and an incredulity towards the authority of established institutions. As Jeremy Carrette (2004: 364) writes in his article 'Postmodern Spirituality': 'The sacred space is no longer delimited simply by institutional power, but is rather contested and relocated according to the politics of individual experience (supported by shared values)'. It is possible and even fruitful to interpret these changes and shifts in terms of power when it includes the dimension of economy. At the end of his life the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote about the changes in capitalism by use of the term 'societies of control', which refers to the new forms of power which advanced after the Second World War and are different

5 Anybody who has read scholarly discussion on fandom has encountered two opposite attitudes toward fans. Either fans are deemed as passive dupes who are blinded by consumer-capitalist ideology or they are seen as active textual poachers who are empowering themselves in everyday life despite the fact that some of the items which are important for being a fan are mass-produced commodities. When looking at the literature dealing with the relation between capitalism and spirituality, it is hard not to get the impression that there is something familiar in the ways in which the issue is discussed.

from what Foucault described as disciplinary societies and its 'code of normalization' (Foucault 2004: 38). The main shift is from successive institutional moulds such as school, army, factory and hospital to more fluid but constantly changing modulation (Deleuze 1995: 169–82). By arguing about the changing tendency from the model of a mole's burrow to snake's coils not only in the system we live but also in the way we live with other people, Deleuze (1995: 179) proposes that 'businesses are replacing factories, *school* is being replaced by *continuing education* and exams by continuous assessment'. This crisis of disciplinary institutions opens the possibility for the weakly institutionalised spirituality both to flourish, even though it does not make it necessary, and to be relocated for example in outlets, business, education and healthcare.

The institutional crisis is related to changing capitalism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983, 1998) understand capitalism as a deterritorialising system which extracts its surplus from the differential flows of social relations. It is able to integrate the crisis of institutions and the new bloom of spiritualities that follow from incredulity towards the authority of institutions. From the perspective of the capitalist production of value, it was too costly to maintain and support the system of disciplinary societies. Therefore, the apparently free floating control is a suitable system for contemporary capitalism. It can turn the deterritorialisation of religion (and its reterritorialisation to spirituality) to cash value both at the level of consumer products and at the level of ideology. This, however, should not be understood as an all-encompassing framework, but as a potential approach in the analysis of spirituality in contemporary power struggles. It can also be supplemented with more recent theoretical developments.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) build their theory on this Deleuzian basis and argue that we are moving from a nation-based, monocultural and institution-driven colonial capitalism to the global or imperial capitalism where cultural/religious/spiritual differences are not excluded from but integrated into the capitalist production of value. Exclusion is not over in imperial capitalism, but its legitimisation and manner have changed, because the 'Empire' no longer creates (cultural, religious etc.) differences, but works with them.

Empire is, according to Hardt and Negri (2000: 198–200), 'a machine of universal integration', and 'complete cultural assimilation. . . is certainly not the priority of imperial strategy'. It accepts 'non-conflictual differences, the kind of differences we might set aside when necessary' and aims at 'the management and hierarchization of these differences in a general economy of command'. This is what is called the triple imperative of imperial strategy



with its three distinct moments: one inclusive (blindness to differences), another differential (exclusion of inflexible and unmanageable differences such as terrorism and extreme fundamentalism), and a third managerial (continuous modulation of identities). Thinking with the triple imperative is one possible model for understanding why differences are now supported and even celebrated more than during the era of colonial capitalism when modern institutional religions had their stable roles as part of the nation-states. Still it does not mean that spiritualities are simply products or supplements of global capitalism.

The problem with the detailed analyses of spirituality is the lack of a theory of capitalism. The logic of imperial capitalism, as outlined above, is such that it is able to accommodate itself to different religious and spiritual views. Whatever the problems are in applying this Deleuzian framework on the empirical study of spiritualities, the benefit of it would be the clarification of the possible connection between the logic of capitalism and the emergence of contemporary spirituality through historical change.

## Conclusion

While it has become commonplace to study and accept the connection between national-colonial capitalism and the emergence of the category of religion (for example Chidester 1996, 2000; Fitzgerald 2000, 2007; McCutcheon 2003; Murphy 2007), we are still only beginning to think even the possibility of a connection between global imperial capitalism and the category of spirituality. To start thinking through these issues is not to argue that the time of the nation-states has totally passed. Instead, it is an opening to a better understanding of the complexity of the relations between local and global—and the role of the categories of religion and spirituality in those processes.

It may turn out that some empirical cases of spirituality are incompatible with this framework, but at least it is important to try to show exactly how some cases are pro-capitalist or anti-capitalist and in what way. Therefore, we need detailed ethnographic evidence, a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of contemporary capitalism and on the basis of these, an evaluation of what counts as an anti-capitalist dimension. So far the scholarship on this has cultivated some of these aspects, but has not combined them successfully.

My suggestion is that by taking the problem of capitalism seriously in the analysis of contemporary spirituality it is possible to understand social

forms, roles and functions of spirituality better and make the scholarly study of it more interesting. I am not arguing that any kind of spirituality should be avoided if one wants to take part in the anti-capitalist struggle.<sup>6</sup> I am simply saying that practices which are placed under the label of 'spirituality' have no intrinsic or necessary relation to capitalism or anti-capitalism. Therefore, as scholars we should be sensitive to the complex and most likely changing web of relations between contemporary spiritualities and capitalism, as well as spiritualities and anti-capitalism. I have suggested that some anti-capitalist critiques of spirituality make the connection between spirituality and capitalism all too simple and easy. At the same time, some writers who see spirituality as progressive, have almost omitted the problematisation of complexities of capitalism. What is needed is a balancing of these critiques and celebrations of discourse on spirituality.

## References

### **Bowman, Paul**

2007 The Tao of Žižek. In: Paul Bowman & Richard Stamp (eds), *The Truth of Žižek*; pp. 27–44. London: Continuum.

### **Carrette, Jeremy R.**

2000 *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*. London: Routledge.

2004 Postmodern Spirituality. In: Christopher Partridge (ed.), *New Religions: A Guide. New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*; pp. 362–4. New York: Oxford University Press.

### **Carrette, Jeremy & Richard King**

2005 *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London: Routledge.

### **Chidester, David**

1996 *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

6 This view differs from Žižek (2008: 183), who follows Alain Badiou in claiming that it is 'better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly'. Although it is easy to follow Žižek's and Badiou's line of thinking, it is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, to hold that position when scholars are working in the midst of the users of spiritual outlets. Even Žižek says elsewhere that one should support anti-capitalist anti-globalisation movements, for example. However, he wants to remain at a distance, because he is sceptical of the idea that things are getting better if we simply continue to support these movements without further theorising (see Žižek's lecture 'The Euthanasia of Tolerant Reason' at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3LF3zN\\_Cxk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3LF3zN_Cxk)).

2000 Colonialism. In: Willi Braun & Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion*; pp. 423–37. London: Cassell.

**Chopra, Deepak**

1993 *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*. Crown Books.

**Critchley, Simon**

2003 Why I Love Cultural Studies. In: Paul Bowman (ed.), *Interrogating Cultural Studies: Theory, Politics and Practice*; pp. 59–75. London: Pluto Press.

**Deleuze, Gilles**

1995 *Negotiations 1972–1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari**

1983 *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

1998 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

**Dewey, John**

1960 *A Common Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

**Fitzgerald, Timothy**

2000 *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

2007 *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Foucault, Michel**

2004 *Society Must be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. London: Penguin.

**Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri**

2000 *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**King, Richard**

1999 *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*. London: Routledge.

**Kotsko, Adam**

2008 *Žižek and Theology*. London: T&T Clark.

**Lau, Kimberly J.**

2000 *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**Lynch, Gordon**

2007 *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century*. London: I. B. Tauris.

**McCutcheon, Russell T.**

2003 *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*. London: Routledge.

**Murphy, Tim**

2007 *Representing Religion: Essays in History, Theory and Crisis*. London: Equinox.

**Žižek, Slavoj**

1999 *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso.

- 2000 *The Fragile Absolute. Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* London: Verso.
- 2001 *On Belief*. London: Routledge.
- 2003 *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- 2004 *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. London: Verso.
- 2008 *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile Books.

## **Spirituality in Education**

### **Introduction**

In this article the concept of spirituality in the educational framework is discussed. The concepts of religion and spirituality are compared. The psychological view of spirituality is presented with a new suggested intelligence type: spiritual intelligence. The educational view emphasizes spiritual sensitivity as a universal human ability that needs to be developed through education. The sociological view of spirituality explores it as an expression of postsecular religiosity. Empirical studies indicate that an increasing number of people now prefer to call themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Mikkola, Niemelä & Petterson 2007). This trend seems to be more present in some European countries, for example, in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Finland. Empirical studies on spirituality are reviewed and discussed. A special emphasis is given to the Finnish research findings related to the spirituality of a new generation or young adults. It is argued that understanding spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity gives more room for young adults to participate in communicative action concerning religion. This would promote a discursive religiousness in the spirit of Jürgen Habermas, in which a plurality of religious beliefs and practices are acknowledged and a dialogical and inter-religious approach is advocated.

### **Different definitions of spirituality**

#### *Religion and spirituality*

The meanings given to the concepts of religion and spirituality have evolved over the centuries. William James (2003 (1902): 32) defined religion as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude.' Since the time of James, few psychologists have taken a serious look at religious institutions and the roles they play in shaping character. Today some writers use the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' interchangeably to add linguistic

variety to their terminology. However, many researchers define spirituality in contrast to religion. In these definitions, religion is usually defined as the organizational, the ritual, and the ideological. The spiritual then refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential, and the thoughtful. The reminder that an individual can be spiritual without being religious or religious without being spiritual, has become a standard theme of many papers on spirituality (Pargament 1999). It seems clear that spirituality must be seen as a wider concept than religion. This kind of understanding of these concepts indicates that religion and spirituality share some common areas but that they also have their own areas of interest (Stifoss-Hanssen 1999).

### *Spiritual intelligence*

The psychological view on spirituality studies it in the framework of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983). The most recently suggested intelligence types include emotional and spiritual intelligence. Daniel Goleman (1995) has suggested that emotional intelligence (EQ) gives us awareness of our own and other people's feelings. It provides us with empathy, compassion, motivation and the ability to respond appropriately to pain or pleasures. Goleman has pointed out that EQ is a basic requirement for the effective use of IQ. If the areas of the brains with which we feel are damaged, we think less effectively (Goleman 1995).

D. Zohar and I. Marshall (2000) have applied the concept of spiritual intelligence (SQ) to the discussion concerning IQ and EQ. According to them, SQ helps us to assess the most meaningful course of action. With SQ, we address and solve problems of meaning and value. The authors claim that SQ is the necessary foundation for the effective functioning of both IQ and EQ. SQ is our ultimate intelligence (Zohar & Marshall 2000). The difference between EQ and SQ concerns the concrete situation in which they are used. Emotional intelligence allows us to judge what kind of situation we are in and then to behave appropriately within it. This is working within the boundaries of the situation, allowing the situation to guide us. Spiritual intelligence allows us to ask if we want to be in this particular situation in the first place. Would we rather change the situation and create a better one? This is working with the boundaries of our situation and allowing us to guide the situation. Similarly, the idea of spiritual intelligence has also been studied by Robert A. Emmons (1999: 176) as he describes spiritual intelligence as 'the adaptive use of spiritual information to facilitate everyday problem solving and goal attainment'.

Howard Gardner (1999: 54–8) has identified three domains of spiritual intelligence. First, he attributes the 'concern with cosmic or existential issues'

to the sphere of spiritual intelligence. In fact, Gardner (1999: 60) has pondered whether it would be more appropriate to consider spiritual intelligence as a form of existential intelligence. Second, he emphasizes the 'spiritual as achievement of a state of being' which represents the psychological states and phenomenal experiences that are called spiritual. The third domain is 'spiritual as effect to others', a social aspect, which also coincides with the term charisma and is an important ingredient of conveying other people towards the fulfilment of the first two domains in their lives. Spiritual intelligence and its measurability has been a widely debated topic (see Emmons 2000; Gardner 2000; Mayer 2000) and the discussion continues.

### *Spiritual sensitivity*

David Hay (1998) has identified three categories of spiritual sensitivity. *Awareness sensing* refers to an experience of a deeper level of consciousness when we choose to be aware by 'paying attention' to what is happening. This category coincides with Gardner's notion of the 'spiritual as achievement of a state of being'. According to Hay (1998: 60) this kind of awareness refers to a reflexive process of being attentive towards one's attention or 'being aware of one's awareness'.

The second category of spiritual sensitivity is *mystery sensing* which is connected to our capacity to transcend everyday experience and to use our imagination. For instance, the beauty and wonder of sunrise and sunset includes the sense of mystery even after the scientific explanations are presented. The imagination is essential to religious activity through the metaphors, symbols, stories and liturgies which respond to the otherwise unrepresentable experience of the sacred. This category relates to both Gardner's understanding of spiritual intelligence as the 'achievement of a state of being' and the 'concern with cosmic or existential issues', while it emphasizes the mysterious nature of such experiences.

The third category of spiritual sensitivity is *value sensing*. This category emphasizes the importance of feelings as a measure of what we value. Among such things are the issues that touch our existential questions and meaning seeking (Hay 1998: 70-4). This category resembles Gardner's definition of spiritual intelligence as the 'concern with cosmic or existential issues'.

In the study by Kirsi Tirri, Petri Nokelainen and Martin Ubani (2006), a social dimension was added to Hay's three categories of spiritual sensitivity. The social aspect of spirituality has been suggested also by Gardner. The fourth sub-scale of spiritual sensitivity is called *community sensing* and is based on the work of J. Bradford (1995). Bradford has identified three types

of spirituality. *Human spirituality* refers to the needs of care, love, security and responsibility we all desire. *Devotional spirituality* is built upon this human spirituality and it is expressed within a certain religious tradition, culture and language. The third type of spirituality is *practical spirituality* in which both the two other types of spiritualities merge. Practical spirituality is present in our everyday lives giving us direction and influencing our social responsibilities and concerns (Bradford 1995: 14). Bradford's definitions represent the social aspect in the domains of spiritual intelligence (Gardner 1999) and include the practical problem solving applications suggested by Zohar and Marshall (2000) and Robert Emmons (1999).

### *Spirituality as expression of postsecular religiosity*

According to Hans-Georg Ziebertz and Ulrich Riegel (2008) postsecularity represents a discursive mode of religiousness. They build their definition on Habermas's (2001) philosophy in which postsecular religion meets three criteria: (1) acceptance of plurality, (2) communicating by reasoning, and (3) acknowledgement of fundamental rights. In the light of these criteria, spirituality can be examined as one form of postsecular religiosity (Tirri 2008).

According to recent empirical studies, an increasing number of people call themselves spiritual rather than religious (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Mikkola, Niemelä & Petterson 2007). The British researchers Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead argue that people do so because they are reluctant to commit themselves to hierarchies and would rather grow and develop as their own unique selves instead of going to churches and submitting themselves to their teaching (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 1–11). The Swedish researcher Ann Alden (2006) has analyzed the current religiosity as highly individualistic, experiential, non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic. In a recent Finnish study preadolescents perceived spirituality to be more connected to these qualities than the concept of religion (Ubani & Tirri 2006). Today, religion cannot be poured over the people from outside in the form of habits or rituals. It is something to be experienced within the person. The traditional religion is seen to be bound to tradition and institutions, whereas spirituality is seen as contemplation of self and inner existentialism and concentration on experiences. Compared to the previous generations, the new generations try to more actively search for meaning and make sense of life themselves without ready answers given by the church. Spirituality now refers to what was earlier referred to as religion in the broadest and non-traditional sense (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 111).



Ninian Smart (2005: 12) uses the term 'religiosity above religions', when a person has a profound spiritual dimension without belonging to any movement or organization, or in a case when there is some transcendental influence in his/her life. Furthermore, religiosity can be called implicit religiosity when a person perceives communication with nature or relations to other people as spiritual. Moreover, esoteric movements, sects and New Age movements use the term spirituality in their vocabulary. The definition of spirituality must always be discussed in the contexts where it is used to get the right idea of its meaning.

The trend to describe oneself as spiritual rather than religious is present among Finnish young people. According to a recent telephone survey of 1,000 young adults 69 per cent consider themselves spiritual and 45 per cent consider themselves religious. Among those who have resigned from the church the corresponding figures are 73 and 21 per cent. Of those belonging to the church 46 percent considered themselves religious and 64 per cent spiritual (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 112–14). The religious identities of young adults can be categorized in four groups. The majority of the young adults (37 %) identify themselves as *religious and spiritual*. They are more often female than male and have not lived in the metropolitan area all their lives and are likely to be more than 30 years old. These people typically have children and regard faith and religion as a somewhat or quite an important part of their lives. They most actively seek different parts of their world view from different sources and are most interested in buying spiritual literature. They tend to subscribe at some level to typical Christian beliefs and belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (82 %) or some other denomination. Furthermore, they actively or quite actively participate in private and public religious activities (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 113).

Those who described themselves as *religious-non-spiritual* (8 %) are the smallest group among young adults. They are most often found among those who have lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area only for a short time. They are also least interested in alternative religious movements and adhere to institutional religion. This is the group that agrees the most with Christian belief statements and are active in their religious practices. This group is most likely to agree that there is only one true religion in the world (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 113).

The second largest group (34 %) among young adults consisted of those who viewed themselves as *spiritual-non-religious*. They are typically under 30 years and have lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area for more than 20 years. They typically disagree with Christian belief statements and are most

in disagreement with a statement that there is only one true religion. Faith and religion do not have any major roles in their lives even though 74 per cent of them belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 113–14).

The group (21 %) that was clearly least interested in all kinds of spiritual and religious matters were named *non-spiritual/non-religious*. A typical member of this group had lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area for more than 20 years. They typically do not believe in God or any kind of higher power and disagree with all kinds of belief statements. Even though they are religiously very passive, 77 per cent are still members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church or some other religious organization (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 114).

These recent Finnish findings indicate that the differences between those identifying themselves as religious and/or spiritual adhere to the very same trend that can be seen in British and Swedish sociological studies. For those identifying themselves as only religious the role of institutional religiosity is strongest. Those who identify themselves as spiritual and religious are most open to alternative religious movements. Those who identify themselves as only spiritual adhere to the most relativistic world view. Mikkola *et al.* describe the current spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity in the following way:

Many of them felt a spiritual yearning, but this finds expression in new ways, where thinking combines a different religiosity of spirituality with science and rationality. This can be seen as the postsecularisation characteristic of the modern age. In postsecular thinking there is no denial of religion or spirituality, nor yet of science and rationality. In practice this is tolerance of many explanations and conflicting phenomena, where the religious solution is not adhered to nor is refuge sought in 'logical' solutions. Life is granted an element of mystery and myth, which cannot necessarily be converted into rationality. (Mikkola *et al.* 2007: 116.)

The above description of spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity meets the criteria by Habermas (2001). According to our review those people who identify themselves as spiritual accept plurality, are ready to communicate by reasoning, and acknowledge the fundamental rights of everybody. In the following chapter the spirituality of young adults is further explored as an example of postsecular religiosity.

## The spirituality of young adults

### *Data and method*

The data for this study ( $N = 500$ ) was collected with a 20-item instrument in 2004. The theoretical structure of the questionnaire has been analyzed earlier with a sample ( $N = 496$ ) that consists of the following three sub groups: (1) preadolescents ( $n = 188$ ), (2) adolescents ( $n = 86$ ) and (3) adults ( $n = 227$ ). Results from this validation study are reported in our earlier work (Tirri *et al.* 2006). The spiritual sensitivity scale items were designed so that they would apply to people from different religious backgrounds and cultures. This allows us to use the instrument in a multicultural society and in cross-cultural studies. The statements described the issues and values that the respondent finds important for him/her. They were operationalized from the three categories of spiritual sensitivity identified by Hay (1998). Every category was presented in the questionnaire with five statements. For example, the category of awareness sensing was measured by the statement: item 5 'I try to listen to my body when I study and work'. An example item measuring mystery sensing was the statement: item 2 'I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset'. The category of value sensing was measured, for example, with the statement: item 8 'I am searching for goodness in life'. The categories of spiritual sensitivity by Hay do not explicitly express the aspects of a social dimension. Hence we added some statements measuring the social dimension of spirituality identified by Bradford and named the fourth sub scale Community sensing. These statements included items such as item 12 'I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually' (Table 1).

### *Procedure*

The total population in Finland is 5.2 million. We chose an area in Helsinki called Kallio, with the largest population of young adults, to represent urban young adults in Finland. The total number of young adults living in Kallio was 12,564 at the time of this study. The percentage of people who leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church is largest in this age group among those who live in Kallio.

The sample was collected by means of phone interviews with 500 young adults (aged 20–39 year). Each respondent was personally invited to participate in the study. The study was part of a larger project researching young urban adults in the city of Helsinki. The participants were asked to use the Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) to evaluate their attitude towards the statements measuring spiritual sensitivity.

## Results

Statistical analyses were conducted in two phases. First, we analyzed twenty items on the spiritual sensitivity scale and reduced the total number of items from 20 to 12. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the selected items on the spiritual sensitivity scale. The young adults have evaluated the item measuring mystery sensing 'I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset' as the most important item measuring their spiritual sensitivity ( $M = 4.3$ ;  $SD = 0.8$ ). The next highest-ranking items included an item measuring value sensing 'I rejoice in the beauty of life' ( $M = 4.1$ ;  $SD = 0.9$ ) and an item measuring community sensing 'I want to advance peace with my own actions' ( $M = 4.0$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ). The least important items evaluated by young adults included two items measuring community sensing that dealt with de-

**Table 1. The descriptive statistics of the spiritual sensitivity scale (Tirri 2008).**

|   | 1 Totally disagree | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5 Totally agree | M   | SD  |
|---|--------------------|----|----|----|-----------------|-----|-----|
| 1. In midst of busy everyday life I find it important to contemplate. | 4                  | 9  | 20 | 36 | 31              | 3.8 | 1.1 |
| 2. I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset.            | 1                  | 3  | 11 | 37 | 49              | 4.3 | 0.8 |
| 3. I reflect on the meaning of life.                                  | 3                  | 16 | 31 | 30 | 20              | 3.5 | 1.1 |
| 4. I try to listen to my body when I study and work.                  | 5                  | 12 | 29 | 37 | 18              | 3.5 | 1.1 |
| 5. I want to advance peace with my own actions.                       | 1                  | 8  | 20 | 35 | 36              | 4.0 | 1.0 |
| 6. I want to help people who are in need.                             | 0                  | 6  | 24 | 46 | 25              | 3.9 | 0.8 |
| 7. Narratives and symbols are important things for me in life.        | 11                 | 28 | 36 | 16 | 9               | 2.9 | 1.1 |
| 8. I am searching for goodness in life.                               | 2                  | 6  | 23 | 42 | 27              | 3.9 | 1.0 |
| 9. It is important for me to share a quiet moment with others.        | 42                 | 35 | 14 | 6  | 2               | 1.9 | 1.0 |
| 10. There are many things in life to wonder.                          | 1                  | 4  | 16 | 41 | 38              | 4.1 | 0.9 |
| 11. I rejoice the beauty of life.                                     | 46                 | 27 | 15 | 7  | 5               | 2.0 | 1.2 |
| 12. I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually.          | 46                 | 27 | 15 | 7  | 5               | 2.0 | 1.2 |

$N = 500$  (male  $n = 250$ , female  $n = 250$ ).

votional life. These items were the following: 'It is important for me to share a quiet moment with others' ( $M = 1.9$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ) and 'I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually' ( $M = 2.0$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ). These items also had the biggest deviation between the respondents (see Table 1).

Second, we analyzed and compared the nature of spirituality between males and females and respondents who belong or do not belong to the church. Table 2 shows the most significant gender differences. In general, females evaluated themselves higher in every item than males, indicating that females are more spiritually sensitive than males. The same trend can be seen with all the other data sets collected with this instrument (Tirri *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, earlier empirical studies have shown that females are more religious than males (Tamminen 1996). Statistically significant differences between females and males were found with the following items: 'In midst of busy everyday life I find it important to contemplate', 'I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset', 'I reflect on the meaning of life', 'I try to listen to my body when I study and work', 'I want to help people who are in need',

**Table 2. Gender differences in spiritual sensitivity (Mann–Whitney U-test) (Tirri 2008).**

| The Item  | Male | Female | M         |
|---|------|--------|-----------|
| 1. In the midst of busy everyday life I find it important to contemplate. | 3.68 | 3.98   | 26776.0** |
| 2. I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset.                | 4.17 | 4.42   | 26432.0** |
| 3. I reflect on the meaning of life.                                      | 3.37 | 3.60   | 27494.0*  |
| 4. I try to listen to my body when I study and work.                      | 3.37 | 3.66   | 27128.5** |
| 5. I want to advance peace with my own actions.                           | 3.88 | 4.05   | 28470.0   |
| 6. I want to help people who are in need.                                 | 3.77 | 4.02   | 26009.0** |
| 7. Narratives and symbols are important things for me in life.            | 2.82 | 2.88   | 29888.5   |
| 8. I am searching for goodness in life.                                   | 3.77 | 3.94   | 28071.5*  |
| 9. It is important for me to share a quiet moment with others.            | 1.85 | 1.95   | 29095.0   |
| 10. There are many things in life to wonder.                              | 3.85 | 4.02   | 28535.5   |
| 11. I rejoice in the beauty of life.                                      | 4.02 | 4.25   | 27394.0*  |
| 12. I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually.              | 1.93 | 2.02   | 29333.5   |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N = 500$  (male  $n = 250$ , female  $n = 250$ ).

'I am searching for goodness in life', 'There are many things in life to wonder' and 'I rejoice in the beauty of life' (see Table 2).

We found three items with statistically significant differences between church members and non-members. The church members expressed more need for time for contemplation in the midst of busy everyday life and to share a quiet moment with others than the non-members (see Table 3). Furthermore, the young adults who belonged to the church expressed more need to find a community where they can grow spiritually than those young adults who did not belong to the church. In general, young adults did not differ very much from the other populations we have studied (preadolescents, students, peace keepers). Every group found spiritual values important in their lives. However, young adults differed from the other groups in their individual attitudes. They expressed less need to belong to a community and to share a quiet moment with others than the other populations we have studied (Tirri *et al.* 2006).

**Table 3. Church membership and spiritual sensitivity (Mann–Whitney U-test) (Tirri 2008).**

| The Item  | Membership |      | M U          |
|---|------------|------|--------------|
|   | Yes        | No   |              |
| 1. In the midst of busy everyday life I find it important to contemplate. | 3.90       | 3.64 | 21 021.50*   |
| 2. I admire the beauty of nature, for example, the sunset.                | 4.29       | 4.30 | 23 369.00    |
| 3. I reflect on the meaning of life.                                      | 3.49       | 3.47 | 23 734.50    |
| 4. I try to listen to my body when I study and work.                      | 3.56       | 3.44 | 22 292.50    |
| 5. I want to advance peace with my own actions.                           | 3.93       | 4.06 | 21 682.50    |
| 6. I want to help people who are in need.                                 | 3.92       | 3.84 | 22 946.50    |
| 7. Narratives and symbols are important things for me in life.            | 2.85       | 2.84 | 23 618.50    |
| 8. I am searching for goodness in life.                                   | 3.89       | 3.76 | 22 079.00    |
| 9. It is important for me to share a quiet moment with others.            | 2.02       | 1.58 | 17 462.50*** |
| 10. There are many things in life to wonder.                              | 3.92       | 3.84 | 22 574.0     |
| 11. I rejoice in the beauty of life.                                      | 4.13       | 4.15 | 23 095.50    |
| 12. I want to find a community where I can grow spiritually.              | 2.08       | 1.67 | 18 462.00*** |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ;  $N = 489$  (church member  $n = 244$ , non-member  $n = 245$ ).

*Reflection on the results*

In this study, spirituality has been understood as a universal human capacity that can be found in every human being regardless of his/her religious or cultural backgrounds. Spirituality can also be seen as sensitivity with an emphasis on creativity and non-linear thinking. In education, spirituality means education for the whole person by acknowledging the importance of social and affective domains in addition to cognitive development. Spiritual sensitivity includes dimensions of awareness sensing, value sensing, mystery sensing and community sensing. In this study we have used a quantitative instrument measuring these four dimensions. According to the results, spiritual sensitivity is also important for young urban adults who are not actively religious. They need quiet moments in the midst of everyday life, mystical and aesthetic experiences to complement rational thinking, and they are searching for meaning and values in life. Young adults also want to act in ways which will advance the cause of peace. Females evaluated themselves as more spiritual than males in almost all the items measuring spiritual sensitivity (8/12). This finding is in accordance with earlier findings related to gender differences in religiosity. In general, young adults were quite individualistic in their preferences. However, those young adults who belonged to the church valued more community-oriented ways of practising spirituality. Those young adults who did not belong to the church valued mysticism, beauty and aesthetics. These dimensions of spirituality should be acknowledged more in church related activities with young adults as well. Spiritual development is a life-long process and it can be nurtured in the church and outside the church. A dialogue between the traditional religious practices and the postmodern ways of expressing spirituality could be a fruitful way to nourish the spiritual life of young urban adults. This can also be one approach for the church to reach young people who do not go to church.

**Concluding remarks and recommendations for future research**

In this article spirituality was examined within the educational framework. The concept of spirituality was contrasted to the concept of religion and the similarities and differences of their use in the professional literature were discussed. Spirituality was also explored in the psychological framework as a new possible intelligence type. The scientific debate of the existence of spiritual intelligence is still going strong. However, in the educational context, a

majority of researchers and educators agree on the importance of developing the spiritual sensitivity of our youth. The sociological approach was emphasized in this chapter by seeing spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity. Recent European writings on the new generation and faith and values of young adults were used as theoretical frameworks to test this approach. New empirical research findings from Finnish studies were reported and discussed. According to both theoretical and empirical reflections on the values and religiosity of the new generation, the concept of spirituality has proved to be an adequate expression of postsecular religiosity.

Studying spirituality as expression of postsecular religiosity opens up new ways of studying religiosity. The empirical approaches and instruments in studies of religiosity have very much operationalized religiosity as dogmatic beliefs (such as a belief in a Christian God) or religious rituals (praying, attending services). We need new research instruments that are relevant for the new generation and acknowledge the current ways of expressing religiosity. These new ways include taking quiet moments in the midst of everyday life, mystical and aesthetic experiences to complement rational thinking and the search for meaning and values in life. This new generation also wants to act in ways that promote peace and human rights. Understanding spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity gives more room for young adults to participate in communicative actions concerning religion. This would promote discursive religiousness in the spirit of Habermas, in which a plurality of religious beliefs and practices are acknowledged and a dialogical and inter-religious approach advocated.

## References

### **Alden, Ann**

2006 *Religion in Dialogue with Late Modern Society: a Constructive Contribution to a Christian Spirituality Informed by Buddhist-Christian Encounters*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

### **Bradford, J.**

1995 *Caring for the Whole Child: a Holistic Approach to Spirituality*. London: The children's society.

### **Emmons, Robert**

1999 *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns. Motivation and Spirituality in Personality*. New York: Guilford.

2000 Is spirituality an intelligence? Motivation, cognition, and the psychology of ultimate concern. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10 (3): 26.



**Gardner, Howard**

- 1983 *Frames of Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1999 *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Basic Books.
- 2000 A case against spiritual intelligence. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10 (3): 27–34.

**Goleman, Daniel**

- 1995 *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

**Habermas, Jürgen**

- 2001 Glaube und Wissen. Rede zur Verleihung des "Friedenspreises des deutschen Buchhandels", Paulkirche Frankfurt. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 15.10. 2001, p. 9.

**Hay, David**

- 1998 *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Fount.

**Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead**

- 2005 *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**James, William**

- 2003 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Signet Classic. (Original work published 1902)

**Mayer, John**

- 2000 Spiritual intelligence or spiritual consciousness? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10 (3): 46–7.

**Mikkola, Teija, Kati Niemelä & Juha Petterson**

- 2007 *The Questioning Mind. Faith and Values of the New Generation*. Tampere: Church Research Institute, Finland. (Publication 58)

**Pargament, Kenneth**

- 1999 The psychology of religion and spirituality? Yes and no. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9 (1): 3–16.

**Smart, Ninian**

- 2005 *Uskontojen maailma*. Keuruu: Otava.

**Stifoss-Hanssen, Hans**

- 1999 Religion and Spirituality: What a European Ear Hears. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9 (1): 25–33.

**Tamminen, Kalevi**

- 1996 Gender differences in religiosity in children and adolescents. In: Leslie Francis, William Kay & W. Campbell (eds), *Research in Religious Education*; pp. 163–88. Leominster: Gracewing.

**Tirri, Kirsi**

- 2008 Spirituality as an expression of postsecular religiosity. In: Hans-Georg Ziebertz & Ulrich Riegel (eds), *Europe as a Postsecular Society (EPOS). Reflections on Religion and Societal Cohesion*; pp. 155–66. Muenster: Lit Publisher.

**Tirri, Kirsi, Petri Nokelainen & Martin Ubani**

2006 Conceptual definition and empirical validation of the spiritual sensitivity scale. *Journal for Empirical Theology* 19 (1): 37–62.

**Ubani, Martin & Kirsi Tirri**

2006 How do Finnish preadolescents perceive religion and spirituality? *International Journal on Childrens' Spirituality* 11 (3): 357–70.

**Ziebertz, Hans-Geog & Ulrich Riegel**

2008 Postsecular Europe—a concept questioned. In: Hans-Georg Ziebertz & Ulrich Riegel (eds), *Europe as a Postsecular Society (EPOS). Reflections on Religion and Societal Cohesion*; pp. 9–41. Muenster: Lit Publisher.

**Zohar, D. & I. Marshall**

2000 *SQ – Spiritual Intelligence the Ultimate Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.

## Andrew Wright's Critical Realism, Clive Erricker's Radical Postmodernism and Teenage Perceptions of Spirituality

### Introduction

This article is a report of my doctoral research completed in 2007. My research was carried out among secondary school pupils in England aged 12–17. Its purpose was to find out what they understood spirituality to be. When I say 'spirituality' I do not mean religious spirituality or the 'alternative' or 'countercultural' spirituality which was the primary focus of this conference. Instead I am addressing the distinctive debate in England about the nature of that spirituality, or to use the exact term, 'spiritual development', which has to be promoted by law in English schools. I will refer to this as spirituality-in-education.

All English schools must, by law, enhance the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, intellectual and physical development of their pupils (Education Reform Act, UK Parliament 1988). This law challenged traditional spirituality, which was essentially understood in the context of religions. Because *all* schools must provide for the spiritual development of *all* pupils, the spirituality enhanced in education could not be exclusively religious, since most of our students have no formal religious attachment.

Because most schools were unclear about the nature of this spirituality that they were supposed to be promoting, in 1993 the government curriculum authority published explanatory guidance (National Curriculum Council 1993). This was closely followed by similar guidance for schools from the government department responsible for school inspections (Office for Standards in Education 1994a) and for inspectors on how to evaluate students' spiritual development (Office for Standards in Education 1994b). All three sets of guidance posed a compromise between religious and non-religious interpretations of spirituality. As well as recognising that for some people spirituality is about their relationship with God, they included in their definitions, for example, the search for meaning and purpose, self-knowledge, creativity, feel-

ings and emotions. The government guidance of 1993–4 was the source of an academic debate that has continued until the present day.

### *Key questions*

The main purpose of my research was to give teenage students a voice in this debate in which they have never previously been consulted, although its outcomes affect them directly. This paper addresses two of my key research questions:

1. What do teenagers think spirituality *is*?
2. To what extent do teenagers' ideas mirror the opposing theories of radical postmodernist Clive Erricker and critical realist Andrew Wright?

Other scholars could have been included but Erricker and Wright represent the polarities of the debate in which they have been the most consistent contributors.

## **Theory of spirituality: the debate between Erricker and Wright**

### *Wright's interpretation of spirituality*

The debate between Wright and Erricker centres on their perceptions of reality, particularly those realities claimed by religions. Wright gave the title 'contemporary consensus' (Wright 1999: 11) to what he saw as the embodiment of romantic and relativist theories of spirituality and consequently the loss of the Christian basis for contemporary spirituality in the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) guidance. With some justification he censures NCC, OFSTED and others who biased the 'consensus' towards what has become known as the anthropomorphic definition (Wright 1998); a bias which, he claims, leaves no room for the spiritual development of believers. Wright criticises those who support the consensus as having given insufficient attention to faith perceptions, 'an extraordinarily rich vein of spirituality' (Wright 2000: 31).

The core of Wright's interpretation is that spirituality derives from the public realms of faith systems, rather than the private world of the imagination and personal interpretation of experience. For anyone, be they of faith or not, to understand spirituality requires knowledge of those belief systems, which in turn requires the acquisition and use of the language of faith. Initially Wright defined spirituality in an exclusively Christian context as:

‘. . . the developing relationship of an individual, within the Christian community, with God’. This is achieved not by human reason or introspection but through the redeeming death of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, enabling a ‘life lived in proper relationship with God’. (Wright 1996: 73.)

Wright is not suggesting that schools should re-define spirituality on Christian principles. Rather he uses his example of Trinitarian Christianity to demonstrate the point that if one religious tradition is incompatible with the ‘consensus’ then the same may be true for the rest, with the result that the NCC and OFSTED definitions of spirituality do not take account of that of children from *any* faith community. He argues that the distinctive spiritualities of the world’s faiths ‘must be understood, in terms of their own inner integrity, as nominalistic’ (Wright 1996: 86) rather than culturally relative expressions of a universal religious experience.

With the multi-faith composition of Britain in mind, Wright provides a universalised form of his definition of Trinitarian spirituality, which could also be applicable to people of any or no religion:

Spirituality is the developing relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is – or is perceived to be – of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 88).

#### *Erricker’s understanding of spirituality*

Erricker opposes the ‘consensus’ because, in his view, it is still too wedded to religion. Radically anti-realist, Erricker denies the existence of any objective reality. He views all knowledge as constructed according to the ideological assumptions of its creator; hence all knowledge is relative and only human narratives can be accepted as ‘truth’ (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 131). Consequently, any understanding of spirituality that takes its meaning from the ‘meta-narratives’ of religions (p. 62) should be rejected as being entirely linguistically and socially constructed by politicians and others in power, such as religious leaders. Erricker’s stance on spiritual development is consistent with his radical post-modern position. He champions spiritual freedom and in accordance with his views on education generally he believes that children should be allowed to construct their own ‘narrative meaning’ (which seems to be one of his terms for spirituality) from their own experiences and listening to the experiences of other children.

It is consistent with his stance on the fluidity of language that Erricker never gives a clear definition of what he believes spirituality to be. Sometimes it appears as 'narrative meaning' (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 62), at other times it is 'children's poetics' (p. 68). Erricker sees spirituality/faith as a process, an 'ontological category' for which epistemology is unnecessary. This process he describes as:

... an artistic endeavour that is creatively ongoing and of which the rational is but one aspect, alongside the intuitive and the emotional. Addressing the integration of these capacities in what we might call the construct of autobiography, by means of the process of narrative pragmatics; this we can call a pedagogy based on poetics or narrative construction. (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 69.)

Erricker is careful not to suggest a prescribed outcome because that would be 'to undermine the process itself'.

Both Wright and Erricker have had a profound impact on the theory and teaching of spirituality-in-education. My question was; how far do their ideas represent the views of students who are at the receiving end of spiritual education? Before answering this question I should say something about my research methods and data analysis.

## **Research methods and data analysis**

My research was conducted over five years, and was preceded by a pilot study, which trialled questionnaires and interview methods. 385 questionnaires were completed in four comprehensive schools by students across the full ability range aged between 12 and 18 (in addition to a further 250 in the pilot study). 177 of these were male and 208 female. 173 students described themselves as Christian, 104 as Muslim, 104 as having no religion, 3 as Pagan and 1 as Rastafarian. The questionnaire consisted of four open questions and one multiple choice question. The first three questions asked students to explain their understanding of the terms 'spirit', 'spirituality' and 'spiritual development'. The fourth, a context question, asked if they thought everyone could be a spiritual person and the fifth asked them to select from a long list the three school subjects that made most contribution to their spiritual development. Finally, students were asked to indicate whether they would be prepared to be interviewed further on the subject. Of those who volunteered 17 male and 17

female students were interviewed. These represented a cross section of age, religion and ability; these variables forming the basis of analysis during the research. Interviews were conducted by e-mail with the exception of a few students who preferred to be interviewed by letter.

A fundamental feature of this research is that the interviews were directed by perceptions of spirituality identified through the questionnaire rather than by *a priori* theory derived from scholarly definitions of spirituality. This principle was not derived from a relativist stance that questioned the validity of scholarly definitions but from the desire to hear the voices of young people. This presupposed an interpretive paradigm, which 'begins with individuals and sets out to understand their interpretations of the world around them' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000: 23). In particular the methods used resisted the imposition of external form and structure since this would reflect 'the viewpoint of the observer as opposed to that of the actor directly involved'; adopting the stance that 'theory should not precede research but follow it' (p. 22).

Completed questionnaires were subjected to micro analysis at word level (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 57). This stage revealed that some words used were functional rather than descriptive; for example, 'your spirit makes you who you are'. This observation led to the search for and identification of *semantic relationships* as recommended by James Spradley (1979: 107 ff.).

### Teenage perceptions of spirituality

It would be surprising to find teenagers aware of either the postmodernism that underpins Erricker's thinking or indeed Wright's critical realism. However, it is not difficult to find in students' thinking, individually and collectively, reflections of Erricker and Wright's positions. Students' perceptions fell into five broad groups which I have called clusters—because of the variety of views within each.

The distinctiveness of each cluster may be seen more clearly in table 2 below. Here four of the most prevalent ideas expressed by students are compared across the clusters.

There appears to be very little support here for Wright's theory while Erricker appears to be justified by the majority of student responses, which demonstrate highly individualistic thinking, showing that most students have come to their position with minimal interference from religion. As we have seen, only 9 per cent of nearly 400 respondents associated spirituality directly

**Table 1. Cluster descriptions**

|  | Whole sample |
|--|--------------|
| Cluster B (Spirituality is to do with beliefs)                   | 26%          |
| Cluster O (Spirituality is to do with relationships with others) | 6%           |
| Cluster P (Spirituality is to do with personal identity)         | 50%          |
| Cluster R (Spirituality is to do with religion)                  | 9%           |
| Discrepant cases (There is no such thing as spirituality)        | 4%           |
| No response  | 4%           |

**Table 2. Extended cluster analysis**

| Cluster  | Description   | The real me   | The spiritual struggle  |
|----------|---|---|---|
| <b>B</b> | Spirituality means holding beliefs  | The spirit inside is created by God or 'something else' such as a universal essence. This person inside acts as a discipline and guide.     | Everyone has the potential to be spiritual. Some people are more spiritual than others because they take their spirituality seriously and make the effort to strengthen their relationship with god.  |
| <b>O</b> | Spirituality is characterised by caring relationships based on a knowledge and understanding of others. | The real self is often hidden behind the need to conform and make friends.  | Everyone is spiritual to some extent but those who get on better with friends and family and are tolerant of other people and live at peace with others, respecting their point of view actually put their spirituality into practice while others don't.                     |
| <b>P</b> | Spirituality is individual identity, sometimes referred to as personality, character, soul or essence.  | The inner person is the authentic, pure self that is hidden from all but closest friends. It is free and not subject to social conventions. | Everyone has a spirit but to be a spiritual person, the spirit must be acknowledged and understood. Some people are more aware of their spirituality than others and some choose not to show their spirituality. Spirituality may be intermittent and awakened by experience. |
| <b>R</b> | Religion is a prerequisite for spirituality.  | The inner self is the God-given conscience.   | Some more than others because some people are more religious.   |



with religion (Cluster R), the largest group (Cluster P) perceiving spirituality as individual identity, sometimes referred to as personality, character, soul or essence. This individual identity, also called the 'inner person' is the authentic, pure self that is hidden from all but closest friends. It is free and not subject to social conventions. This is precisely what Erricker demands for young people; that they should find spirituality in their 'metaphorical constructs' unhindered by the claims of others (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 63).

### Teenage perceptions and Erricker's interpretation of spirituality

According to Erricker, children are to find spirituality in their own experiences and personal narratives, not in imposed narratives 'to which they are

| The eternal spirit   | Relationship between spirituality and the spirit  |
|--|---|
| After death the spirit goes on to a new life in a new place, that may be heaven or hell. Its destiny reflects the quality of the life lived and is decided by God. It is possible that the dead can communicate with the living. | The spirit determines one's humanity and uniqueness; it controls and guides our lives. Spirituality is a dynamic process that awakens awareness and recognition of the spirit, giving rise to specific traits such as a sense of direction and an instinct for good or evil as well as helping us understand our beliefs.             |
| The spirit lives on in some form.  | The spirit determines one's humanity and uniqueness; it controls and guides the emotions. Spirituality is a process that enables one person to uncover the spirit of another by helping us understand their beliefs. Spirituality enables us to do this because it gives rise to specific traits such as respect for others' beliefs. |
| The spirit continues after death but is apparently earthbound. It exists either a ghost or in the memory of loved ones, where conversations may be had.  | The spirit determines one's humanity and uniqueness; it controls and guides our lives. Spirituality helps us understand ourselves and gives rise to specific traits such as confidence and receptivity.   |
| After death the spirit goes on to a new life in a new place, that may be heaven or hell. Its destiny reflects the quality of the life lived and is decided by God.   | The spirit determines one's humanity and uniqueness; it controls and guides our choices and beliefs. Spirituality gives rise to specific traits such as religiosity and helps us understand our religion and that of others.  |

expected to conform' (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 68). Several students revealed how their understanding of spirituality derived from experience. This is not the sort of 'religious' experience that David Hay writes about (Hay 1982) but rather what might be called life-experiences. The most explicit reference to experience was from 17 year old Haley (Cluster P) who wrote in her questionnaire that spirituality 'can't be taught through texts: grows from experience'. Expanding on this during interview she added:

I believe you gain spirituality through experience in life . . . the spirit can change because situations change . . . you yourself change to deal with what is being thrown at you.

According to 15 year old Fiona (Cluster P), spirituality grows out of the experience of introspection; looking 'deep within yourself':

I think that spirituality occurs when people have to assess their lives . . . I think a spiritual person who does take the time to look at themselves [*sic*] is likely to be a stronger person than someone who gives up.

Also, Erricker's insistence that spirituality should be constructed without the influence of religious formulae also has resonance with students.

A key finding of this research was the extent to which Christian and Muslim students showed no awareness of the meanings of spirituality in the teachings of their religions. Only six Christian students (4 %) refer to God in their definition of the 'spirit' although seventeen (11 %) do so in relation to spirituality. References to the Holy Spirit, or to the Trinity generally, were totally absent from all Christian responses both through the questionnaire and

**Table 3.**

|                           | Christian | Muslim | No Religion (N/R) |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------|-------------------|
| Belief                    | 34%       | 26%    | 16%               |
| Relationships with others | 5%        | 5%     | 5%                |
| Personal identity         | 43%       | 43%    | 62%               |
| Religion                  | 12%       | 16%    | 5%                |
| Discrepant cases          | 1%        | 2%     | 7%                |
| No response               | 9%        | 9%     | 11%               |

Totals exceed 100 % because students gave multiple responses.

interviews. The only Muslim students to associate spirituality with God were the 6 per cent in Cluster B(ii) and a few of the 12 per cent in Cluster R. Most of their comments could be classed as demonstrating 'awareness'; typically 'having an interest in God' or 'something to do with God'. This is not to say that these students did not take their religion seriously; just that they did not associate it with spirituality. It would be reasonable to say that students display in their thinking about spirituality the independence from the influence of religious teachings that Erricker prizes. Moreover there are some points in which the views of teenagers overtly support aspects of Erricker's theory.

Several students convey a sense of integration, defining spirituality as, for example 'your beliefs, values and morals', or 'thoughts, beliefs, emotions'. Such ideas are comparable to Erricker's understanding of 'faith' as the integration of all aspects of personal life (Jackson 2004: 62). Others recognise the extent to which 'the spiritual' as a dynamic force 'governs one's positions'. For example 17 year old Imogen describes the spirit as 'emotions which make you see the differences between right and wrong' and Cathy similarly says, 'I think your spirit is inside of you . . . helping your mind to make up your personal decisions'. Closest to Erricker's position is this 15 year old girl:

Spirituality is the feelings and emotions that motivate you to do something. It is something deep within you that makes up your beliefs and morals.

However, although many of the students involved in my research expressed broadly relativist views, their highly individual responses to my questions owes more to the absence of teaching about the nature of spirituality by Church, Mosque, or school than adherence to Erricker's extreme anti-realist stance. This was apparent particularly in students' responses to Q3, 'Can everyone be a spiritual person?' A sizable minority (42 %) who denied universal spirituality did so with a realist agenda; for example some had prescribed understandings of spirituality that excluded materialists, those without beliefs and those who 'do bad deeds'. This does not in any way support Erricker's contention that 'all knowledge is relative and only human narratives can be accepted as 'truth' (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 131), for it follows that *all* human narratives must be true and therefore all definitions and forms of spirituality must be true. Even the 58 per cent of students who believed that everyone could be spiritual argued from a belief in equality rather than adherence to relativism. From Erricker's perspective, personal narratives and knowledge may not be evaluated epistemologically because all knowledge is of equal potential value. Thus there are no criteria (except the intuitive faith of the individual) for evaluating

one truth against another. This is the supreme weakness in Erricker's position. Taken to its logical extreme, it provides a justification for those who distort undeniable historical 'knowledge', such as those who deny the Holocaust.

There are other significant differences between my research and Erricker's position. Although my research meets Erricker's requirement that the voices of children are heard, what we hear from students is very different and has inevitably resulted in a different profile of responses. Erricker found categories which he named 'my little pony', 'all-American kid', and 'family orientated'. I found no evidence for these categories but I have found limited evidence of the 'hard man', a characteristic adopted by some boys in order to become socially acceptable. In addition it is clear from my data that some, albeit a minority of students, do understand spirituality in exclusively religious terms. Erricker allows for no such category.

What we have here is evidence of individual perceptions of spirituality based on experience rather than the imposition of ideas from elsewhere, as Erricker requires. However, the pressures and anxieties of these young people which, in some cases, prevent them from realizing their spirituality, raises further questions about Erricker's postmodern stance, which as we have seen, requires that individual perceptions of spirituality remain unchallenged. The most serious practical weakness in Erricker's position is the abandoning of children to their own limited experiences and understanding without apparently offering them any alternatives that might stimulate new insights and directions. This is particularly worrying in the case of children with a violent world view (e.g. Erricker & Erricker 2000: 165). For an interviewer to record a dialogue without intervening, even if the subject expresses extreme antisocial tendencies, is professionally correct. However, Erricker offers his interviewing technique as a model for classroom practice (p. 181), where leaving a child to believe that his or her choice of worldview or lifestyle is as acceptable as any other is highly questionable. Hence Wright is justified in his criticism that Erricker's pedagogy leaves children 'in a moral and intellectual vacuum in which they are forced to fall back on their own resources' (Wright 1998a: 94). The evidence provided by these students supports Wright's arguments. For example one has to ask who will offer students an alternative view of the world that might alleviate the confusion and unhappiness caused by their perceptions of a world where to 'fit in' one has to be a slave to consumerism (girls) or laddishness (boys). This is a reminder of J. Priestley's comment on postmodernism: 'in its extreme forms, [it] allows anybody to interpret anything in any way' that inevitably leads to 'some form of cultural, moral and spiritual anarchy' (Priestley 1997: 28).

## Students' perceptions and Wright's interpretation of spirituality

Wright's view that students' spirituality should draw on 'spirituality as an object of critical study' (Wright 1998: 100) finds strong support from the students. When asked which subjects contributed most effectively to their spiritual development, students' top nine nominations were as follows:

Fifteen-year-old Eliza explains how Religious Education (RE) has helped develop her beliefs, particularly about God:

Personally taking RE has changed my opinions on my Christian points of view, being Christian myself, it has led me to develop my own personal beliefs which I understand more clearly, however I also accept that other people have different points of view and doing RE has enabled me to gain an insight into them and question certain areas of the religion which previously I was unsure about.

When Erricker applies his thinking to religious education, he finds a subject dominated by the teaching of the meta-narratives of religions. He regards the religious content of the curriculum as perpetuating each religion's assumptions, strengthening the claims of religions against a secular world view; in other words, a manipulation of the curriculum to maintain power. One of Erricker's most radical proposals is to separate children's spiritual development from religion altogether, on the grounds that it 'cannot be expressed and reflected on by the children themselves as long as the subject enquired

**Table 4. Students' choice of the aspects of education that make the greatest contribution to spiritual development**

| Subject                               | Number of nominations |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Religious education                   | 217                   |
| Personal, social and health education | 128                   |
| Assembly                              | 106                   |
| Art                                   | 72                    |
| Physical education                    | 53                    |
| Tutor period                          | 49                    |
| History                               | 44                    |
| Music                                 | 42                    |
| English                               | 42                    |

into is defined by the concept “religion” (Erricker & Erricker 2000: 26). These views are not shared by the students who agree rather with Wright’s view that a study of faith perceptions offers ‘an extraordinarily rich vein of spirituality’ (Wright 2000: 31).

### **The spiritual profiles of subjects**

A review of questionnaire responses and interview records revealed that a number of terms occurred regularly in students’ explanations of *why* they nominated specific subjects. When analysed it became clear very quickly that their explanations described different aspects of subjects that caused students to nominate them. These aspects could be described as each having a different semantic relationship with the subject. The combination of these aspects gave each subject a different profile that described how students perceived its unique contribution to spiritual development. These aspects are best described as:

- Key learning processes contributing to spiritual development
- Personal involvement in activities contributing to spiritual development
- Learning environments contributing to spiritual development
- Substantive concepts contributing to spiritual development
- Personal spiritual outcomes

These aspects were not allocated equally across subjects, as illustrated in table 5.

In realising this breadth of experience in subjects, students unconsciously echoed the debate in scholarship over how schools should promote pupils’ spirituality. This debate is often portrayed as being polarised in support for affective and cognitive approaches (Watson 2005: 149). The key learning processes, personal involvement and learning environments are the principal concerns of those who advocate affective approaches while the substantive concepts are central to the cognitive argument.

I will limit my illustration of the subject profile to RE, being the subject in question.

## The contribution of Religious Education to spirituality

An analysis of subject choice by age, gender, religion, ability and cluster showed that in every category RE headed students' choice of subjects. Table 5 shows that RE is identified as contributing to all the key aspects of subjects discussed earlier, contributing particularly well to key learning processes, subject content and attitudes/personal qualities. A higher proportion of boys (75 %) than girls (61 %) nominated RE, which reflects the greater emphasis boys placed on the connection between religion and spirituality.

Students' reasons for nominating RE illustrate well the differences between clusters. Only 57 per cent of Cluster P nominated RE, one of the lowest figures of all groups, and the reasoning of these students shows why the selection of RE is in keeping with their leitmotif that spiritual development is to do with the inner self, as the following two examples illustrate. Iona (Cluster P) justified her choice of RE with reference to 'meditation periods' which she enjoys in her Roman Catholic school:

The teacher takes the class into a small room, full of cushions, and the students are asked to take a seat and close their eyes, whilst they are played a piece of relaxing music. It is entirely up to the students how they spend this time. They are really expected to sit quietly and reflect on their lives, their emotions or things that are bothering them.

In Iona's rationale we see clear evidence of key learning processes (meditate, reflect), personal involvement (emotions) and learning environment (freedom, relaxation, enjoyment, atmosphere). Husna, a Muslim also in Cluster P justifies her choice of RE with particular reference to personal outcomes:

At home I'm mostly taught about my own religion however at school there was a contrast . . . Other religions which I disagreed with now I have a better understanding and respect for . . . throughout my life I will encounter people with different social/religious backgrounds. It has in general made me a better and more understanding person.

For Husna subject content is only important for its contribution to her personal development and she identifies key attitudes and personal qualities (understanding and respect), concluding that these make her a 'better person'. Iona's and Husna's choice of RE is entirely consistent with their overall Cluster

Table 5. The spiritual profiles of subjects

| Subject                            | Religious education  | Personal, social and health education                        | Assembly   | Art   |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Key learning processes</b>      | Talk<br>Think<br>Discuss<br>Express opinion<br>Meditate<br>Reflect                       | Listen<br>Talk<br>Express opinion                            | Listen<br>Think<br>Talk<br>Contemplate<br>Reflect<br>Silence                       | Research<br>Think<br>Express<br>Imagine<br>Create<br>Design |
| <b>Personal involvement</b>        | Feelings   | Feelings   | Feelings   | Emotion<br>Self-revelation                                  |
| <b>Learning environment</b>        | Freedom<br>Choice<br>Enjoyment<br>Relaxation<br>Atmosphere                               | Freedom<br>Working with friends<br>Developing relationships  |  | Freedom<br>Enjoyment<br>Relaxation<br>Fun<br>Calming        |
| <b>Substantive concepts</b>        | Questions<br>Ideas<br>Beliefs<br>Religion<br>Spirituality<br>God<br>Morality<br>Cultures | Morality<br>Racism<br>Relationships<br>Community<br>Problems | Questions<br>Beliefs<br>Religion<br>Morality<br>Bullying<br>World issues<br>People | Issues  |
| <b>Personal spiritual outcomes</b> | Understanding<br>Respect   | Understanding  |  | Self-understanding  |

P theory and they identify, in different ways, aspects of the subject that contribute to their personal development.

In contrast, 15 year old Eliza from B(ii) has a very different view of why RE contributes to spiritual development, giving an outstanding explanation of how RE has helped develop her beliefs, particularly about God:

In RE I study Judaism and Christianity and this enables me to research thoroughly into the different aspects and nature of God within these religions e.g. the Trinity. It also enables me to understand and accept that everyone has a different opinion on the subject and therefore no one person has the correct answer and I have to accept God in my own way.



|  | Physical Education                            | Tutor period                       | History                                     | Music                          | English                   | Drama  |
|--|---|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
|  | Concentrate                                   | Talk<br>Discuss<br>Express opinion | Talk<br>Discuss<br>Express opinion          | Listen<br>Create<br>Express    | Talk<br>Discuss<br>Create | Listen<br>Talk<br>Discuss<br>Share ideas<br>Express opinion<br>Create<br>Express |
|  | Self-transcendence                            | Feelings                           |   | Feelings<br>Self-transcendence | Feelings                  | Feelings<br>Self-revelation<br>Self-transcendence                                |
|  | Enjoyment<br>Calming<br>Discipline<br>Control | Working with friends               |   | Enjoyment<br>Escape<br>Calming |                           | Relaxation<br>Working with friends   |
|  |   | Problems<br>Home                   | Religion<br>Spirituality<br>Cultures<br>War |                                | Cultures                  |  |
|  | Confidence<br>Self-esteem<br>Improvement      |                                    |   |                                |                           |  |

Personally, taking RE has changed my opinions on my Christian points of view. Being Christian myself, it has led me to develop my own personal beliefs which I understand more clearly, however I also accept that other people have different points of view and doing RE has enabled me to gain an insight into them and question certain areas of the religion which previously I was unsure about. I believe everyone has their own personal God and this does not have to be encountered through an already established religion. However, an established religion does offer the opportunity to learn about God and his covenant with you as a human being. An established religion is also recognised throughout the majority of the world and therefore people are more likely to accept your beliefs, but as already stated

God is completely individual and personal to everyone and therefore no one has the right to be prejudice against you about your own beliefs. God can be present at any time and anywhere and no one religion can explain Him fully because he is infallible.

Subject content is important to Eliza because it has a purpose, particularly in its contribution to attitudes and personal qualities (understanding, awareness, open-mindedness). Eliza illustrates well the difference between Clusters B(ii) and R, for although she recognises that her religion has shaped her beliefs, her priority is the development of personal beliefs which, crucially, do not have to be encountered through an established religion.

In contrast, Bakir and Janna (Muslims, Cluster R) selected RE because it makes them better Muslims. Bakir and Janna related their personal religious development specifically to the substantive concepts at the core of RE. Both students learnt about other religions but when explaining the influence of RE on their spiritual development both focused on Islam:

(Bakir): RE helped me to become religious and believe what i think is best; ISLAM. . . in school I learnt about islam about the holy cabba but theres lots more to come.

(Janna): In RE i am currently studyin 2 religions which are sikhism and islam. . . in islam i have learnt more about my religion. things such as how to live my life according to allahs will. . . this has helped me alot as i try not to develop jealousy. because Allah hates jealousy cos it destroys a person.

A high percentage (68 %) of Cluster O nominated RE on the grounds that it contributed to their knowledge and understanding of others as well as self. This is the view of Maimuna:

RE. . . helps you grow in your culture and religion because in RE you learn about your religion and other religions. . . I think it's important to learn about other people's lives and religions because then by knowing someone is no good you need to know their religion and beliefs. . . I meant that it is important to understand what other people believe because that helps understand them. I think spirituality is more about understanding people than religion.

The analysis of students' views on RE by Cluster reveals some interesting features about their choice. Students' rationales for selecting RE are dependent

on their understanding and experience of the subject and what they get out of it. Students regard content as more important in RE than any other subject, but as a means to ends (developing beliefs, developing in one's religion, understanding others) than as an end in itself. What is apparent here is that many students from different perspectives have found RE to make a significant contribution to their spiritual development, but that contribution varies for each person. This has an important bearing on the academic debate, supporting Wright's view that the case for RE is easy to make out because it raises 'spiritual questions of fact and value' (Wright 1998: 100) but lending no support to Erricker's claim that spiritual education should be removed from teaching about religions.

## References

### **Cohen, L., L. Manion & K. Morrison**

2000 *Research Methods in Education*. 5th edn. London: Routledge-Falmer.

### **Erricker, C. & J. Erricker**

2000 *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education*. London: Routledge-Falmer.

### **Hay, David**

1982 *Exploring Inner Space. Is God still possible in the twentieth century?* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

### **Jackson, R.**

2004 *Religious Education: an Interpretative Approach*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

### **National Curriculum Council (NCC)**

1993 *Spiritual and Moral Development: A Discussion Paper*. London: HMSO.

### **Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)**

1994a *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development*. London: OFSTED. (An OFSTED discussion paper)

1994b *Promoting and Evaluating Pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development*. London: Ofsted.

### **Priestley, J.**

1997 Spirituality, Curriculum and Education. *The International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 2 (1): 23–35.

### **Spradley, J. P.**

1979 *The Ethnographic Interview*. Belmont, CA: Wandsworth.

### **Strauss, A. & J. Corbin**

1998 *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

**UK Parliament**

1988 *The Education (Reform) Act*. London: HMSO.

**Watson, Jacqueline**

2005 What Is Spiritual Development? An Examination of What Might be Meant by Spiritual Development in the Context of State Secondary Schools (in England) since the 1988 Education (Reform) Act and the 1992 Education (Schools) Act. PhD Thesis, University of East Anglia.

**Wright, A.**

1996 Language and Experience in the Hermeneutics of Religious Understanding. *British Journal of Religious Education* 18 (3): 166–80.

1998 *Spiritual Pedagogy. A Survey, Critique and Reconstruction of Contemporary Education in England and Wales*. Oxford: Culham College Institute.

1999 *Discerning the Spirit. Teaching Spirituality in the Religious Education Classroom*. Oxford: Culham College Institute.

2000 *Spirituality and Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

## Biographical Notes

**Antoon Geels** was trained in the History of Religions, and specialized in the Psychology of Religion, in which subject he now is a Chair Professor at the University of Lund, Sweden. He is also Honorary Professor in the Psychology of Non-Western Religions at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His primary area of research is the comparative psychological study of mystical experience and mystical techniques. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Subud and the Javanese Mystical Tradition* (1997), *Förvandlande ögonblick. Religiösa visioner i dagens Sverige* (Transforming Moments. Religious Visions in Contemporary Sweden, 2001), a study on comparative mysticism entitled *Berusad av Gud* (Drunk on God, 2002), *Religiös besinning och besinningslös religion. Tankar om terror i Guds namn, Buddhism och global andlighet* (Religious Sense and Senseless Religion. Thoughts about Terror in the Name of God, Buddhism, and Global Spirituality, 2007), and *Medvetandets stilla grund. Mystik och spiritualitet i världens religioner* (The Still Ground of Consciousness. Mysticism and Spirituality in the Religions of the World, 2008). He is presently writing on sacred sexuality. Address: Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Allhelgona kyrkogata 8, 223 62 Lund, Sweden. E-mail: antoon.geels@teol.lu.se.

**Sarah Goldingay** works as an actor and a producer and is an Associate of The Wrestling School Theatre Company. Her research concerns the relationships between Performance Studies and the Sociology of Religion. She is currently at the Drama Department of the University of Exeter, UK, completing a PhD examining how contemporary British spirituality is constructed and reconstructed by performance. Address: Department of Drama, School of Arts, Languages and Literatures, University of Exeter, Thornlea, New North Road, Exeter EX4 4LA, United Kingdom. E-mail: sjg211@ex.ac.uk.

**Andreas Häger** has a PhD in the Sociology of Religion from Uppsala University (2001), is Associate Research Professor in the Sociology of Religion at Åbo Akademi University and works as a researcher at the Department of Sociology at this university. His thesis was a study of Christian discourses on popular music, and he has continued to write on religion and popular culture, particularly popular music. He is currently working on a research project on Finnish revivalist movements. Address: Department of Sociology, Åbo Akademi University, 20500 Åbo, Finland. E-mail: andreas.hager@abo.fi.

**Nils G. Holm**, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion, Åbo Akademi University. Special interest: Psychology of Religion. E-mail: nholm@abo.fi.

**Ralph W. Hood, Jr**, Dr, is Professor of Psychology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He holds a joint PhD degree in Psychology and Sociology. His research speciality is the Psychology of Religion. He is a former president of the division of the Psychology of Religion of the American Psychological Association and a recipient of its William James, Mentor, and Distinguished Service awards. He is a former editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. He has been a co-editor of *The International Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and currently is a co-editor of the *Archive für Religionspsychologie*. He has recently edited publications including *Measures of Religiosity* (with Peter C. Hill, 1999) and *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of his Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition* (2005). Recently co-authored works include *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (with Peter Hill & W. Paul Williamson, 2005), *Them that Believe: The Power and Meaning of Christian Serpent-handling* (with W. Paul Williamson, 2008) and *Blood and Fire: Godly Love in a Pentecostal Emerging Church* (with Margaret Poloma, 2008), and *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-cultural Research in Germany and the United States* (with Heinz Streib, Barbara Keller, Rose-Marie Csöff & Christopher Silver, 2008). He is currently completing the fourth edition of *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (with Bernie Spilka & Peter Hill). Address: Department of Psychology, Dept 2803, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN 37403-2598, USA. E-mail: ralph-hood@utc.edu.

**JP Jakonen** is studying Comparative Religion, Psychology and Philosophy at the University of Turku. He is writing his Master's Thesis on the world-view of the American philosopher Ken Wilber. JP Jakonen has translated Wilber's *A Brief History of Everything* into Finnish, being the first volume of Ken Wilber's oeuvre to be translated into Finnish. Jakonen's main interests include integral philosophy and integral psychology, cultural studies and transrational spirituality. Address: Kojuvret, 21740 Utö, Finland. E-mail: jpjako@utu.fi.

**Maria Liljas Stålhandske**, who has a PhD in the Psychology of Religion, is a researcher and lecturer at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at Uppsala University. Her research is focused on existential and ritual aspects of late modern secular life. Important publications include: 'Omöjligt och nödvändigt: Kvinnors livsfrågor och psykiska välbefinnande i samband med abort.' in *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift* 85 (2) (2008); *Ett avgörande beslut: Om existentiella behov och uttryck i samband med tidig abort* (Uppsala 2006); 'Riten i det existen-

tiella tomrummet: om meningsskapande i dagens Sverige' in Göran Gunner (ed.), *På spaning... Från Svenska kyrkans forskardagar 2005* (Stockholm 2006); *Ritual Invention: A Play Perspective on Existential Ritual and Mental Health in Late Modern Sweden* (Uppsala 2005). Address: Centrum för studier av religion och samhälle, Teologiska institutionen, Box 511, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden. E-mail: maria.liljas@crs.uu.se.

**Marcus Moberg**, M.Theol., is a doctoral student at the Department of Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University. He is currently working on the completion of his doctoral thesis on the Finnish Christian metal music scene. His main research interests are religion and popular culture, religious change and popular music cultures. Address: Åbo Akademi University Foundation Research Institute, Piispankatu 13, 20500 Turku, Finland. E-mail: marcus.moberg@abo.fi.

**Dominika Motak** is a lecturer at the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion of the Jagiellonian University. Her fields of study are anthropology and sociology of religion. Her current research interests include the methodology of the study of religion, sociology of modernity and contemporary religious phenomena. She has published a book on religious fundamentalism (*Nowoczesność i fundamentalizm*, Kraków: Nomos, 2002), as well as articles and translations of academic books (e.g., by Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann). Address: Jagiellonian University, Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion, ul. Grodzka 52, 31-044 Cracow, Poland. E-mail: uzmotak@cyf-kr.edu.pl.

**Janne Juhana Rantala** is a PhD student of cultural anthropology. His area of interest is how ritual maintains communality in social and spiritual movements. He is especially concerned with the problem of social structurelessness, which is far less noticed and theorized than social structure which has remained a prototype of social organization in the social sciences. Rantala has written an article for a still unpublished Finnish anthology on the study of social movements, and some reviews and papers concerning similar themes. Address: Långdalintie 19 as. 721, 10470 Fiskari, Finland. E-mail: janne.juhana@gmail.com.

**Britta Rensing**, Dr, from 1991: Universities of Cologne and Bonn, English Linguistics and Literature and Protestant Theology, 1994–5: Foreign Language Assistant in Essex, 1998: 1st Staatsexamen, 1999–2002: Service Professional for Deutsche Lufthansa AG Düsseldorf International Airport, 2003–6: artist for chalk/charcoal drawing and gouache/oil painting, lecturer in English and German as a foreign language, 2004–6: dissertation at the Department of Religious Studies, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena. In 2007–8 scientific em-

ployee at the Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena. At present working on several projects such as religion in Asian films and neopaganism. Address: Siegburger Str. 84, 40591 Düsseldorf, Germany. E-mail: brittarensing@web.de.

**Sofia Sjö**, Dr.Theol., from Åbo Akademi University. In her doctoral thesis *Spe-lar kön någon roll när man räddar världen? Kvinnor, kvinnligheter och messi-asmyster i SF-film* (Does Gender Matter When You Save the World? Women, femininity and myths of messiahs in SF-film), she looks closely at the messiah myth in contemporary science fiction film from a gender perspective. The areas that Sjö has focussed on in her research are religion and popular culture and religion and gender. Address: Vichtisvägen 11 C 31, 00320 Helsingfors, Finland. E-mail: sofia.sjo@abo.fi.

**Göran Viktor Ståhle**, PhD, is a lecturer at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden. His research interests concern the field of religion, culture and health. He has concentrated on studies on modern Hinduism and new religious move-ments. Ståhle defended his doctoral dissertation in 2004 at Uppsala University division of the Psychology of Religion. Address: Södertörn University, 141 89 Huddinge, Sweden. E-mail: goran.stahle@sh.se.

**Teemu Taira** holds a PhD in Comparative Religion from the University of Turku, Finland. He works as Senior Research Fellow at the department of Theology & Religious Studies, University of Leeds. He is also the reviews editor of *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*. He has written on religion in modernization as well as on theoretical issues in the study of religion. His current studies are focused on public discourses on religion, especially on por-trayals of religion in the British media and the category of religion in the Finnish media. Address: Kivikkokatu 8, 60320 Seinäjoki, Finland. E-mail: teetai@utu.fi.

**Kirsi Tirri**, Professor of Religious Education at the University of Helsinki. Re-search interests: moral and religious education, spirituality, teacher education, adolescence research, gifted education and cross-cultural studies. Recent publi-cations: 'Conceptual definition and empirical validation of a spiritual sensitivity scale.' *Journal of Empirical Theology* 19 (1) (2006): 37–62 (with P. Nokelainen and M. Ubani); 'Developing whole school pedagogical values – a case of go-ing through the ethos of "good schooling".' *Teaching and Teacher Education* 23 (4) (2007): 390–401 (with J. Husu); 'A Comparison of Academically Average and Gifted Students' Self-Rated Ethical Sensitivity.' *Educational Research and Evaluation* 13 (6) (2007): 587–601 (with P. Nokelainen); 'Identification of multiple intelligences with the Multiple Intelligence Profiling Questionnaire III.' *Psychology Science Quarterly* 50 (2) (2008): 206–21 (with P. Nokelainen).



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Address: University of Helsinki, P. O. Box 33, 00014 Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: [kirsi.tirri@helsinki.fi](mailto:kirsi.tirri@helsinki.fi).

**Barbara Wintersgill**, MA, PhD, Associate Fellow at Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick. Worked as a civil servant for nearly 20 years during which time she wrote many papers on religious education and spiritual development (in accordance with civil service rules these documents were published under the name of the relevant government department), for example, Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED): *The Impact of New Agreed Syllabuses on the Teaching and Learning of Religious Education* (London: The Stationery Office, 1997); National Curriculum Council (NCC): *Spiritual and Moral Development – A Discussion Paper* (York: National Curriculum Council, 1993). From 1990 as the religious education adviser in two consecutive government advisory organisations. Was then appointed as Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) at Ofsted with responsibility for religious education. Left Ofsted in 2005 to complete her PhD. Her interest is adolescent spirituality. Address: 143 Blachford Rd, Ivybridge, Devon, PL21 0AE, United Kingdom. E-mail: [bwintersgill@btinternet.com](mailto:bwintersgill@btinternet.com).