Religion Beyond God

Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital

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A Re-enchantment of the World?

No less than a century after its formulation, Max Weber's (1948[1919]) analysis of the progressive disenchantment of the modern world continues to evoke debate and arouse the intellectual imagination. The fate of modern man, Weber held, is to face stern reality as it is, without illusions – to heroically bear the modern fate of meaninglessness without taking refuge in utopian dreams or promises of religious salvation. Although he took great efforts to take this imperative seriously in his own life as a man of science, his struggle with his "inner demons" that resulted in his mental breakdown in the period 1897-1902 demonstrates just how difficult a task this actually was (Radkau, 2009). Perhaps more than anything else, the emergence of postmodernism strikingly confirms Weber's analysis of the progressive dissolution of solidly grounded meaning in the modern world. Many contemporaries experience today's world as having lost its metaphysical foundations and as rife with insidiously rhizoming less-than-real simulations that have replaced the "natural" or "solidly grounded" social worlds of the past (Baudrillard, 1993[1976]) – a world in which depth has been superseded by surface (Jameson, 1991) and in which even science's authority to legislate truth has progressively dissolved (Bauman, 1987; Rorty, 1980).

In Weber's intellectual circles in the German city of Heidelberg at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, however, many a philosopher, psychologist, and artist took refuge in utopian experiments, alternative religions, and esoteric movements, such as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, the philosophy of life of Henri Bergson and the like. Although there is no doubt that Weber was acutely aware of these attempts among his contemporaries to re-enchant a progressively disenchanted world (Radkau, 2009), he adopted a rationalist stance and firmly

dismissed these tendencies as "weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times" (1948[1919]: 149). And more bluntly: "this is plain humbug or self-deception" and one should "bear the fate of the times like a man" (Ibid.: 154-155). This personal aversion, dictated by ruthless intellectual rationalism, seems to have withheld Weber from a detailed and systematic analysis of these tendencies to re-enchant the modern world. This is quite unfortunate, both because his work provides an excellent point of departure for such an analysis and because these tendencies have certainly not waned since. Indeed, sociologists such as Michel Maffesoli (1996) and Zygmunt Bauman (1993) observe a re-enchantment of the world, with the latter (ibid.: 33) commenting that "postmodernity (…) brings 're-enchantment' of the world after the protracted and earnest, though in the end inconclusive, modern struggle to dis-enchant it". Many commentators conceive especially of the increased popularity of New Age, Paganism, Wicca, and the like, as indicating a present-day re-enchantment of the world. Thus Philip Wexler (2000) writes about the emergence of a "mystical society" and David Lyon (2000: 34) observes "widespread re-enchantment" in the late-twentieth century.

The ambition of the present paper is to theorise these and related processes of re-enchantment in the modern western world by drawing on Max Weber's and Emile Durkheim's classical sociological insights on modernity, meaning and religion. Our aim in doing so is not only to demonstrate how much the latter have to offer to such an analysis, but especially to argue for the need of a rejuvenation of sociology of religion by shrugging off its traditional Christian bias and going beyond its narrow focus on secularisation and religious decline.

New Age Spirituality

A Spiritual Supermarket?

In most of the social-scientific literature, New Age – or "spirituality", as increasingly seems the preferred term – is used to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices varying from holistic health, reincarnation therapy and spiritual 'healings' to channelling, astrology and (neo) paganism. This dominant discourse about New Age basically reiterates sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann's influential analysis, published about forty years ago in *The Invisible Religion* (1967). Structural differentiation in modern society, Luckmann argues, results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a "market of ultimate significance." On such a market, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences, that remain strictly private affairs. Unlike the church-based Christian religion of the past, they are held to lack wider social significance and to play no public role whatsoever. Similar arguments have been made by the late Bryan Wilson (1976), Steve Bruce (2002), and many others. Such accounts are found over and over again in the sociological literature, as Kelly Besecke (2005: 186) rightly observes: "Luckmann's characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one".

Yet, this new orthodoxy in the sociology of religion is more problematic than many seem to realize, especially because it has meanwhile become abundantly clear that a shared doctrine of "self-spirituality" constitutes the common denominator of the wide range of beliefs, rituals, and practices found in the spiritual milieu. This doctrine postulates that the sacred cannot be found "out there", like the transcendent personal God of Christianity, but rather "in here" (Heelas, 1996:

4

19). Put crudely, New Agers, believe that people have not one, but two selves: they contrast a "mundane", "conventional", "unnatural" or "socialized" self, demonized as the "false" or "unreal" product of society and its institutions, with a "higher", "deeper", "true", "natural", "authentic" or "spiritual" self, with the latter laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the former. Residing in the deeper emotional layers of consciousness, the "higher" or "deeper" self is sacralised as representing the person one "really" or "at deepest" is. It is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy (mostly referred to as "ki" or "chi") that holistically pervades and connects "all", that is, nature, society, and the cosmos and to reveal itself through one's feelings, intuitions, and experiences. One should hence "follow one's heart", do what "feels good" and refrain from what "feels bad" (Heelas, 1996: 23).

Although its market structure and the sovereignty of the individual spiritual consumer are central and uncontested features of the contemporary spiritual milieu, these hence do not prove the absence of a coherent spiritual doctrine. More than that: it is precisely this unifying doctrine of "self-spirituality" that accounts for its fragmented market structure without a clear centre of authority. As it happens, this doctrine informs "perennialism" and "bricolage" as two major features of the way the spiritual milieu deals with religious traditions. According to perennialism, all religious traditions refer to one and the same esoteric truth, i.e., the presence of a sacred kernel in the deeper layers of the self. Individual participants in the milieu can speak about a "higher self" (derived from Blavatsky's Theosophy), a "divine spark" (from ancient Gnosticism), a "Buddha self" (from Buddhism), an "inner child" (from humanistic psychology) or even delve into Christian vocabularies when they talk about the inner self as "the soul". Perennialism motivates the flowering of multiple vocabularies because it firmly rejects the idea that such a thing as a tradition superior to all others exists. It is instead held that religious traditions have lost

5

sight of their common "divine source" because of their dogmatic clutching to sacred texts, systematising religious doctrines, establishing priesthoods, etcetera – by engaging in the side issue of traditionalising, routinising and institutionalising "pure" spirituality. Rather than conforming to a particular religious tradition, then, New Agers opt for bricolage: combining elements from various traditions into packages of meaning that "feel good" personally.

Most of the literature about New Age and spirituality, in short, misconstrues perennialism and bricolage as the overwhelming presence of a variety of strictly personal individual beliefs and practices in the contemporary spiritual milieu. These features are in fact dictated by the shared doctrine of self-spirituality that hence provides the milieu with its ideological coherence. Conformity to a religious tradition is rejected, because such assumes submission of one's inner wisdom to external authority – an unforgivable sin against the imperative of obeying the spiritual self and becoming "who one really is" (author(s)). Needless to say, this doctrine also accounts for the loss of appeal of the "New Age" label since the 1980s, when New Age increasingly came to permeate the cultural mainstream and transformed into a veritable religious tradition itself ("No, I am not a New Ager, but I have a strong interest in spirituality!") (Hanegraaff, 2002: 253, 259; Heelas, 1996: 17).

New Age and Esotericism

The claim that contemporary spirituality is fragmented and incoherent is flawed for yet another reason. What we have come to call New Age since the 1960s' counter culture is in fact a contemporary offshoot of the esoteric (or hermetic) tradition (Hanegraaff, 1996). This tradition has its origins in the Renaissance, when it started with the translation of the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*, which offered a synthesis of much older traditions like Gnosticism and Neo-

Platonism. In particular New Age's emphasis on the vital importance of feelings, intuitions, and experiences in guiding one on one's personal path to salvation stems from esotericism. With this central role accorded to "gnosis", esotericism entails an antinomian rejection of church and science (or faith and reason) as the two principal carriers of western culture (Hanegraaff, 1996: 519). Before it became more clearly visible and influential as "New Age" in the 1960s' counter culture, the esoteric tradition underwent a number of significant transformations, the most important of which were the incorporation of oriental thought and western psychology from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century onwards (Hanegraaff, 1996).

Key figures in the adoption of oriental thought are Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), the founder of the famous Theosophical Society (1875), the so-called "American transcendentalists" (of whom Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is probably best known), and American "beatniks" like Jack Kerouac, Alan Watts, and Allen Ginsberg in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Hanegraaff, 1996). As a consequence of this profound influence from oriental traditions, it is simply impossible to imagine the contemporary spiritual milieu without a wide range of (unmistakably "Occidentalized") ideas, practices, and concepts, especially taken from Buddhism and Hinduism (karma, reincarnation, meditation, yoga, aura, chakras, meridians, etcetera) (Puttick, 2000). The influence of psychology can hardly be overestimated either. It runs from the "New Thought Movement" of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866), through William James' (1842-1910) functionalist psychology, and the work of Carl Gustav Jung (1885-1961) that laid the foundations for what would become the Human Potential Movement in the countercultural 1960s and 1970s (Hanegraaff, 1996).

Despite its marked individualism, fragmented appearance and decentred market structure, in short, New Age's unifying doctrine of self-spirituality and its roots in western esotericism

make it very difficult to dismiss it as "no real religion" as sociologists of religion have been doing time and again (Woodhead, 2005).

Explaining the Emergence of New Age Spirituality

Max Weber on Religion and Modernity

One of the cornerstones of Weber's analysis of modernity is the notion that the disenchantment of the world inescapably aggravates problems of meaning, because the process "destines us to realize more clearly these struggles again, after our eyes have been blinded for a thousand years (…) by the allegedly or presumably exclusive orientation towards the grandiose moral fervor of Christian ethics" (1948[1919]: 149). This notion constitutes a promising point of departure for an analysis of tendencies towards re-enchantment in the modern world, particularly because Weber understands culture as "the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings" (Schroeder, quoted by Campbell 2007: 11).

According to Weber, the erosion of belief in a transcendent "other world" causes great difficulties for moderns since science, unlike religion, can and should not provide answers to existential questions about the meaning of life, suffering and death. More specifically, it raises difficulties for moderns to accept their reduction to mere functionally defined cogs in bureaucratic machines or industrial factories: "What is hard for modern man (…) is to measure up to *workaday* existence. The ubiquitous chase for experience stems from this weakness", as he observed (1948[1919]: 149, emphasis in original). Modern institutional orders, driven by a relentless quest for efficiency and effectiveness, preclude strong moral identifications and are

8

hence experienced as "meaningless" and "abstract" (Zijderveld, 1970; Berger et al., 1973). Needless to say, this is also the major thrust of Marx's critique of capitalist-induced alienation (1964[1848]) and the principal complaint against modern technocratic society voiced by the 1960s' counter culture that gave birth to the New Age movement (Roszak, 1968).

No longer provided with pre-given and solidly grounded meaning and subjected to rationalized modern institutions, modern selves find themselves plagued by nagging questions of the type "Do I really want this?" and "What sort of person am I, really?". With "external" reality increasingly incapable of endowing life with meaning, the deeper emotional layers of the self become the straw to clutch at in seeking solace for these problems of meaning. This does of course not mean that the turn to New Age spirituality constitutes a mere process of individual psychological adaptation. From a Weberian perspective, ideal interests like these are catered for by cultural and religious specialists. Threat of loss of plausibility of cultural and religious worldviews, due to disenchantment or otherwise, sparks processes of "cultural rationalisation" aimed at cultural and religious reconstruction to prevent erosion of meaning (Weber, 1956; see also Campbell, 2007). This means that the disenchantment of the world can hardly result in anything else than the construction of more "modernity-proof" worldviews that are as such less susceptible to disenchantment. Precisely because the world's disenchantment has detracted significantly from the plausibility of theistic Christian doctrines and the legitimacy of religious authorities, New Age spirituality has been constructed by religious and cultural specialists as a more "modernity-proof" substitute (Campbell, 2007). As a "religion of modernity", it is less vulnerable to disenchantment than doctrinal and theistic Christianity, because it substitutes belief in a radically transcendent personal God, who has revealed what the world's events and processes "really" mean, for the notion that the sacred lies hidden deep "within" each single person (Heelas

and Woodhead, 2005; author(s)). Those concerned are thus convinced that to overcome alienation they need to "take their feelings seriously", "follow their hearts", and "listen to their intuition".

With its marked emphasis on personal experience rather than conformity to religious doctrines and propositional truths, New Age hence rejects the need to "believe" or "have faith", giving primacy to the "emic" perspective of the experiencing person, from which experiences are "true" and "real" by definition. As Olav Hammer puts it (2001: 331): "There is no real need to believe in any particular doctrines, nor is one obliged to trust in their antiquity or their scientific basis. The ultimate litmus test is whether you can experience their veracity for yourself." This is precisely what distinguishes personal experiences from, for instance, "errors" or "sinful deeds", notions which both rely on external standards of legitimacy. More specifically, as we have seen, New Age understands emotions such as love, pain, pleasure, anger, or happiness as personal reactions to events in the outer world that convey vital spiritual knowledge about one's inner world – about the sort of person one "really" or "at deepest" is. While traditional theistic types of religion give meaning to personal experiences through religious doctrines, in short, New Age spirituality constructs these as spiritual lessons about oneself and the sacred.

Despite Weber's personal aversion to the spiritual tendencies he was witnessing in his own days, the emergence and spread of what later came to be known as New Age spirituality is thus perfectly compatible with his analysis of modernity. From a Weberian perspective, it is not surprising at all to find that the problems of meaning created by disenchantment and rationalisation have spawned New Age as a modern religious attempt to overcome them (Campbell, 2007). Much more widespread today than in Weber's own days (author(s)), this type

10

of spirituality constitutes a cultural and religious adaptation that caters for individual psychological needs in a massively rationalized world.

Emile Durkheim on Religion and Modernity

Emile Durkheim's classical analysis of religion and modernity, equally influential as Weber's, does much to illuminate the collectively shared nature of New Age spirituality as a veritable "religion of modernity". This is because in his later work Durkheim conceives of religion as an inevitable feature of all human societies, be they "primitive" or modern. Because religion constitutes the sacralisation of a society's most cherished values, Durkheim argued, modernity cannot mean the end of religion, but rather entails its transformation. This analysis, brought forward in his last book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (published in 1912) differs strikingly from the one presented in his first book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (published in 1893). While Durkheim initially rejected the notion that religion could constitute a source of solidarity in modern industrial societies, as indicated by the "decidedly negative" (Chandler, 1984: 571) references to the "cult of individualism" in his first book, he revised this position in the course of his career (Seigel, 1987), particularly during the Dreyfus affair that shook France in 1898. In his essay "Individualism and the Intellectuals" (1973[1898]), he responded to the anti-Dreyfusards' charge that liberal intellectualism's individualism paved the way for anarchy, disorder, and anti-social egoism. Quite to the contrary, Durkheim argued: in modern society, the individualism defended by Kant's Enlightenment rationalism as well as Rousseau's Romanticism constitutes "the only system of beliefs which can ensure (…) moral unity (…)" (Ibid.: 50). This typically modern moral individualism does not value that which separates people from one another, but rather sacralises their shared humanity, producing a "religion in which man is at once

11

the worshipper and the God" (Ibid.: 46). In stark contrast to *The Division of Labor in Society*, then, Durkheim here construes individualism as providing social solidarity and cohesion to modern societies – as the religion of modernity *par excellence*.

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

Of particular interest is Durkheim's brief discussion of speculations among his contemporaries about "whether a day will not come when the only cult will be the one that each person freely practices in his innermost self" (Ibid.: 43), a religion "that would consist entirely of interior and subjective states and be freely constructed by each of us" (Ibid.: 44). Acknowledging the widespread aspirations toward such a religion in his own days, he comments that "if that radical individualism has remained in the state of unrealized theoretical aspiration up to now, that is because it is unrealizable in fact" (Ibid.: 427). And indeed, as we have seen above, these aspirations – far more widespread today than in Durkheim's days – do not produce strictly personal spiritualities, but religion in a Durkheimian, pre-eminently social and collective sense: a shared system of beliefs that sets the sacred (here: the deeper layers of the self) apart from the profane (here: the socialized self and the society from which it springs) and that sacralises society's most cherished values (here: moral individualism, particularly personal liberty and

authenticity). Needless to say, if, as Durkheim argues, *anything* can be sacred – "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything" (Ibid.: 35) – this applies to the deeper layers of the self as well.

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

The spiritual milieu proper of course also celebrates the higher or deeper self in collective rituals. Singing mantras and performing Yoga, breathing techniques or rebirthing, does after all not merely generate private experiences of personal authenticity, but also shared feelings of unity and togetherness (e.g., Rose, 2005). These collective sacralisations of the self are moreover not only found at spiritual festivals and seminars (Hamilton, 2000), pagan covens (Berger, 1999) or long-standing New Age communities like Glastonbury (Prince and Riches, 2000), but nowadays even in contemporary business corporations where personal authenticity and empowerment have become the new moral imperatives (author(s); Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Costea et al.,

13

2007). New Age constitutes a veritable "religion of modernity", in short: it entails a collective sacralisation and reinforcement of long-standing modern ideals of individual liberty and personal authenticity and has increasingly come to permeate the public domain.

The Sacralisation of Computer Technology

Although Weber left open the possibility of "a rebirth of old ideas and ideals" (1996[1930]: 182), his prediction of an increasingly mechanical and suffocating iron cage breathes a tragic understanding of history and portrays rationalisation as a Faustian bargain. From the seventeenth century onwards, he maintains, modern rationality and technology have increasingly become autonomous forces beyond human control, "determin(ing) the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism" (Weber, 1996[1930]: 181) – an analysis that has deeply influenced later theorizing. Jacques Ellul (1967[1954]), Bryan Wilson (1976) and Jean Baudrillard (2000[1981]) are just three examples of social scientists who have echoed Weber's analysis of the emergence of a suffocating and alienating iron cage, arguing in an often even more pessimistic and certainly more moralistic vein that technology has increasingly become an autonomous power that renders modern life meaningless and alienating. We have however already seen that precisely these experiences of alienation have triggered the turn towards New Age spirituality, so that rationalisation does not merely undermine religion and meaning. We now take this critique a step further by demonstrating that these same experiences of alienation can also evoke a sacralisation of technology, and of digital computer technology in particular.

Computer Technology: From Alienation to Spiritual Salvation

During the 1950s and 1960s, rationalized modern institutional orders were strengthened significantly by the use of giant mainframe computers, owned and deployed by large corporations such as IBM and (the military branches of) the government. Back then, computers were central to the so-called "military-industrial complex" and as such exemplified technology's status as a supra-individual system. Precisely because many a computer specialist was deeply dissatisfied with this embeddedness of computers in impersonal bureaucratic systems, the monopolization of computers by the government and a handful of major corporations, and the misuse of computer technology in the Vietnam war, the counter-cultural "hacker ethic" of the 1960s emerged. Central to this ethic were the imperative to "mistrust authorities", the goal that "all information should be free" and the belief that "computers can change your life for the better" (Levy, 2001[1984]). These counter-cultural hackers saw themselves, as Ken Goffman has phrased it, as the "new Prometheans" – individuals who, like the Greek god Prometheus, aimed to steal the "technological fire" from the authorities (2005: 9). Aiming to bring "computing power to the people", their dreams of small-scale and privatized computer systems that could be put to more democratic and humanized use provided a major impetus for the development of the personal computer. Inspired by this counter-cultural hacker ethic, hacker Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, eventually imagined and built the first personal computer in Silicon Valley, California, in 1976. At around the same time, Bill Gates founded Microsoft and developed, in collaboration with IBM, the personal computer that has conquered the world market since its launch in 1981 (e.g., Castells 2000[1996]; Himanen, 2001; Levy 2001[1984]; Pels, 2002; Roszak, 2000).

It can of course be doubted whether the popularization and commercialization of the personal computer since the 1980s has really given "computing power to the people" in the way

envisioned by the hackers. There is however no doubt that the computer's radical privatization contradicts the classical social-scientific image of technology as a supra-individual system, dominated by powerful political and economic elites. More than that: precisely the feelings of alienation generated by such large-scale systems provided the impetus for the development of privatized computer systems that could be tailored to user preferences. This trend still drives innovations in computer technology, as evidenced by Web 2.0 applications that have recently become popular, such as online computer games, virtual worlds, web logs, Hyves, MSN, MySpace, YouTube, etcetera. These privatized applications provide individuals with opportunities to actively resist multinationals (think of the music industry) and to express their identities in artistic – or not so artistic – fashions (e.g., Markham, 1998; Turkle, 1995). The radically democratic and permissive goals of these new digital environments are perfectly illustrated by YouTube's motto: "Broadcast yourself!".

Although voiceful counter-cultural critics of the "technocratic system" like Theodore Roszak (1968) referred to authors like Weber, Ellul, and Marcuse in making the point that technology and spirituality were mutually incompatible, recent studies have pointed out that even the counter culture's spiritual branch was in fact less uniformly anti-technology than it is often taken to be. Besides "luddites" like Roszak, it also featured many "technophiles" – young computer experts who were simultaneously deeply involved in spirituality (e.g., Bey 2001[1996]; Goffman, 2005; Ziguras, 1997). Even Roszak (2000: 6) himself has meanwhile come to acknowledge that "it is within this same population of rebels and drop-outs that we can find the inventors and entrepreneurs who helped lay the foundations of the California computer industry". Many of those who initially belonged to the counter culture's 'luddite' branch moreover came to understand computer technology as a means towards spiritual salvation later on.

Key figures of the early Californian New Age milieu, like Ken Kesey, Terrence McKenna and, most notably, Timothy Leary, fall within this category. Leary argued that "hard technology" may in fact promise a more effective avenue towards the goal of personal salvation than "soft techniques" like yoga, t'ai chi, or chakra healing. He compared the personal computer to LSD (e.g., Dery, 1996) and suggested in the 1990s that one can escape an "alienating" and "repressive" society by immersing oneself in the new otherworldly realm of cyberspace that was opened up by computer networks. And Leary was no exception. He was but the *eminence grise* of a much broader "technophile" wing of the New Age movement that, especially in the early 1990s, gathered around hackers, Internet gurus and cyberpunk writers like William Gibson, Rudy Rucker and others – a group of people that constituted "counter culture 2.0" (Dery, 1996) in and around Silicon Valley and dreamed of spiritual liberation in cyberspace. About this notable counter-cultural convergence of digital technology and spirituality, Rushkoff (1994: 6-7) has remarked that "The mission of the cyberian counter culture of the 1990s, armed with new technologies, familiar with cyberspace and daring enough to explore unmapped realms of consciousness, is to rechoose reality consciously and purposefully. Cyberians are not just exploring the next dimension; they are working to create it".

These developments in the spiritual milieu in the early 1990s were closely related to a broader (pseudo) religious discourse about modern technology, cyberspace and spiritual salvation. Back then, renowned technicians and academics also heralded the newly emerging realm of cyberspace as a spiritual space with an immaterial and ephemeral ontology. It was described as "Platonism as a working product" (Heim, 1993), a "paradise" where we "(W)ill all be angels, and for eternity!" (Stenger 1992[1991]: 52), "new Jerusalem" (Benedikt 1992[1991]: 14) and a "technological substitute of the Christian space of heaven" (Wertheim, 1999: 16).

17

Renowned robotics experts and transhumanists like Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil promised eternal life in the nearby future by "getting rid of the meat" and uploading human consciousness to computer networks. These and many other examples indicate that advanced computer technology spawns its own eschatological beliefs about spiritual liberation and attainment of an "immortal mind" (Noble 1999[1997]: 143). The privatization of computer technology through its disconnection from the powerful supra-individual systems that monopolised it in the post-war period, has in short stimulated its sacralisation as enabling rather than preventing spiritual salvation.

These developments are clearly at odds with the nineteenth-century theories of Comte, Tylor, Weber and those of Ellul, Wilson and Baudrillard. Despite their differences, they all emphasize the role of science and technology in marginalising and ultimately driving out religion, magic and meaning. Digital technology and religion are however not necessarily incompatible. More than that: digital technology can become the locus of religious salvation itself thereby disturbing the long standing "modern divide" (Latour, 1993[1991]) between 'rational' and 'advanced' science on the hand and 'irrational' and 'primitive' religion on the other.

Computer Technology: From Alienation to Technological Animism and Magic

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

While computer technology has come to be seen as a powerful tool towards spiritual salvation, Weber (1948[1919]: 139) is doubtlessly correct when he notes that "the savage knows

18

incomparably more about his tools" than modern lay people do, so that "intellectualization and rationalization do not (...) indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time." Disenchantment hence assumes division of labour and specialization of knowledge: while most moderns lack the expertise to fully understand how a streetcar, an elevator or a computer operates, they trust that the experts do. But do they?

Two related arguments can be made against these Weberian claims. First of all, various authors have argued that we are witnessing a transition from relatively transparent modern technology to opaque post-modern technology (e.g., Turkle, 1995; Haraway, 1985; Žižek, 2001[1996]). Bruno Latour (1999) makes the point that every new generation of technology builds upon the former, resulting in a multiple "layering of technology". Because of this, his argument continues, technology is increasingly understood as a "black box" of which the operation is no longer completely comprehended – not even by the experts. Paradoxically, as Sherry Turkle (1995) has argued in a similar vein, it is the very desire to make computer technology more user friendly by means of graphical user interfaces, visual icons and simulations that tends to obscure its inner workings. Contrary to older generations of personal computers, for instance, Apple computers and machines running on Microsoft Windows no longer invite their users to look beyond the simulated interface, let alone to try and comprehend the workings of the bare machine itself. Referring to this as "the MacIntosh mystique", Turkle characterizes this development as a transition from a "modern culture of calculation to a post-modern culture of simulation" (Ibid.: 23). Erik Davis has argued that this trend towards opacity easily engenders a new and unexpected process of re-enchantment: "The logic of technology has become invisible –

literally occult. Without the code you're mystified. And no one has all the codes anymore" (1999[1998]: 181).

And indeed, computer technology's opacity generates new magical discourses about computer technology. Sociologist William Stahl, for instance, analyzed 175 articles on computer technology in *Time Magazine* and found that 36 percent of these displayed explicit magical language, concluding that "Magical discourse seems alive and well in industrialized North America" (1999: 80). Moreover, computer specialists themselves often rely on quasi-magical discourse ("nerd theology") as well (Kelly, 1999), while a group of renowned programmers and Internet specialists in Silicon Valley refer to themselves as "new magicians", "cyberdruids" or "technopagans" (e.g., Davis 1999[1998]; Dery, 1996). These technopagans explain that their work with highly complex computer technology, and with opaque software programs in particular, has brought them to the conclusion that programming can no longer easily be distinguished from performing magic. They talk in mysterious, animistic terms about the global digital interconnections that have come into existence (author(s)). Phenomena such as Artificial Intelligence, computer viruses and software bots make them think of digital technology as a subjective entity or imbued with "life". Tylor's (1977[1889]) and Malinowski's (1954[1925]) classical anthropological theories of animism and magic are hence highly relevant for understanding this type of re-enchantment. Although these theories are based on studies of "primitive" societies, their emphasis on the vital roles of opacity and experiences of impotence in generating animism and magic applies to today's digital environments as well.

A second argument against the Weberian logic of disenchantment is that computer systems have become increasingly autonomous – a development that is, of course, closely related to the one just discussed. Computer technologies "acquire wildness", Kelly (1994: 4) observes; they get

"out of control" and "will soon look like the world of the born". In a similar vein, Donna Haraway (2001[1985]: 29) comments that "late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert". These out-of-control features of computer technology and the religious feelings these invoke may be understood from the classical work of anthropologist Robert Marett (1914[1909]). Marett explained the birth of "nature religion" by the fact that "primitives" found themselves confronted with a natural environment they could neither understand nor control; they therefore experienced it as an overpowering, mysterious force ("mana") that invoked the basic religious emotion of "awe", a combination of fascination and fear. These basic religious feelings are today projected onto digital technology (author(s)).

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

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

Conclusion: Religions of Modernity

Since the 1960s and 1970s, processes of disenchantment, rationalisation and ensuing individualisation have spawned major cultural and religious reconfigurations in the West that have deeply affected the Christian churches. The latter have declined substantially and have lost much of their former legitimacy, particularly in the formerly Protestant North-Western European countries (e.g., Brown, 2001; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; author(s)). Even though it is as yet hard to tell what exactly this means for the longer-term viability of Christian religion in the West (e.g., Bruce, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005), much of what remains of the latter is accommodating itself to the new environment in which it has come to find itself. In Christian circles, the personal experience of the divine is becoming more important, especially among the younger generations (Roeland, 2009), and a marked withdrawal from Christianity's traditional institutional strongholds takes place, spawning a "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994).

Indeed, most of the contemporary debate about the future of religion in the West takes shape in the shadow of the Christian heritage, thus virtually equating the future of religion to the future of Christian religion. Recent discussions have focused, for instance, on whether the decline of Christian "belonging" does not simply herald a subsequent decline of Christian "believing", too (Voas and Crockett, 2005), and on how the more experiential and privatized types of Christian religiosity relate to New Age spirituality of the type discussed in this paper (Flere and Kirbis, 2009; author(s)s). This marked Christian bias in the debate about religion in the west is of course not surprising in itself, given that this is the dominant religious tradition in this part of the world. Yet, it has seriously impeded efforts to theorize about the emergence and spread of strains of religion that reject Christian solutions to problems of meaning and decidedly embrace the features of modernity that Christianity has always been hostile too – moral individualism and modern technology.

The emergence and spread of these "religions of modernity" suggest that modernity is neither inimical to religion *tout court*, nor only undermines or reshapes Christian religion, but even spawns its own strains of religion that promise solace from modernity's cultural problems. From the moment it gained its secular powers, modernity has hence been "haunted by ghosts of its own making" (Pels, 2003: 18) that promise salvation from alienation and anomie. While these "maladies of modernity" (Zijderveld, 2000) have been theorized extensively by sociology of religion's founding fathers, the hypothesis that merits full attention by contemporary sociologists of religion is that precisely these cultural discontents have evoked new religious attempts at overcoming them. Indeed, profound changes in the real world since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century call for an extension and critical re-appropriation of Weber's and Durkheim's classical work on modernity, religion and meaning. As we have aimed to demonstrate, the latter

23

provides a promising point of departure for shrugging off sociology of religion's Christian bias

and escaping its narrow emphasis on secularisation and religious decline. Now that it is no longer

taken for granted that the west is facing a Christian future, the tacit equation of "real" religion to

Christian religion has become a major intellectual obstacle (Woodhead, 2005) and now that it is

no longer taken for granted either that the future will necessarily be secular, the same goes for the

notion that religion and modernity are essentially incompatible (Meyer and Pels, 2003).

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