

Oriental Religion in the Secular West

Globalization, New Age, and the Reenchantment of the World

[Published in: *Journal of National Development*, vol. 16, nos. 1&2, pp. 67-86]

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1. Introduction

Globalization changes the cultural landscape of our planet in many ways. Barber, for instance, argues that the globalization of western culture gives rise to all sorts of religious and political fundamentalist movements in non-western societies, producing the twins of *Jihad and McWorld* as characterizing today's world.¹ In a similar vein, Huntington speculates about a *Clash of Civilizations*, with secular and democratic western cultures increasingly conflicting with traditionally religious non-western ones.² Although there is, of course, no denying that the globalization of western lifestyles and aspirations deeply affects non-western societies, one-way traffic is definitely not all there is. Non-western societies are not simply passively adapting or actively reacting to a global expansion of western culture, but are affecting western societies in many diverse ways, too.

This is especially visible in the religious domain, with late-modern western societies characterized by a remarkable interest in oriental religious ideas and practices. Extremely popular yoga is not much more than the tip of the iceberg of a 'seemingly insatiable market for things "eastern" which has emerged with a special force in the 1990s'.³ In this paper, we discuss this current western interest in oriental religion in the allegedly disenchanted and secularized western world, primarily focusing on the New Age movement in the Netherlands. We discuss how and why those oriental religious ideas and practices have ended up in the

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West in the first place and how their remarkable contemporary popularity can be understood from a cultural sociological point of view.

2. The Western Turn to the East

2.1. Western Esotericist Perennialism

The so-called 'esoteric tradition' has manifested itself in western culture since the Renaissance.⁴ According to Hanegraaff this tradition of thought – that runs through movements like romanticism, occultism and theosophy – can best be understood as an undercurrent in western culture and a forerunner of the contemporary New Age movement.⁵ It has always been an epistemological alternative to 'faith' (Christianity) and 'reason' (science). In contrast with these two competing epistemological views, the esoteric tradition seeks for 'gnosis' or 'divine knowledge': 'According to this [gnosis], truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or "enlightenment". Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of reason or faith, it is in principle not generally accessible. This "inner knowing" cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of faith (...) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience.'⁶ As distinct from reason and faith, gnosis does then not assume one universally binding truth, derived from a 'reality out there' – neither truth as pre-given divine revelation ('faith'), nor truth as grasped by means of reason.

Western esotericism promotes the exploration of various religious traditions in search of their common spiritual essence or kernel. This view can be traced back to the esoteric doctrine of 'perennialism' ('philosophia perennis' or 'perennial philosophy').⁷ According to this doctrine, all religious traditions are equally valid, because they all essentially worship the same divine source. 'Spiritual truth' is thus held to transcend its various historical manifestations in established religious traditions. Hence, esotericism, in contrast with most world religions, is 'profoundly inclusivistic'⁸: its 'perennialism' puts a premium on exploring non-western religious ideas and practices. Unbound by a well-defined doctrine and motivated by perennialism, 19th-century western esotericists opened up the doors to religious diffusion and eclecticism on a global scale.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) was one of the key figures in the esoteric turn to the east at the end of the 19th century. Arguing that 'each religion is a ray of truth from

the central Sun,' her New Theosophy is typically part of the esoteric tradition.⁹ During her travels through India in 1868 she made contact with various Buddhists and Hindus. Those contacts and the study of oriental literature led her to conclude that 'the ultimate source of primordial wisdom is India.'¹⁰ Whereas her earlier work, *Isis Unveiled*, is still largely inspired by ancient Egypt, in her later work, especially *The Secret Doctrine*, she strove for a synthesis between east and west. At the same time, the so-called 'American Transcendentalists' became fascinated by oriental religion, especially Hinduism and selectively incorporated concepts like karma and reincarnation into an esoteric framework. Like Blavatsky, they adopted oriental religion to a western point of view.¹¹ In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), probably the most famous spokesman for the 'American Transcendentalists': 'We read the Orientals, but remain Occidental'.¹²

The end of the 19th century, in short, was a crucial period for the import of oriental religion to the west. Through the work of Blavatsky, her New Theosophy and the 'American Transcendentalists', various oriental religions got integrated in western esoteric thought.

2.2. *New Age from Counter Culture to Nuclear Culture*

The 1960s were a second decisive period in the popularization of oriental religion in the west. The emergence of the so-called 'counter culture' not only changed the political landscape of western societies, but had important religious ramifications as well. Whereas 'Anarchists' and 'Activists' were prominently involved in the construction and defense of new modes of social life to transcend technocratic and capitalist consumer society, 'Gnostics' represented the spiritual dimension of the counter culture.¹³ 'Beat poets' such as Kerouac, Watts, and Ginsberg mixed esoteric and oriental religious ideas and introduced Buddhism to a larger audience.¹⁴ Rejecting the traditional western types of religiosity, constructed around the Christian conception of a transcendental personal God, those Gnostics searched for meaning within the deeper layers of the self. This counter-cultural quest for spirituality, that emerged alongside its social and political dimensions, constitutes the beginning of the New Age Movement and paved the way for today's popularity of oriental practices such as yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and Tantra in late-modern western societies.

In the 1960s and 1970s New Agers still typically worked and lived in utopian communities, sheltered from the vices of technocratic and capitalist consumer society. Since the 1980s, however, this self-chosen isolation has remarkably disappeared and replaced by a religious market on which New Age centers cater for their clients' spiritual needs.¹⁵ In 1990 there were about 200 of those centers in the Netherlands, while five years later there were

already 300.¹⁶ Not only are those centers extremely popular in contemporary western societies, but Sutcliffe and Bowman even argue that in a more general sense ‘contrary to predictions that New Age would go mainstream, now it’s as if the mainstream is going New Age.’¹⁷ And judging from the remarkably increased popularity of New Age trainings in business life, this doesn’t even seem a gross exaggeration.¹⁸

Rather than offering an escape from late-modern consumer society, today’s New Age circuit is remarkably well integrated into it.¹⁹ Books, magazines, videotapes, CD’s, and health products are marketed and a wide range of courses, trainings, and therapies is on offer, aimed at improving mental and physical well being. Like postmodern hunters and gatherers, New Age consumers sample their highly varied and fleeting spiritual diets from those New Age centers. Sociologists of religion even refer to this phenomenon in terms borrowed from economics. They speak of a ‘religious market’,²⁰ a ‘spiritual market’,²¹ ‘para-cultural supply’,²² ‘New Age capitalism’,²³ and ‘client and audience cults’.²⁴

2.3. Unpacking the Shelves of the Spiritual Supermarket

One of us has studied the course programs of twenty-four Dutch New Age centers a few years ago to find out what types of courses and therapies are on offer.²⁵ Most of the centers prove to offer a wide range of courses and trainings, while only a few specialize in a singly type of activity such as ‘shiatsu’, ‘neo hypnotherapy’, or ‘reincarnation therapy’. No less than 844 different types of trainings and therapies are offered by the twenty-four centers that have been studied, that is no less than about thirty-five on average. This diversity on the supply side of the spiritual supermarket is illustrated by Table 1, that presents the ‘top ten’ of the most often offered types of trainings.

The ten most popular ones account for less than a quarter of the total of 844 different types of trainings and therapies on offer. The category ‘other’ thus captures an extreme diversity: most of those are unique for a single New Age center. This staggering diversity is caused by the tendency of New Age trainers and therapists to draw upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. One trainer might use tarot cards in combination with crystal healing and ideas from Hinduism about chakras, whereas another might combine traditional Chinese medicine, western psychotherapy, and Taoism into another idiosyncratic concoction. This tendency was already discussed thirty-five years ago by Luckmann under the label ‘bricolage’, a concept borrowed from Levi-Strauss.²⁶ It has

become a key feature of the New Age market since. ‘Standard therapies’ are simply not to be found.

Table 1. The ten mostly offered types of trainings and therapies in 24 Dutch New Age centers (1995; N=844).

Type of training/therapy	%
1. Yoga	6.6
2. Shamanism	2.6
3. Shiatsu	2.0
4. (Neo)reichian therapy	1.9
5. Reiki	1.8
6. Tarot	1.8
7. (Neo)hypnotherapy	1.8
8. Gestalt therapy	1.7
9. Psychosynthesis	1.3
10. Zen meditation	1.2
Other	77.3
Total	100.0

Nevertheless, at a higher level of generality, we can distinguish three general sources the New Age market draws upon. The first, esotericism, has already been discussed above. The second is oriental religion. No less than 29% of the 844 trainings and therapies offered by those 24 New Age centers rely on elements of oriental religion. Most salient among those are Hinduism (activities related to mandalas, mantras, chakras, and auras), Taoism (practices inspired by the principle of Yin and Yang), and traditional Chinese medicine (particularly healing activities that assume meridians and life energy). The third general source that the New Age centers draw upon is psychology. ‘New Age religion (tends) to blur the distinction between religion and psychology to an extent hardly found in other traditions,’ as Hanegraaff correctly observes.²⁷

Especially the work of humanist psychologist Jung ‘enabled people to talk about God while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine.’²⁸ Establishing contact with one’s deeper spiritual self, and the closely connected quest for ‘personal growth’, borrowed from humanist psychology,

then underlies the diversity of the contemporary New Age scene: ‘(...) “personal growth” can be understood as the shape “religious salvation” takes in the New Age Movement: it is affirmed that deliverance from human suffering and weakness will be reached by developing our human potential, which results in our increasingly getting in touch with our inner divinity.’²⁹ Consistent with the primacy of gnosis in esotericism, New Age rejects any belief in ‘external’ sources of truth and meaning. Those can only be found within the deeper layers of the self: ‘(...) the most pervasive and significant aspect of the lingua franca of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the “Self” itself is to experience “God”, “the Goddess”, the “Source”, “Christ Consciousness”, the “inner child”, the “way of the heart”, or, most simply and (...) most frequently, “inner spirituality.”’³⁰

Despite the enormous diversity on the shelves of the late-modern spiritual supermarket, in short, the courses, trainings, and therapies on offer have a common objective, that is too easily overlooked by observers who merely acknowledge the syncretism and volatility of the New Age scene. This common objective, that constitutes the defining characteristic of New Age, is the (re-)establishment of contact with the spiritual self, that is held to have become overgrown with the weeds of socialization (the socialized self or ‘ego’). The range of trainings and therapies offered by New Age centers stimulates and assists their New Age clients to reach beyond the ego and once again experience the ‘real self’ as the only valid source of meaning and identity.

3. Sacralizing the Self and Demonizing Institutions

3.1. The Primacy of Self-Spirituality

Recent research among trainers of Dutch New Age centers confirms the primacy of gnosis and self-spirituality.³¹ ‘What is faith?’, one of the respondents asks, immediately giving the characteristic answer himself: ‘Something that one takes for granted. Just like that. Faith is (...) a limitation.’ All other respondents come up with similar ideas. They criticize faith and the churches, thus primarily critiquing established dogmas, rules and ideas:

I think the churches failed above all because ‘expressing it from within oneself’ (...) has totally got lost. It got lost in two ways. The first way is that it has become a system of

rules, dogmas (...) the second is that it has been intellectualized. It has become brains only. (respondent 8, male)

(In) a church, as we know it anyway, the stories have already been worked out (and one has) some sort of pre-determined role of how it should be done. How one should live. But I prefer to find my own source and to determine from my own source what is my conscience and how I would like to live. (respondent 9, female)

Hence, our respondents indicate that Christian dogmas, rituals, and moral rules preclude self-spirituality and personal growth. Traditional Christians, one declares, 'are imprisoned in the lard of the dogmas.' Spirituality is instead held to reside within the deeper layers of the self: 'I experience (...) the Divine as something inside myself (...) It is all about self-knowledge and self-awareness,' 'I consider spirituality something that lives inside myself, ' and 'I am God myself. (...) I am going to feel!'

Theologist Tom Beaudoin nicely captures this feature of post-Christian religiosity in the chapter titles 'Institutions Are Suspect' and 'Experience Is Key' of his book *Virtual Faith*.³² Being the long-standing western religious institution, it is hardly surprising that criticism is primarily directed at the Christian church. It applies to other religious traditions and new religious movements, too, however. One respondent remarks about the movement of Baghwan (or 'Osho'), for instance:

On the one hand it has a lot of flexibility and freedom, but it too has norms and values (...) People go and change their names. Yes, that is supposed to be very valuable... That doesn't appeal to me very much. (...) In every current there is an underlying danger of norms and values coming to dominate and limit personal liberty. (respondent 10, female)

New Agers do not simply oppose the substantial ideas of Christianity, Islam, and other traditional religions, then. They rather oppose the exerted institutional pressure, because this leaves insufficient room for personal spiritual experience ('gnosis').

3.2. *Simply Becoming Who One Is*

This resistance to institutional pressure is underscored by our respondents' opposition to non-religious institutions and the social roles tied to them. Social roles are rejected because our respondents want to 'be themselves' under all circumstances and do not want to play 'unnatural'

roles, considered inconsistent with their 'true selves'. They strongly feel that one should not behave in a particular way because 'everybody expects one to act that way,' but simply because one 'feels like it.' The following remarks about traditional gender roles illustrate this:

I don't want to behave according to a certain gender role, because I want to be myself at all times. I think that if one can't be oneself, one definitely cannot or will not feel good in oneself. (respondent 2, female)

If it is forced onto one by society, 'This is how one should behave as a woman,' then that is all very nice; it gives one a sense of social security, because 'I do it well according to society.' But later on, one becomes more conscious and one thinks: 'Yes, but do I actually want this?' (...) One can choose oneself. Isn't that much nicer than when the world, society, chooses on one's behalf? (respondent 5, male)

As soon as (...) society or whatever forces me into a certain role, it may feel unnatural. Because I have to play a role that is not really me. (respondent 7, male)

In the same way our respondents reject the idea that marriage as an institution, i.e., apart from the well being of the individual spouses, has a right to exist and deserves protection and preservation. 'If one gets the feeling that one restrains oneself,' one respondent states, 'then that's a reason for divorce.' Another respondent even goes a step further by stating: 'Marriage is essentially merely an annoying obstacle to getting divorced.' This ideal of personal authenticity has an interesting theoretical consequence that deserves some special attention. It means that the display of behavior that is consistent with traditional roles does not necessarily indicate traditional action in Max Weber's classical sense.³³

This is especially visible in the case of traditional gender roles. Some of the women explain that they have deliberately stopped working and become full-time mothers when their children were young. They did not make this decision because traditional gender roles expected them to do so, but because they experience motherhood as 'natural' and fulfilling. In her recent book on post-feminist ideologies of motherhood, Bobel refers to this as 'natural mothering.'³⁴ 'Natural mothers' are suspicious of dominant institutions and criticize liberal feminism as privileging rather than weakening masculine dominance. Instead, as an act of cultural resistance, they sacralize the bond between mother and child and insist on the existence of natural differences between male and female experience. Women and

motherhood are even more explicitly linked by our New Age respondents, because of the typical valuation of ‘the feminine’ in New Age circles – by men as well as women. This glorification of femininity in New Age-circles tends to go hand in hand with a reproduction of the traditional inequality between the sexes.³⁵ ‘At least you knew where you stood with straightforward chauvinists,’ a female New Ager cited by Prince and Riches cynically remarks in this context.³⁶

Beliefs and values relating to the bringing up of children further confirm New Age’s anti-institutionalism. The external imposition of parental norms and values upon children is forcefully rejected. Our respondents argue that children should only be encouraged to ‘simply become who they are,’ as is demonstrated by their claims about the main goal of parental socialization:

To accompany, so that the personality of the child can fully come out. To make sure that the child can be himself, with all of his craziness, particularities. I think that is very important. (respondent 10, female)

That they can become who they are. That is the final aim: to just become who one is. (respondent 6, female)

I think one can mean most to children by just showing them life. That is, without influencing them. (respondent 1, male)

The anti-church and anti-Christian sentiments among New Agers, in short, are merely elements of a more general ‘anti-institutional mood.’³⁷

3.3. Functional Rationality: Buildings, Desks, and Boxes

This generalized anti-institutionalism is also confirmed by the way our respondents judge specialized modern occupational roles and functional rationality. They are distinctly negative about bureaucracy and processes of bureaucratization. Bureaucratic rules and organizational forms are regarded ‘alienating’, ‘nonsensical’, ‘inhumane’, and ‘unanimated.’ They refer to bureaucrats disapprovingly as ‘people who sit in buildings to invent rules’ and ‘people sitting behind desks and (...) inventing plans without knowing what really happens on the work floor.’ ‘Bureaucracy does not work anymore. (...) People are no more willing to play this game,’ a respondent argues. The formalized character of bureaucracy is held to prevent its employees and

clients from 'simply being themselves': it misunderstands what makes them into unique individuals, destroys inspiration and animation, and forces people to stop and think for themselves, effectively numbing them in the process. Every individual human being is unique, or so our respondents argue, and hence work needs to offer opportunities for expressing this individuality. 'I very much believe that people should be there where they belong,' one respondent remarks in this context. Working under rationalized relations is, in short, depicted as 'unanimous', 'inhuman', and fatal for opportunities for personal growth.

Very much like we have seen in our discussion of the possibility of voluntarily and self-consciously choosing for patterns of conduct that resemble 'traditional action' for the superficial external observer, our respondents reject the idea that such a thing as a 'transpersonal' point of view exists, that could be used to 'objectively' judge the quality of work. In this case, too, it is only personal experience that is decisive. 'It's just an assumption that work is alienating,' one respondent explains, arguing that 'alienation is merely a concept.' As a consequence, he appends, alienation is not the inevitable outcome of working under rationalized relations, but essentially an individual choice, too:

One can choose to alienate from things around one. But that's also a choice. Because one can also say: 'I keep my attention with it. I see it as some sort of meditation. I keep my attention with my work. I do it with one hundred percent of dedication.' Then it becomes a sort of Zen-meditation. Then it's not alienating. Then one comes very close to oneself.
(respondent 7, male)

Hence, whether or not rationalized work is 'alienating' and 'obstructing self-actualization' is not given by its 'objective' characteristics. What is alienating and numbing for one person, might actually be liberating for another by offering excellent opportunities for making contact with the 'spiritual self.' Some people, for instance, even indulge themselves in work that many others find alienating:

Some people love that! There are people who love to be surrounded by rules and to execute rules and to point out a comma to others. 'You can't do that! Here is that comma!'
(respondent 5, male)

Apart from resistance to functional rationality as an externally imposed characteristic of modern work organizations, we also find a more general distrust of the modern primacy of reasoning,

categorizing, and conceptualizing. This rationalist bias is held to leave no room for personal experience and as such to disregard individual differences. Because every single person is unique, rationally invented standards never cover multifarious reality; they are nothing but artificial constructs:

I am opposed to all concepts. (...) A concept for me is adjusting to what is already there. Why don't you develop something totally new? You are an entirely new person!
(respondent 9, female)

One cannot motivate two persons in the same way. The motivation of persons to do or not do something is entirely different. For one it is this, for the other it is this, for yet another it is that. (respondent 5, male)

Subjecting people to rationally informed classifications – ‘Sorting everything neatly into boxes. Then it is safe’ – is denounced, then, as a dismal and unproductive practice: ‘Neither children nor adults belong in boxes. (...) I am not a box. That is not possible’; ‘Why should we put (people) in a box? I think everyone should be able to live as one wishes’.

4. ‘Institutions make one sick’

The quest for self-spirituality and the sacralization of the self, our data demonstrate, gives rise to a demonizing of institutions. Everything that is not self-chosen, but ‘artificially’ and ‘externally’ imposed, and that as such subordinates the self to pre-given patterns of behavior, is rejected. Such a resistance against institutional pressure was expressed time and again during the interviews in more general ways, too:

Imposing things from the outside, I am totally opposed to that anyway. That doesn't tally with finding one's own way in life and experiencing what is good for me. (respondent 4, female)

I am actually totally opposed to everything that is prescribed. Because I just want to create things from within myself. (...) Every authority that imposes itself as authority restricts the development of a personal, inner authority. (respondent 9, female)

It is of course not only faith and church, but actually our whole Christian culture, our Western culture, which (...) with all kinds of explicit or implicit taboos (...) impairs self-actualization. (respondent 8, male)

The characterization of institutions as essentially alienating is, in short, indissolubly linked to the sacralization of the self: people should liberate themselves from external influences and choose authentically for what is Good, True, or Pure. What happens, then, if people adjust to institutions after all? Our respondents make many, often dramatic, pronouncements about this. Adjustment to traditional institutions and functional role expectations can work out well for quite a while, they believe, but eventually it inevitably produces problems:

I think that if one can't put anything of oneself in one's work (...) one doesn't go to work with pleasure. One often thinks negatively and that's not good for oneself. It makes one ill, both physically and mentally. (respondent 2, female)

It can make many people ill. You should only know how many people have mental and psychosomatic complaints, because they find themselves in a social role where they don't belong. One comes across such persons regularly in this center. (respondent 5, male)

About the consequences of too much of an identification with the work role:

'I am my work.' I hear that often. People who retire and fall into a black hole. 'I don't exist anymore. I am my work, my status. I am an executive. And tomorrow it is "Goodbye!" and nobody calls me anymore.' That's tough. And then it goes wrong. Such a person will become bitter. Become unhappy. Sometimes they will die very soon. So, 'I exist less.' Which is absolutely untrue. (...) One always exists. (respondent 1, male)

In bringing up children there is the same danger. A traditional, authoritarian upbringing, forcefully rejected by our respondents, inevitably results in 'a sense of inferiority, insecurity, effacing oneself, and believing that another person is more than he or she is.' Too directive an upbringing is thus held to cause mental and emotional damage to children:

One shouldn't program in advance how one wants a child to become. That's how many

children get screwed up. They will end up in mental health care. Just because the parents emphasize too much how they want the child to develop. (respondent 5, male)

Frustrations about institutional adjustment are held to lead not only to problems of mental and physical health, but to violent types of crime, too:

One does not live brilliantly anymore. One holds back, watches out, pays attention to not make a mistake. One is busy doing that, instead of being natural. And that can come out distortedly in all kinds of ways. That someone really develops a sick mind. Crimes can result from that. (respondent 9, female)

Repressing sexual desire, 'as encouraged by the church,' also has undesirable results, according to this respondent: 'If physical tension cannot be released through sexuality, they have to arrange something else. Or they get a heart attack.' And she adds:

If one is flowing naturally, you can see that in small children and in animals, then everything makes sense. Then it just makes sense how one lives. (...) And if in one way or another this flow gets stemmed, then it is just like a brook that flows down from a mountain. Then the water has to come out one way or another. And then it can come out in very different ways. Often very ugly ways. (...) If one knows what one is doing, then one can make choices, and one can deal with it, one can handle as big a force as sexuality. (...) Whereas if one doesn't really know that that force is present within one, but comes to expression in a different way, then all kinds of sick things are the result. Like child pornography and stuff like that. (respondent 9, female)

Adjustment to institutional role expectations, to sum up, is regarded a principal source of personal and social problems by our respondents. They attribute frustrations, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorders, depressions, but also physical diseases, spontaneous violent outbursts, and indulgence in sick forms of sexuality to a state of alienation from the spiritual self. And this alienation is considered the inescapable result of adjustment to institutional role expectations. 'Institutions make one sick,' their dramatic message reads.

5. Whence this 20th -Century Turn to the Self?

New Age's radical individualism is in flat contradiction with the arguably most fundamental sociological assumption: that to lead a more or less satisfactory human life, people need to sacrifice the satisfaction of their most primary impulses and desires. This is not only the central message of the work of sociologists such as Durkheim, Elias, and Parsons, but also of Freud's. In a polemical critique of the latter's essay *Civilization and its Discontents*,³⁸ Bauman rightly argues that today the exact opposite is happening.³⁹ People are becoming less willing to repress their deepest longings and instincts. They are increasingly prepared to sacrifice institutional regulation to the quest for individual liberty, self-expression, and personal happiness. This is exemplified by today's 'numerous "self-improvement" movements, deriving their seductive power from the promise of developing the sensuous potential of the body through exercise, contemplation, self-concentration, breaking psychic blocks and convention-induced constraints, letting free the suppressed instincts (...)'⁴⁰

This quest for self-spirituality in the West is easily misconstrued as a 'regression' to 'premodern irrationality', but we are in fact dealing with a radically modern phenomenon.⁴¹ It entails a radicalization of the ethics of authenticity that has accompanied modernity from its very beginnings.⁴² The modern sensitivity to the self is a logical outgrowth of the process of rationalization that has increasingly undermined the possibility of finding 'objective' meaning in the external world. Because of their increasing formalization, abstraction, and differentiation, modern institutions lose their ability to provide the self with meaning. As a result, the modern self increasingly experiences itself as separated from the institutional order – no longer as a 'natural' or 'organic' part of it, as in pre-modern society, but rather as facing it 'from the outside', as it were.⁴³ 'Modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of "homelessness";' Berger et al. explain: 'The correlate of his experience of society and of self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of "home" (...) It has therefore engendered its own nostalgias – nostalgias, that is, for a condition of "being at home" in society, with oneself and, ultimately, in the universe.'⁴⁴

With the unfolding of the process of rationalization, institutions have become unmasked as merely human inventions without solid metacultural foundations. It has become widely felt that they might as well have been 'different' and accordingly they no longer enjoy the levels of 'self-evidence' and 'reality' they were traditionally endowed with. What happens in such a radically disenchanted type of society that no longer provides the self with pre-given meaning and that as such inevitably brings forth problems of meaning and identity? What happens if the self, thrown back upon itself, becomes immersed in nagging questions such as 'Who am I *really*

as a person?’ or ‘What do I *really* want?’ Taking refuge in a postmodern sense of irony and contingency is not going to bring one very far if one feels that questions such as those need to be answered in a solid and personally convincing way. Under those circumstances one necessarily clutches at the straw of the self as the only remaining personally convincing source of meaning. One embarks for a voyage of discovery to the deeper layers of the self to search for ‘real’ meaning and ‘real’ identity there and thus re-infuse life with new meaning and purpose.

In quite a paradoxical way, to sum up, problems of meaning and identity, produced by the process of rationalization and the disenchantment of the world that accompanies it, constitute the starting point for a reenchantment of the western world. It is important to underline that this is indeed a process of *reenchantment* rather than a sort of regression to premodern belief systems. The sacred is, after all, no longer believed to be found in the external world, but rather within the deeper layers of the self. New Age’s sacralization of the self in contemporary western societies is then the paradoxical apotheosis of the modern preoccupation with the self, produced by the processes of rationalization and disenchantment.

6. Conclusion: New Age and Oriental Religion

The religious landscapes of western societies have changed dramatically during the last few decades. In most of them, the Christian churches have declined considerably, whereas New Age as a post-traditional type of religion has remarkably increased during this same period.⁴⁵ As a corollary to this increased interest in New Age, oriental religions are more salient in the west today than they have ever been before. Although there is no denying that western culture deeply affects the rest of the globe, forcing non-western societies to either passively adapt to western lifestyles and aspirations or actively react to them in more or less militant ways, that is certainly not all that is taking place. The remarkably increased interest in oriental religious ideas and practices in today’s western societies is one of the key examples of such a movement in the opposite direction.

The fascination for the east in the modern west cannot be denounced as merely a patronizing type of ‘orientalism’, reflecting and reinforcing western feelings of cultural superiority.⁴⁶ Such a view ignores the extent to which much of today’s fascination with oriental religion in the New Age circuit in the west stems from the cultural discontents produced by the twin processes of rationalization and disenchantment. The orient is constructed as ‘a timeless place that transcends the problems of this world, a place where the

West can escape from its ills, a place where the West can seek peaceful solace.⁴⁷ The current fascination with the east in western societies, in short, arises from a self-critical appraisal of the west as much as from an approving, although stereotypical, image of the east as having fostered for centuries the spirituality that has, in the west itself, not simply been lost, but effectively destroyed.⁴⁸

Today's interest in oriental religion in the western world has been produced by the largely endogenous western processes of rationalization and disenchantment, then, that have eventually cut off all possibilities to find meaning in the world external to the self. We are dealing with one of those wonderful ironies of history here. The very religious traditions that long ago, according to Max Weber, obstructed the rationalization of the oriental world,⁴⁹ are today embraced in western attempts to infuse life with new meaning, now that the old belief systems have been destroyed by the process of rationalization that the western world once provided with fertile soil.

Notes

¹ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, New York: Times Books, 1995.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

³ Kimberly J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 2.

⁴ See Jörg Wichmann, *Die Renaissance der Esoterik: Eine kritische Orientierung*, Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1990, for the influences of premodern traditions such as gnosticism and neoplatonism on the esoteric tradition. According to Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, the esoteric tradition started in earnest with the translation of the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1462 or 1463 by Marcello Ficino.

⁵ Hanegraaff, o.c.

⁶ Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 519.

⁷ See also Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London: Flamingo, 1994 (originally published in 1945).

⁸ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 219.

⁹ Blavatsky, cited in Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 451. Despite this continuity, Blavatsky made a fundamental change by transforming the religious ‘perennial view’ into a testable scientific hypothesis. By encouraging the comparative study of religion she thus eventually hoped to find a scientific basis for the esoteric idea that all religions are valid.

¹⁰ Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 451.

¹¹ Hanegraaf, o.c., Wichmann, o.c.

¹² Cited in Hanegraaff, o.c., pp. 460-461.

¹³ Anton C. Zijderveld, *The Abstract Society: A Cultural Analysis of Our Time*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970

¹⁴ Elizabeth Puttick, “Personal Development: The Spiritualisation and Secularisation of the Human Potential Movement”, in Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 201-219. See also Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969.

¹⁵ Miranda Moerland and Anneke van Otterloo, “New Age: Tegencultuur, paracultuur of kerncultuur?” [New Age: Counter Culture, Para-Culture, or Nuclear Culture?], *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1996, pp. 682-710.

¹⁶ Anneke van Otterloo, “Selfspirituality and the Body: New Age Centres in The Netherlands since the 1960s”, *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1999, pp. 201.

¹⁷ Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, “Introduction”, in Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 11.

¹⁸ E.g., Heelas, o.c., Puttick, o.c.

¹⁹ Adam Possamai, “Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *Culture and Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, pp. 31-45.

²⁰ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, London: MacMillan, 1967.

²¹ Anneke van Otterloo, “Moderne spiritualiteit en secularisatie” [Modern spirituality and secularization], in Bart Voorstuis (ed.) *Moderne spiritualiteit tussen traditie en vernieuwing* [Modern Spirituality between Tradition and Renewal], Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1997, pp. 13-25.

²² Paul Schnabel, *Tussen stigma en charisma: Nieuwe religieuze bewegingen en geestelijke volksgezondheid* [Between Stigma and Charisma: New Religious Movements and Mental Health Care], Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1982.

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- ²³ Lau, o.c.
- ²⁴ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- ²⁵ Stef Aupers, “Werken aan lichaam, emoties en energie in New Age-centra: Een ‘hertovering’?” [Working on Body, Emotions and Energy in New Age Centers: A ‘Reenchantment’?], *Sociologische Gids*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2000, pp. 350-65.
- ²⁶ Luckmann, o.c.
- ²⁷ Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 183.
- ²⁸ Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 513.
- ²⁹ Hanegraaff, o.c., p. 46.
- ³⁰ Heelas, o.c., p. 19.
- ³¹ Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman and Inge van der Tak, “‘Gewoon worden wie je bent’: Over authenticiteit en anti-institutionalisme” [‘Simply Becoming You Are’: On Authenticity and Anti-Institutionalism], *Sociologische Gids*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2003, pp. 203-223.
- ³² Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998.
- ³³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society (Two Volumes)*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 24-26 (originally published in German in 1921).
- ³⁴ Chris Bobel, *The Paradox of Natural Mothering*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002.
- ³⁵ Bobel, o.c., also emphasizes the way the glorification of ‘the feminine’ by ‘natural mothers’ serves to leave the traditional inequality between the sexes intact, reproducing rather than challenging it.
- ³⁶ Ruth Prince and David Riches, *The New Age in Glastonbury: The Construction of Religious Movements*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000, p. 128.
- ³⁷ Anton C. Zijderveld, *The Institutional Imperative: The Interface of Institutions and Networks*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000, p. 13.
- ³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961 (originally published in German in 1930).
- ³⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997. See also: Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, London: Sage, 1996.
- ⁴⁰ Bauman, o.c., p. 181.

⁴¹ See especially Heelas, o.c.

⁴² Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁴³ Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980 (originally published in German in 1957). See also: Roszak, o.c., Zijderveld, o.c., 1970, Zijderveld, o.c., 2000.

⁴⁴ Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, New York: Random House, 1973, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Dick Houtman and Peter Mascini, "Why Do Churches Become Empty, While New Age Grows? Secularization and Religious Change in the Netherlands", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 455-473.

⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978.

⁴⁷ Lau, o.c., p. 8.

⁴⁸ See also J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, London: Routledge, 1997, as cited by Lau, o.c., p. 8.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 (originally published in German in 1922).