



Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

This volume has emerged from a collaboration among:

the NWO Research Council for the Humanities (GW),
the NWO Research Council for Social Sciences (MaGW), and
the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS PAST

Hent de Vries, General Editor

In what sense are the legacies of religion—its powers, words, things, and gestures—disarticulating and reconstructing themselves as the elementary forms of life in the twenty-first century? This sequence of five volumes publishes work drawn from an international research project that seeks to answer this question.

International Advisory Board

Veena Das, Chair
Christoph Auffarth
Peter Clarke
Galit Hasan-Rokem
Michael Lambek
Regina M. Schwartz

Editorial Board

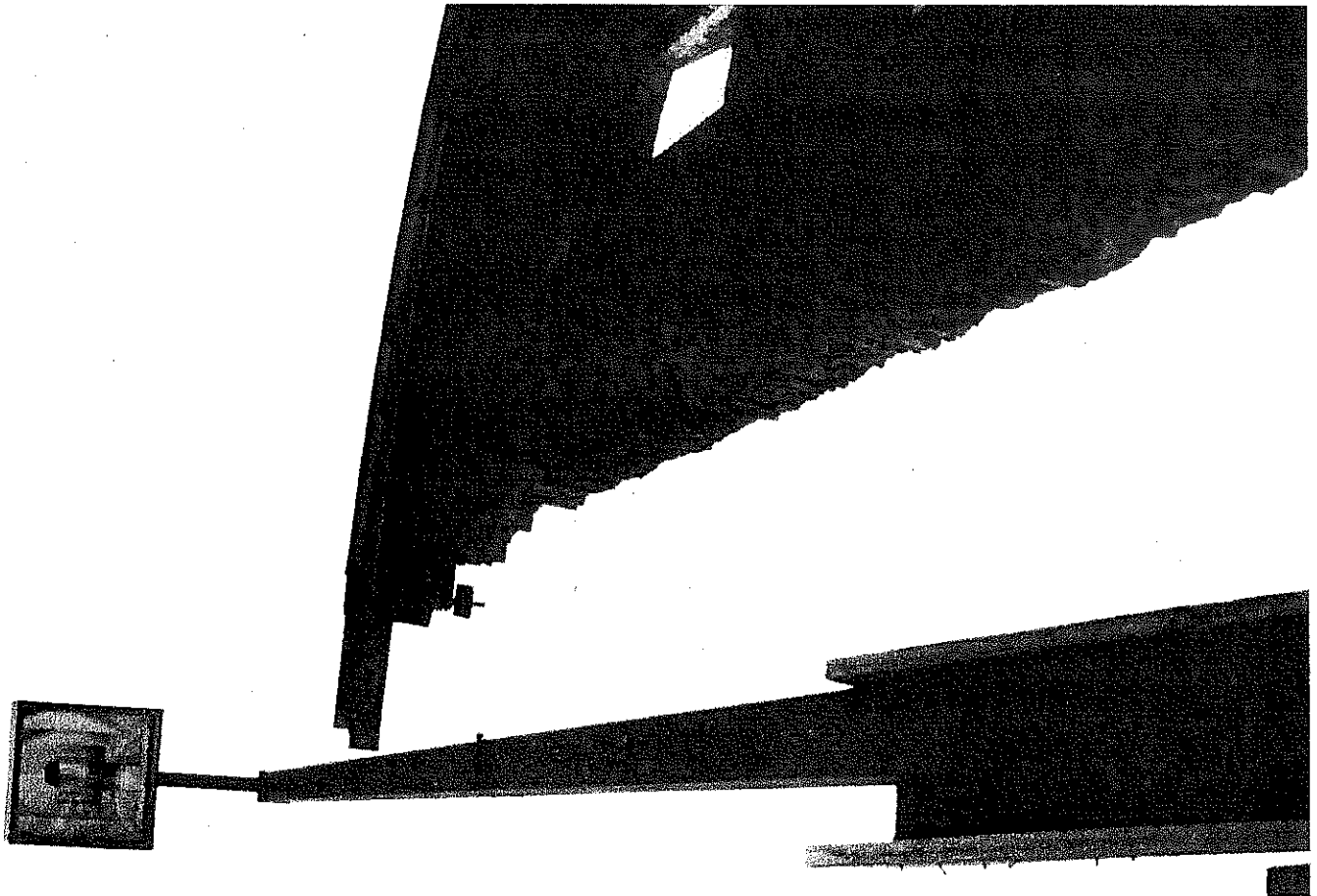
Meerten ter Borg
Jan Bremmer
Martin van Bruinessen
Jan Willem van Henten
Dick Houtman
Anne-Marie Korte
Birgit Meyer

Religion

BEYOND A CONCEPT

Edited by HENT de VRIES

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK 2008



Cybergnosis

Technology, Religion, and the Secular

Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman, and Peter Pels

Recite to yourself some of the traditional attributes of the word "spiritual": mythic, magical, ethereal, incorporeal, intangible, nonmaterial, disembodied, ideal, platonic. Is that not a definition of the electronic-digital? . . . These "spiritual" realms, over centuries imagined, may, perhaps, now be realized!

—Timothy Leary, *Chaos and Cyberculture*¹

Thus spoke Timothy Leary, one of the most prominent spokesmen of the spiritual counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, who converted from "psychedelia" to "cyberdelia" in the 1990s.² Together with computer scientist Eric Gullichsen, Leary considered the emerging realm of cyberspace—first imagined by William Gibson in his 1984 *Neuromancer* and popularized by the personal computer and the Internet—an "experience" of a "quantum universe" of digital information. Since the world is held hostage by "white, menopausal men," the young "cyberpunks," "electro-shamans," and "modern alchemists" have a duty to turn this experience into personal transmutation by means of "the ecstasy of the 'ultimate hack'" or the "satori of harmonious human-computer communication" and thus "start [their] own religion"—which is Evolutionism.³ Leary was but the *eminence grise* of a movement that, especially in the early 1990s, gathered together gurus, hackers, and ravers hoping for a new technological salvation in the quest for "Cyberia."⁴

Is this religion? Is this science or technology? In this essay, we want to argue that these questions may fail to do justice to such phenomena. We suggest that Leary's mode of reasoning epitomizes a discursive phenomenon characterized by epistemological, ontological, and social features that cannot be reduced to religion or technoscience (or faith and reason) and that is embedded in social relationships that distinguish it

from the relations we commonly expect to typify either science or religion. We call this phenomenon "cybergnosis," a new manifestation of the "modern gnosis" that emerged as a discursive practice together with the discursive practices of "religion" and "science" (as we now understand them) in the nineteenth century. Inspired by Wouter Hanegraaff,⁵ we think of modern gnosis as comprising a personal experience of revelation that can be conveyed neither through discourse (which would be "reason") nor through higher authority (which would make it "faith"). This personal revelation demonstrates the existence of a radically other world of salvation and transforms and liberates the knower in, socially speaking, an antinomian and democratic fashion, via knowledge of this other world. Its most well-known manifestations are the movements that, from Theosophy and modern occultism in the nineteenth century to New Age today, dominate the field of "post-traditional religion." Leary's cybergnosis is its most recent manifestation—though one that may already be redefining some of its antinomian characteristics. Since the economic bubble that carried cybergnosis in the 1990s has meanwhile burst, an examination of this "countercultural" refusal of the material world seems timely.

As Leary's hyperbolic language indicates, cybergnosis is characterized by a "fast-forward" recycling of religious and technoscientific repertoires, mostly outside the social circumstances in which scholars traditionally expect to find religion and science. Cybergnosis must, therefore, be understood against the background of the specific discursive and social place of gnosis in modernity. In the following section, we will locate modern gnosis in a world dominated by print capitalism and the institutions it favors. This will raise a number of questions about the theoretical status of "religion" and "science" in modernity, especially since it runs counter to a common view of secularization as the spread of rationality through technology.⁶ We will then, therefore, discuss the relative positions of religion, the secular, and technology in modernity, attempting both to criticize the ideological effect of a "modern constitution" that suspends current societies between religion and science (or the secular),⁷ and to do justice to the empirical reality of some of the secularization processes that—paradoxically—give religion a new future in our present. Finally, then, this will allow us to set out the manifestations of cybergnosis and draw some conclusions about its possible future enchantments.

Modern Gnosis and Print Capitalism

Modern gnosis is a typical product of the nineteenth century, and it arose together with the concepts of "religion" and "science," at least in the way we understand them now. "Religion" and "science"—as well as the related, more epistemological notions of "reason" and "faith"—attained their meaning simultaneously, as the opposite and mutually exclusive pairs of an indivisible modern dichotomy. The notion of science as the study of "nature"—in which the latter concept was understood to refer to the material world of

matter and force regulated by universal laws—"hardened," in Raymond Williams's words, only in the early and mid nineteenth century.⁸ The process by which religion was increasingly understood as referring to morality and the supernatural provided the opposite to this conception of science, and although this is by no means the whole story about religion in modernity, it determined most of our understanding of religion and science until recently.

This crystallization of usage partly arose from a process in which, at least from David Hume's work onward, both religion and science became increasingly understood in a *propositional* sense, as making statements about the world and/or nature, and faith came to be understood as assent to the truth of these religious propositions.⁹ In this comparison, when religion came to be understood as "an alternative account of the natural world," it increasingly came to be seen as a false one in comparison, for example, to Newton's laws.¹⁰ But it was also seen to produce propositions of a moral or metaphysical kind, whose truth could not be ascertained by recourse to nature or the material world.¹¹ Hence the rise of the sciences of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*, the history of religion, and the anthropology, sociology, and psychology of religion), whose main office was to demonstrate, by comparing religions from all over the world, their shared superstitious nature or their formulation of universal morality and original (metaphysical) revelation.¹² By assuming this dichotomous understanding of religion and science, modern scholarship often disregarded or dismissed developments of the religious heritage that had little to do with its understanding in propositional terms—religious nationalism, the increasing emphasis on religious feeling, the rise of "spirituality," to name just a few. Modern gnosis was one of these developments.

Modern gnosis did not arise with a similarly recognizable label, even though terms such as *Theosophy* (since the 1780s)¹³ and *occultism* (starting around 1880)¹⁴ indicate its presence. It descended from Western esotericism and emerged within movements of Romantic thinkers who, starting in the late eighteenth century, also drew inspiration from non-Christian religions (Jewish Kabbalah, the Egyptian cult of Isis, Hinduism, Buddhism) and from more or less marginal sciences such as Mesmerism, physiognomy, ethnology, and phrenology. Including scholars, activists, and artists such as Richard Payne Knight, Count Volney, Sir William Jones, William Blake, Robert Owen, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, these movements culminated, most famously, in the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, founded in 1875.¹⁵

The concept of gnosis refers back, of course, to the creeds and sects that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian calendar and that—combining elements of Christianity with Platonism and Eastern (especially Manichean) religious inspirations—considered the physical world to be a prison and an illusion, created by a false god (the Demiurg) and guarded by evil demons (the Archons), and aspired to release the "inner man" from these bonds, returning him to his native divine realm.¹⁶ Epistemologically, gnostic knowledge does not arise from a reality "out there": it can neither be found by

rationality and systematically scrutinizing the external world, nor revealed by a transcendent God. It instead relies on an "inner source"—on personal experience, imagination, or intuition.¹⁷ Moreover, unlike the propositional knowledge based on faith or reason, gnostic knowledge is of a transformational nature: "being concerned with the secrets of salvation, 'knowledge' is not just theoretical information about things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation."¹⁸ Hence the role of *imaginatio* as "the main instrument for attaining gnosis,"¹⁹ for the imagination is creative and therefore changes one's self and the world around one.

Modernized in the Romantic imagination of the creative artist (who himself embodied a secularization and democratization of divine creative power), by the end of the nineteenth century this transformative power became psychologized and was increasingly understood in terms of mental evolution.²⁰ Thus, modern gnosis counters and aims to overcome the propositional statements of faith and reason with the implicit argument that the scientific conception of evolution boils down, in the end, to the transformative experience of a transcendental "mind" (or will, or consciousness, or intelligence) by one's personal imagination. Gnostic epistemology, in short, presupposes a dualistic ontology by juxtaposing two radically different worlds, one evil and alienating and the other offering salvation from suffering, defining the movement from the former to the latter by means of a transformative experience of a transcendental mind. This is crucial for understanding the holism characteristic of modern occultism and New Age: the primacy of a dualistic ontology for gnosis indicates that their holism is not (yet) realized: it is an ideal, a cure for the disease diagnosed as dualism.

Because gnosis think that the alienation imposed by the world can only be overcome through transformational knowledge based on personal experience, they radically question mainstream institutions, dogmas, and authorities. This emic sociology marginalizes gnosis, who blame the establishment for clinging to power, for its passive inability or active refusal to admit that the world is evil, and for not taking personal experience, as distinct from institutionalized roles and routines, seriously. Nineteenth-century gnostic movements actively opposed the established church and academy, not only because their participants felt alienated from these institutions but also because they were sometimes excluded for reasons of religion or class. Indeed, the modernity of modern gnosis is determined precisely by its antinomian attempt to counter and overcome the propositional knowledge of faith and reason that seemed to dominate established institutions: modern gnosis redefines established churches, universities, laboratories, governments, and big corporations as the Archons of modernity—the guards of the alienating prison that the world has become under their influence.

Antinomian spiritualities typically adhere to a kind of spiritual democracy, which manifested itself during the nineteenth century in feminism, socialism, or anticolonialism but which could also ally itself with virulent forms of racism, especially as the century

drew to its imperialist close.²¹ Modern gnosis tends toward individualism and anarchism in its organization—a tendency continually displayed by the nineteenth-century proliferation of spiritualistic associations and offshoots of the Theosophical Society,²² as well as the fissiary tendencies of twentieth-century human potential movements (such as Scientology, est, Landmark, or Essence), wiccan covens, and coteries of high magicians. Few religious movements seem to offer similar scope for individual authority, with perhaps the exception of the Pentecostal forms of Christendom, which feature strongly in the genealogy of modern gnosis.²³ From the start, then, antinomian spiritualities could not be easily grouped under a single label. Outside the domestic sphere, they were rarely permanently institutionalized and took root instead in temporary voluntary associations, in commercial religious spectacle, in the latter's spillover into entertainment, and in the rising publishing industry (including the world of the mystery novel), thus adopting the forms of "selling God" associated with popular Christianity.²⁴

The antinomian character of modern gnosis does not, however, necessarily justify the claim that "the traditions based on gnosis can be seen as a sort of traditional Western counter-culture."²⁵ The leading Gnostics of antiquity did, indeed, display "pronounced intellectual individualism," and the personalized nature of gnostic knowledge made non-conformism "almost a principle of the gnostic mind."²⁶ But modern gnosis is distinct from its ancient predecessor in that its antinomian attitude is embedded in a "Romantic ethic" that is fed by and feeds into consumerism, that is part of a systematic pattern of conflict and symbiosis with the more puritan ethics of modernity, and that is therefore a significant part of the "core" of modern culture.²⁷ Historians of religion and occultism have generally neglected this paradoxical fusion of antinomian attitudes and mainstream consumerism because they have focused exclusively on religious phenomena per se. Occultism, by contrast, was disseminated by popular, commercial books and thus by the market for books.²⁸

Occultism, therefore, resembles nationalism in being a specifically modern cultural form spread by "print capitalism."²⁹ Benedict Anderson's analysis of ties between nationalism and print culture, however, reproduces modernist ideology by portraying secular nationalism as replacing religion. He fails to consider that print capitalism includes "the simultaneous growth of serialized novels published in periodicals and the enormous expansion in the market for imaginative literature."³⁰ Starting in the mid nineteenth century, simultaneously with and parallel to the quiet commodification of the Bible,³¹ the market for mystery and imaginative literature became a core institution for spreading modern religious repertoires. While the sales of, for example, *The Celestine Prophecy* justify the assumption that a majority of Euroamerican households possesses a copy of this New Age best seller, the common scholarly failure to recognize these sociocultural carriers of modern religion has resulted in the fact that much of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century print capitalism's contribution to the dissemination of modern gnosis still remains to be written. It nevertheless seems clear that one of its central storylines

would focus on the emergence of the mystery novel and its crucial role in the rise of the best-seller industry. The early mystery novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton, who was a Rosicrucian and whose narratives were filled with sorcery and magic from Egypt and India, inspired Madame Blavatsky's invention of the Theosophical Masters.³² Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and various theosophical inspirations found their diverse ways into the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, and H. G. Wells, as well as a host of lesser writers.³³ Best-selling anthropologists—experts in the exotic and religious—also spread the occult word, whether they liked it (like Andrew Lang) or not (like James Frazer).³⁴ The commercial world of mystery was fed by modern gnosticism just as much as occult bestsellers fed back into the development and spread of what came to be known as science fiction, fantasy, adventure, and horror—a dialectic between occultism and print capitalism that, from the New Age adoption of J. R. R. Tolkien and Marion Zimmer Bradley in the 1960s to recent blockbusters like *Harry Potter*, is still increasing in importance. This dialectic indicates how modern gnosticism was embedded in institutions that work through consumer choice. Mail-order magic, commercial courses at centers for self-realization, occult bookshops, television shows by New Age high priestesses like Oprah Winfrey, and (not least) the Internet institutionalize modern gnosticism in public consumerism, public domesticity, and leisure.³⁵

This is why we insist on studying modern gnosticism as a discursive practice rather than a movement or a collection of cults. "New Age" is, indeed, a *lingua franca* more than a movement.³⁶ One cannot become a member of a discourse: using a modern gnostic discourse does not immediately make one a member of a modern gnostic movement. One can adopt the use of gnostic discourse just as one chooses to buy a commodity in the marketplace: it may or may not identify you, it may or may not make you a member of an identifiable group, you may use it only to forget it again at some later moment. A modern gnostic, therefore, is not like a member of a church and cannot be counted as such. Whether she is inspired by a gnostic book in her leisure time, adopts a New Age vocabulary in her Christian ritual, or realizes her true self during a management-training course, there is nothing in all those activities that prevents her from identifying herself by means of church attendance when she is counted by the kind of statistical devices developed to measure the latter. This explains why the membership of adherents to "spiritual" movements in Western societies never seems to rise much above 20 percent, while the sales of certain New Age titles such as *The Celestine Prophecy* indicate that tens of millions of people in Western countries must possess a copy. Modern gnosticism, even if we (partly) need to study it as religion, does not gain its impact through religious institutional membership.

Religion, the Secular, and Communications Technology

Because "religion" or "faith" and "reason" or "science" have, as mutually exclusive categories, dominated Western intellectual traditions, the importance of modern gnosticism for

these traditions has been consistently underestimated. This may be because modern gnosticism is part of the networks and mediations that are obscured by the purified dichotomies of the "modern constitution,"³⁷ or because the dichotomy of religion and science imposes a pure system on otherwise chaotic or dangerous experiences.³⁸ We hesitate, however, to subsume modern gnosticism under terms like "hybrid" or "translation,"³⁹ or to call its experience "inherently untidy."⁴⁰ Syncretisms and hybrids of religion and science do, of course, exist: Auguste Comte's nineteenth-century religion of science and twentieth-century creationism are examples that come to mind. The epistemological, ontological, and sociological features of modern gnosticism and its modern institutionalizations, however, suggest that we should treat it as a phenomenon sui generis, if only to be able to outline the extent to which cybergnosticism differs from its nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessor.

Modern gnosticism is neither purely religious or scientific nor simply a combination of the two. As a phenomenon sui generis, it disturbs classical theories of secularization, which were largely predicated on the replacement of religion by science in the most important social realms. As Leary's example suggests, cybergnosticism confuses the dichotomy between religion and science, allowing religious and technoscientific contents (such as hacking, evolution, satori, and shamanism) to cohabit in the same discursive realm. But if modern gnosticism allows for futures of the religious past outside of religious contexts strictly speaking, we must try to understand such co-existence and intertwining of both secularizing and sacralizing processes in the modern world. It makes little sense to use modern gnosticism to support or debunk the secularization thesis unless this leads to better insight into how it deals with the secular.⁴¹ Conversely, one cannot comprehend cybergnosticism without understanding how gnosticism is related to the sacralization of technology.

To understand modern gnosticism, it is crucial to realize that "the secular . . . is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)."⁴² This means that the hegemony of secularism in modern states should not be allowed to obscure the large variety of trajectories that combine the secular with the religious. We can roughly trace the genealogy of the secular to three intellectual realms: the Renaissance doctrine of humanism, the Enlightenment concept of nature, and the nineteenth-century conception of history.⁴³ And we might say of modern gnosticism that its specific understanding of the secular replaces man-made history with mental evolution by sacralizing the humanistic self. The Romantic humanism of self-realization through the creative imagination, combined with the comparative and largely secular project of finding the true core in every religion, led to a conception of evolution whose end point lay in the realization of human spiritual powers—the power of mind over matter, of "creating one's own reality."⁴⁴ This definition of evolution—and thus of secular "nature"—in mental or spiritual terms determines the extent to which gnostic salvation can be achieved by technological progress and may explain why modern gnosticism appears to have a specific relationship with certain *communications technologies* in particular.

Salvation by technology—the liberation of humanity from toil and want in order to indulge in the development of its “higher nature”—has, of course, long been a feature of European thought. David Noble argues that the “religion of technology” of the Western world finds its roots in the monastic environment of the medieval period and its attempts to approximate Eden via human inventiveness, and that, since then, it has been marked by a recurrence of forms of technological millenarianism.⁴⁵ Freemasonry and Comteism came close to turning the engineer into a latter-day priest,⁴⁶ while especially in North America, the development of a “rhetoric of the technological sublime” in the mid-nineteenth century mass-produced images of a secular, mechanistic Eden, a “machine in the garden.”⁴⁷ Late-nineteenth-century Gnostics (the spiritualists, in particular) seem to have derived a kind of optimistic reassurance about the scientific and secular basis of their mystical visions from electricity, magnetism, the technology of the telegraph and telephone, and photography.⁴⁸

Every communications technology generates its own balance between the real and the imaginary, and thus its own secularity and sacredness. Print, for example, has relied to a large extent on the private imagination of the consumer of books and journals. The telegraph and telephone may have been especially attractive to spiritualists because they work via a bilateral exchange between individual minds (or spirits). Print, telegraph, and telephone all seem, in the imaginative possibilities they support, rather different from the much bleaker and alienated mystical “presence” of the broadcast media that characterized the larger part of the twentieth century. While radio and television give their consumers an impression of connectedness, they also limit consumers’ participation to the passive role of listeners and viewers of messages, eventuating in a sense of individual isolation in either encompassing global and outer space.⁴⁹ This “alien ether” seems less hospitable to some of modern gnosis’s core features—especially its antimonian desire for salvation through personal experience—than either print or the “spiritual telegraph,” since the “other world” of broadcasting quickly turned into a centralized network, “quite literally a net covering and ensnaring its audience.”⁵⁰ Jeffrey Sconce argues that it promoted fantasies of extraterrestrial invasion rather than personal salvation.⁵¹ Yet twentieth-century communications technologies could also help to transform the possibilities of salvation: the camera allowed the cinema audience to have virtual experiences of love, adventure, or violence without risking their bodies, by providing a “magical double” on the screen.⁵² Thus, the screens of film and television can compress the time and space that separate everyday from imaginary lives and promise an immediate experience of transportation into another world—an experience that may have increasingly come to replace the classical humanist and secular ideal of *Bildung* with a desire for more magical and instant forms of salvation.⁵³

We need a much more detailed cultural history of twentieth-century transformations of popular culture to flesh out these relationships between communications technology and modern gnostic movements, including the conceptions of the secularity and salvation

they entail. It is evident, however, that our current form of modern gnosis—“New Age”—arose against the background of the “alien ether” of broadcast media, especially through the UFO-craze of the 1950s.⁵⁴ New Age has, for the most part, been interpreted in terms of a “return” to (human) nature, in which talk of technology was focused on “small is beautiful” and an “appropriate technology” modeled on the human body.⁵⁵ Explicitly or implicitly opposed to the alienating technologies of “materialist” society, the 1960s counterculture and 1970s New Age seemed to interpret technology as “anti-nature,”⁵⁶ and in retrospect one can say that this holds true for a large number of manifestations of modern gnosis since the 1870s—one can think of the “bio-dynamic” agriculture of anthroposophy or Jungian “archetypes” of human psychic nature as particularly illustrative examples. Thus, secular nature—understood in terms of the “appropriate technology” of biological growth—became for many New Agers an important source of salvation.

It is far too simple, however, to conclude from the above that New Age discourse is inhospitable to the rhetoric of the technological sublime or the religion of technology. It is more complicated than that: films like the first *Star Wars* trilogy, for example, which is saturated with New Age discourse, are made up of a “struggle between anti-technological narrative and hyper-technological aesthetic.”⁵⁷ As we shall see, the relationships between New Age, the counterculture, and computer technology, in particular, are much more intimate than the dominant image of New Age as an antitechnological discourse suggests.

This most recent convergence of religion and technology seems to be taking place on the basis of a novel transformation in our conceptions of the secular in terms of “information.” Starting in the 1950s, “cybernetics” redefined the conception of material “nature,” the humanist concept of the person, and our common understanding of the machine (and thus, of history).⁵⁸ Subsequently, the “Information Revolution” seemed to take off in the late 1970s and early 1980s, giving the British Tory government, *Time* magazine, and an assorted crowd of cyber-gurus (among others) opportunity to herald the coming of an “Athens without slaves”—a new version of the religion of technology.⁵⁹ This slow emergence of the “digital sublime”⁶⁰ from post-1945 information theory crystallized only in the 1980s, in a paradigm that radically separated a universal informational code from its material carriers and that came to be dominated by the notion of virtuality.⁶¹ Imagining the humanistic, secular person in terms of information implies continuing yet radicalizing the liberal humanist tradition of reducing persons to their minds.⁶² Imagining nature in terms of information produces “cybernature,” viewed as a universal informational code that constitutes the structure of everything that exists, on which technology draws to become “second nature.”⁶³ By juxtaposing the world of mind and information to that of the material body and the Newtonian billiard-ball universe, this conception of virtuality divides the secular against itself, not least by opposing physical space to cyberspace.⁶⁴ This complicates the dictionary meaning of *secular*—“worldly”—which implies that there is only *one* world from which we take our measure (and, by implication, it also complicates the classical Weberian distinction between “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” concerns

experience, whether through the “consensual hallucination” of cyberspace, the hallucinogens of rave and house culture, or their combination in the “hallucinogenic” of Leary and Gulichsen’s “digital polytheism.”⁷⁷ What some see, however, as the democratic fact that “anyone can now access the datasphere,” others see as a “lure” to “create a globally predictable consumer culture.”⁷⁸

These speculations about cyberspace—just a handful from the cornucopia available—indicate a remarkable elective affinity between digital technology and modern gnosis.⁷⁹ This affinity results to a considerable extent from the fact that our current computer world emerged from countercultural 1970s California—the world of drugs, rock, revolution, and spirituality. We will zoom in on the epistemological, ontological, and social dimensions of modern gnosis to bring out this relationship with digital technology in more detail.

Cyberspace as Transformative Experience

Gnostic epistemology is at the heart of the popular imagination of cyberspace, both among certain computer hackers and in cyberpunk literature, various science fiction movies, and contemporary online computer games. As one hacker (who is also a fan of the Californian rock band the Grateful Dead) said, real hacking is “tapping into the global brain. Information becomes a texture . . . almost an experience. You don’t do it to get knowledge. You just ride the data.”⁸⁰

This experience was made mythical by William Gibson’s cyberpunk science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, which “brought romance” into hacking by celebrating its hero Case’s “bodiless exultation of cyberspace,” thus providing the hacker community with an exemplar that, to many, slowly seemed to turn from technological fantasy to engineering fact.⁸¹ The transformative experience of cyberspace was dramatically materialized by movies such as *The Lawnmower Man*, *eXistenZ*, and *The Matrix* trilogy.⁸² The world of computer games, where players are invited to “follow a personal path,” is also characterized by strong “emotional involvement,”⁸³ a sense of “authenticity,”⁸⁴ and the way it encourages a “kind of spiritual development” through the game experience.⁸⁵ In the words of one game designer: “Why should we settle for avatars, when we can be angels? . . . Spiritual experiences are, in fact, our business.”⁸⁶ As Morpheus tells Neo (in *The Matrix* I), before his rebirth into freedom: “unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself.”⁸⁷

This experience is, indeed, a transformative one: these movies’ protagonists usually develop from ordinary humans into posthuman entities with supernatural powers: they walk through walls, bend the laws of gravity, and affirm their omnipotence by saying such things as “I am god here!” (*The Lawnmower Man*). But other cybergnostics and virtual reality specialists also stress that full-fledged “sensory immersion” in virtual reality offers limitless subjective experiences and possibilities of reenchantment.⁸⁸ In consequence, the

in the sociology and anthropology of religion). Once awe—reserved, in the Enlightenment, for sublime nature,⁶⁵ then transferred to technology by nineteenth-century Americans,⁶⁶ and regarded as the basic attitude of religion and magic by early-twentieth-century anthropologists⁶⁷—can be attached to nature-as-information, a new fusion of religion and technology in cybergnosis becomes possible.

Cybergnosis

Timothy Leary is just one example of the ways in which, since the 1980s, the emergence of cyberspace has evoked countless religious, mystical, and metaphysical speculations—speculations that have, as we have shown, a long and checkered heritage. Spiritual gurus, cyberpunk writers, virtual reality specialists, and academics began to describe cyberspace and virtual reality in vocabularies derived from religious and metaphysical traditions. Cyberspace became, for instance, “Platonism as a working product,”⁶⁸ a “new Jerusalem,”⁶⁹ “paradise,”⁷⁰ or a “technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven.”⁷¹ Others have said it stimulated “another, unheard-of dimension of spirituality.”⁷² Intellectuals such as Leary were joined by others—psychedelic ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, chaos mathematician Ralph Abraham, mathematician and science fiction writer Rudy Rucker, to name a few—who defined the realization of this spiritual realm as a phase of evolution in which digital technology would allow humans finally to become conscious of the “morphogenetic fields,” made up of information patterns, that make up the “global brain”—a later incarnation of J. E. Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, which was prominent in New Age circles.⁷³ By digitalizing such New Age views, cybergnostics drew inspiration from the “New Age Science” of people like Rupert Sheldrake (“morphogenetic fields”), David Bohm (the “implicate order” of quantum physics), and Lovelock, on the one hand, and the heritage of High Magic and neo-paganism (on a “technoshamanistic” and cybernetic “astral plane”), on the other.

This awe for Cyberia and belief in its promise of liberation have strong gnostic features. The transformative experience that marks off modern gnosis from faith and reason resides in the common assumption that surfing the datastream (i.e., hacking, but also simply communicating on the Internet without any expertise whatsoever), taking psychedelic drugs, dancing to computer-generated house music, or simply using one’s digital imagination gives access to, even creates, the hidden reality of the world—the “implicate order” that is the world of information itself and that forms the perennial truth hiding behind every surface appearance of religious or scientific convention.⁷⁴ This cybernetic world of salvation is inherently free and unfettered and realizes humanity’s “true” evolutionary destination, as against the “giants of flesh and steel”⁷⁵ or the “white, menopausal, mendacious men now ruling the planet earth”⁷⁶ that identify today’s Archons—still identified with the powers of materiality and convention that inhibit the unfolding of humanity’s potential. All this is available to anybody who is willing to seek out that transformative

home of the mind" is probably the most central problematic in the academic literature on cyberspace.⁹⁹ But where scholars often question the possibility of attaining a computer-driven "escape velocity" to leave the body behind,¹⁰⁰ cybergnostics celebrate the possibility of the "liberation from human nature" achieved by uploading one's mind into a machine,¹⁰¹ of a happy determination "by individual whim, style and seasonal choice" of whether one will become a "human-as-program" or a "human-in-program,"¹⁰² and often display a profound contempt for the archaism of "wetware"—that is, organic substance. Such contempt of the body, shared by many more than we can discuss here, reached its ultimate realization when the members of the Heaven's Gate sect collectively killed themselves to "upload" their consciousness from their bodies to the extraterrestrial vehicle of a comet in 1997.

Such fantasies of a man-made, immanent "other world" are, in fact, more than fantasies. Margaret Wertheim discusses the different conceptions of space as described by modern physicists and rejects the applicability of any of those to the realm of cyberspace. She argues: "The electronic gates of the silicon chip have become, in a sense, a metaphysical gateway, for our moderns transport us out of the reach of physicists' equations into an entirely 'other' realm. When I 'go' into cyberspace I leave behind both Newton's and Einstein's laws. Here, neither mechanistic, or relativistic, or quantum laws apply."¹⁰³ Wertheim makes a strong case for considering cyberspace as an alternative world of human construction. We do not need to determine whose laws apply there to see that all speculations on the ontology of cyberspace that identify it as a man-made yet other-worldly realm effectively pluralize our conception of the secular. This destroys the possibility of an unambiguous determination of what is "this world" and what is an "other world": for some, the engineering of cyberspace creates another world that is just as immanent, and just as natural, as the "this world" that used to be defined by the secular, Enlightenment or Newtonian concept of "nature." (Others, of course, would argue that these beliefs deny the material, political, and economic conditions of their production.¹⁰⁴) At the very least, this means that the dualistic ontology inherited by the cybergnostics is powerfully supported by the realization that there may be another immanent world, realized by technology and irreducible to the "General-Motors concepts" of the bodies, masses, and forces of the Newtonian universe.¹⁰⁵

Cyberspace is, indeed, easily seen as a realm beyond linear time and geographical space.¹⁰⁶ Gibson already noted that "there is no there there." When surfing on the Internet, people's locations can no longer be fixed in physical space, while, on a more mundane level, geographical barriers become irrelevant. In a sense, then, the Internet does not simply realize a "global village,"¹⁰⁷ a metaphor still based on a geographical notion, but is in fact a place *beyond* geographical places. The Internet also transforms linear time, to produce a "sense of immediacy that conquers time barriers."¹⁰⁸ Hypertexts, linkages, and the recycling of various historical genres on the Internet also disrupt the sense of linear time: "timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning,

"real" becomes a personal, subjective experience—if one that gives access to a higher truth that remains hidden to the unenlightened body. In the words of Morpheus (*The Matrix 1*): "What is real? If you're talking about what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain."⁹⁸ In fact, the illuminating experience may not even need the mediation of a computer screen or a virtual reality headset: the DJs and VJs of a rave or house party can turn the experience on the dance floor into a collective manifestation of a "fractal" that transports one into the implicate world of the morphogenetic fields of information.⁹⁹

This transformative experience—which Leary referred to as "the ecstasy of the ultimate hack," manifesting a "satori of harmonious human-computer communication"⁹⁹—is often described in terms of an instant evolution, a moment either that one experiences while surfing the datastream or that may result in a collective mutation—usually put, by the followers of Terence McKenna, as occurring in the year 2012—that will release humanity from its current, materialist paradigm and make it "slip out of history" into a cybernetic Eden of fully realized human potential.⁹² Thus, the slow organic evolution of the body is being replaced by a notion of teleological mental evolution,⁹³ in which the end of human development is being realized "cybernaturally" in a man-made, technological time-compression of biological evolution that can now be cultivated as an "inalienable right."⁹⁴

While companies such as Amazon.com, World Online, World Com, and America Online have, since the end of the 1990s, increasingly colonized and commodified the Internet and cyberspace, this process does not seem to have eroded cyberspace's potential for inducing spiritual experiences. To the contrary: commercial providers of chatgroups, virtual communities and online games have further encouraged it. Writing on the "experience economy," Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore argue that "cyberspace is a great place for . . . [escapist] experiences" and maintain—very much like Morpheus in *The Matrix*—that "there is no such thing as an artificial experience. Every experience created within the individual is real, whether the stimuli be natural or simulated."⁹⁵

"The new home of the mind"

The emergence of cyberspace has also reinforced and reinvented modern gnosis's dualistic ontology.⁹⁶ William Gibson's hero, "console cowboy" Case, craves the experience of cyberspace after his employers punish him for theft of information by feeding him a Russian neurotoxin that bars him from accessing the heavenly space of information: "For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh."⁹⁷ As Heim notes, "Gibson evokes the Gnostic-Platonic-Manichean contempt for earthy, earthly existence."⁹⁸ This dualistic conception of the body as "meat" and cyberspace as the "new

no end, no sequence."¹⁰⁹ It becomes "timeless time." In other words, the technology of cyberspace provides an enormously receptive context and breeding ground for the dualistic ontology of modern gnosis.

Social Context: From Counterculture to Experience Economy

The countercultural sociology of modern gnosis regained momentum in the 1990s with the engineering of the World Wide Web. In 1996, John Perry Barlow, former writer for the Grateful Dead, wrote his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* against the "giants of flesh and steel" of the "industrial world," who should not be allowed to bar people's right to access the "new home of the mind."¹¹⁰ Timothy Leary's cyberdelia resulted in a similar manifesto, declaring the sovereignty of the new young cyberspecies against "all governments controlled by the menopausal" and their "organic duty" to "mutate, to drop out, to initiate a new social structure"¹¹¹—thus conflating natural process and human culture. Together with others who had their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, Leary promoted a "digital remastering of the counterculture."¹¹² In many ways, the 1990s seemed, in Mark Dery's succinct cyberphrase, "The Counterculture 2.0."¹¹³

Theodore Roszak has pointed out the real continuities between the militant counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and the cyberdelia of the 1990s.¹¹⁴ While his own earlier assessment of the counterculture emphasized its rebellion against a traditional morality based on technocratic thinking and its desire to go "back to nature,"¹¹⁵ the seeds of a countercultural and gnostic celebration of technology, leading to a movement "from safari to Silicon Valley," were already sown in the 1970s: "it is within this same population of rebels and drop-outs [of the 1970s counterculture] that we can find the inventors and entrepreneurs who helped lay the foundations of the California computer industry."¹¹⁶

A technophile counterculture in the form of a "hacker ethic" had, in fact, already formed among the hackers working with the TX-O computer at the MIT artificial intelligence lab in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its opposition to the "Priesthood" guarding the giant computers of IBM and other large corporations encouraged hackers to acknowledge that "all information should be free," that one should "mistrust authority" and promote decentralization," and that when hacking would be trusted on its merits and allowed to unfold its own creative art, computers would "change your life for the better."¹¹⁷ At the Stanford artificial intelligence lab, the hacker ethic found a new home (in rooms named after J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth locations) and quickly spread into other countercultural movements, such as the People's Computer Company—which, just like Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib* (1974), wanted to bring computing to everybody—and the hardware hackers of the Homebrew Computer Club (founded in 1975), the most important breeding ground of the personal computer. Steve Jobs (Apple) and Bill Gates (Microsoft) were acid-heads and "part-time Buddhists" at the time, while the hacker ethic is also well received in the pages of the countercultural *Whole Earth Catalog* and among

the psychedelic fan club of the Grateful Dead—which counted among its members many of those who were to set up one of the first bulletin boards (the Whole Earth Electronic Link—WELL) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Here, forms of modern gnosis and digital technology first converged. One of the first personal computers, the IMSAI, was the product of a group of adherents of Werner Erhard's human potential training.¹¹⁸ PCs were often described and experienced as "magical"—as places where, in the words of Les Solomon, "every man can be a god."¹¹⁹ The hacker's expectation that the world would be better if everyone had access to a computer was in itself a fantasy of personal transformation by technology.

It would be wrong, however, to describe this earlier period purely in terms of gnosis: the full blossoming of cybergnosis only became apparent after much of the countercultural movement's political thrust had dissipated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, leading to the "culture of narcissism" of the New Age and to a new trust in technological salvation in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. Popular magazines, such as *Mondo 2000*, *Wired Magazine*, and others, made the countercultural message available for a mass and mainstream audience. *Wired Magazine*, Jedediah Purdy argues, introduced a "new brand of libertarianism" and "the Wired temperament is contemptuous of all limits—of law, community, morality, place, even embodiment. The magazine's ideal is the unbounded individual."¹²⁰ *Mondo 2000* was even more radical in its libertarianism, stating, "We're talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. . . . High-jacking technology for personal empowerment, fun and games. Flexing those synapses! . . . Becoming the Bionic Angel."¹²¹ The booming industry of computer games epitomized the commercialization of these countercultural ideals and their translation to huge numbers of European and American households.

This incorporation of a countercultural or animonian temperament into mainstream technophilia is perhaps best represented by Jody Radzik, one of the foremost gatekeepers of Cyberia in the San Francisco house and rave scene in the early 1990s. For Radzik, cyberspace was the vehicle for disseminating the awakening of the planet's awareness into "a direct experience of the infinite" and an incorporation into the fractal pattern of metaconsciousness by using marketing "as the perfect transformational tool": "The kids now are not going to turn on, tune in, drop out. They're going to drop in."¹²² The 1990s reinvention of the counterculture of the 1960s—while retaining, in certain sectors, the political critiques and "hacktivism" of the latter—became largely geared to a modern gnostic rather than political animonian attitude, one that is fully in line with the culture industry's production of an "experience economy" for an audience of mass consumers, and with the commercialization of the Internet.¹²³ Especially through the massive investment of both producers and consumers of computer games in the increasingly sophisticated simulations made possible by the computer, a kind of gnostic amnesia of the physical and mechanic supports of cyberspace has been made possible, supported by the inventions of the graphics user interface and the Internet. Thus, the cultural connection

between a Romantic antinomian ethic and the culture of consumerism, which emerged at least from the late nineteenth century onward, is further reinforced by the commercialization of computer technology.

Conclusion

We do not pretend to be able to predict the future of cybergnosis, nor can we say whether it will overwhelm, or give way to, other forms of cyberspace salvation, of connecting the computer to current utopian thinking, or (most likely) finding salvation in another new technological development. Often cybergnosis seems too disembodied and playful to support a viable "posthuman" future.¹²⁴ For us, the interest of this phenomenon lies in a different direction, related to a broader understanding of transformations of religion in modern society. Cybergnosis is an indicator of the current "experience economy," yet it seems to speed up these experiences to such an extent that one wonders whether they still deserve the term. Cybergnosis popularizes a countercultural attitude, but in the sense in which advertising, too, admonishes all people to "be their true selves" and oppose consumption by buying certain widely available commodities.¹²⁵ Cybergnosis does seem to make a difference to our imagination of the religious and the secular—by pluralizing the secular and highlighting the salvation made possible by the "this-worldly other world" of information—yet the cybergnostic choice of the world of information alone, as against the world of "meat," seems to reduce these possibilities at the same time.

We find it more important to emphasize that computer technology has helped make modern gnosis progressively more at home in modern society. Incorporated into the mainstream from society's countercultural fringe, having lost much of its critical political posture in the process, it has moved to the very center of contemporary culture and society.¹²⁶ "Contrary to predictions that New Age would go mainstream, now it's as if the mainstream is going New Age."¹²⁷ This phenomenon—and this would go for current Western societies in general—cannot be studied in terms of a kind of "science-plus-religion" sum, since it subsumes the this dichotomy in a new discursive formation. This gnostic formation has a tremendous capacity for recycling the "pasts" of faith and reason—in fact, with the coming of computer technology, this recycling has become even more rapid, eclectic, and perennialist, leaving no holy or evil stone unturned.

Put crudely, whereas classical social science expected the world of religion to be increasingly subverted and marginalized by science and technology, we suggest that religion has had to make way in many sectors of Northern European and North American societies for a modern gnosis that is not just privatized, but made massively present in the consumerist public sphere. This contemporary form of enchantment receives a tremendous boost from science and technology, now especially in the guise of the engineering of the immanent, "this-worldly other world" of cyberspace. While this may seem to testify

to a process of modernization, it is not a modernization that can be grasped by opposing science, reason, the secular, and technology to religion and/or faith. Instead, the phenomenon of cybergnosis shows that both the secular and technology have to be dislocated from this binary opposition and relocated in a third term in order to understand how and why modern people use and need *both* the sacred and the secular in order to portray themselves as modern people.