Pure Religion and Real Sacrality

The Cultural Logic of an Anti-Institutional Religious Tradition

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Introduction

Anyone raised with the notion that religion is about church-based belief in a God who has created the world cannot help but feel puzzled by the responses present-day students of religion in Western Europe jot down to fairly elementary questions. 'Are you religious?'; 'No, I am not. I am quite interested in spirituality, though.' Or: 'No, I am not religious; I want to follow my personal spiritual path'. Or even: 'No, I am not religious, *because* I want to follow my personal spiritual path'. Answers like these indicate that the traditional language of 'religion' has increasingly given way to a new language of 'spirituality', with many Western Europeans today disliking the former and embracing the latter. In the process, the meaning of the notion of spirituality has changed substantially. It is nowadays no longer primarily understood as the opposite of 'materiality' (as in 'spirit and matter'), but rather as the opposite of 'religion' (Huss, 2014). Another example of a nowadays often-heard and profoundly new response pattern: 'Do you believe in God?'; 'No, I do not, but I do believe that there is something'. Many Western Europeans do no longer understand God as a person and creator who needs to be believed in and obeyed, but rather as a vaguely defined 'something' that needs to be experienced in everyday life.

Changes like these suggest that what we have been witnessing in the past half century is more complex than what secularization theory has always predicted. For even though it is

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clear that the customary institutional, doctrinal and ritual aspects of religion have lost much of their former appeal and legitimacy, the unfolding of modernity has not simply undermined and marginalised religion. It has also profoundly transformed it and has done so in ways that we need to begin to unpack and theorise to arrive at an understanding of religion and modernity that goes beyond the secularization narrative. This is what I hope to contribute to in what follows, starting off from the observation that a satisfactory sociological understanding of the spiritual turn in Western Europe is lacking until the present day. I start with a discussion of how even though classical and modern sociologists of religion were already acutely aware of spiritual longings, leanings and initiatives, they failed to bring a satisfactory sociological account of the spiritual turn in modernity to fruition. Nonetheless, their work provides vital theoretical building blocks for such an endeavour and it is by elaborating on the latter that I hope to contribute to a sociological account of the spiritual turn in what follows.

Classical Sociology and the Study of Spirituality: An Unhappy Marriage

All things considered, the absence until the present day of a sociologically mature account of the spiritual turn is odd and remarkable. For even the two classical founders of the sociology of religion, Max Weber (1854-1920) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), were already acutely aware of widespread spiritual longings and leanings in their own days. Nonetheless, informed by their own theories about the bleak fate of religion as the West had known it for centuries, neither of them took these phenomena very seriously. When after World War II the secularization paradigm became the received wisdom in sociology of religion this similarly posed a theoretical obstacle to the development of a convincing sociological-theoretical understanding of the spiritual turn in the West. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, classical sociology of religion as well as work on secularization provide powerful insights that enable the construction of such an understanding.

Max Weber, Spirituality, and the Disenchantment of the World
Max Weber's theory of the 'disenchantment of the world, i.e, the gradual disappearance of a metaphysical 'Hinterwelt' which provides the world with meaning, already announces what would come to be known as 'secularization theory' after World War II. The process of disenchantment took off long before the rise of modernity, Weber maintained, with the emergence of Judaic anti-magical monotheism in ancient times. Only much later it was

pushed a decisive step further forward when in the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformation unleashed its attack on what it understood as Catholic magic and superstition. The further expulsion of supernatural forces and powers from the world has been firmly supported since by the modern scientific imperative of pursuing truth and nothing but truth, in effect contributing to the emergence of a world that is devoid of meaning – a world in which 'processes (…) simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything', as Weber (1978 [1921]: 506) characterised a disenchanted world.

Acknowledging that, much to his horror, there are 'big children in the natural sciences' (1948 [1919]: 142) who believe they can bestow 'objective' meaning upon the world, Weber firmly rejected such a position himself as basically 'unscientific': 'Only a prophet or a savior can give the answers' (1948 [1919]: 153). According to his understanding modern science cannot endow life with meaning, because it cannot provide answers to the ultimately most significant questions faced by humankind – questions about the meaning of life, about the purpose of the world, and about the life plans to pursue or refrain from: '(…) it (cannot) be proved that the existence of the world which these sciences describe is worthwhile, that it has any "meaning", or that it makes sense to live in such a world' (1948 [1919]: 144). Driven by its anti-metaphysical and strictly logical and empirical orientation, science cannot decide between the competing ends and value claims espoused by religions and political ideologies either. As an essentially 'irreligious power' (1948 [1919]: 142), it can only point out suitable means for the pursuit of *given* ends – ends that are however basically arbitrary and meaningless from an intellectual point of view: '(T)he disenchantment of the world (…) means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation', so that 'one need no longer have recourse to magical means to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculation perform the service' (1948 [1919]: 139).

It needs to be pointed out, however, how deeply ambiguous and counterfactual Weber's analysis of the role of science in furthering the disenchantment of the world actually is. His *Wissenschaftslehre* (Weber, 1949) on the one hand legislates that science cannot ground meaning and can as such only stimulate the further disenchantment of the world. On the other hand, it critiques those who in spite of this tended to conflate science with the attribution of meaning – not only the 'big children in the natural sciences' mentioned above, but also the so-called *Kathedersozialisten*, professors in the social sciences who mixed up scientific analysis with socialist politics (or worse: masqueraded the latter as the former). The

modern science that according to Weber robs the world of meaning is hence not necessarily science as it actually exists, but rather science as it should be in his own understanding. In effect, Weber's analysis of the relationship between science and disenchantment rests on a debatable distinction between 'real science', i.e. the relentlessly disenchanting type of science that he advocates himself, and 'fake science' that masquerades morally informed and one-sided understandings of the world as 'really true' and 'scientifically informed'. For someone who forcefully encouraged his colleagues to stick to the former notion of science, i.e. science as limiting itself to an analysis of how the world actually 'is' and refraining from moralizing about how it 'ought to be', this is quite a remarkable distinction.

Weber's critique of conflating intellectual analysis and moral discourse becomes particularly awkward in his treatment of the spiritual leanings in his own days and in his own intellectual circles. Then and there, many a philosopher, psychologist, or artist took refuge in utopian experiments, alternative religions, and esoteric movements, such as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy or the philosophy of life of Henri Bergson and the like. Weber was well aware of these spiritual attempts to infuse the modern world with new meaning and in the Spring of 1913 and 1914 even paid visits to Monte Verita in Ascona in the Swiss Alps, where his contemporaries indulged in alternative lifestyles (sexual freedom, vegetarianism, pacifism, and the like), intimately tied up with alternative forms of spirituality. He was thus acutely aware of attempts by his contemporaries to re-enchant the world that he himself held to be progressively disenchanted. Yet, Weber made no attempt to theorise these spiritual tendencies in conjunction with his theory about the disenchantment and rationalization of the world, let alone consider the possibility that they demanded the latter's refinement or elaboration. He instead adopted a moralist-rationalist stance by dismissing the spiritual tendencies that he was so well aware of as 'weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times' (Weber, 1948 [1919]: 149). Or even more bluntly: 'this is plain humbug or self-deception', adding in an overly masculine register that one should 'bear the fate of the times like a man' (1948 [1919]: 154-155). Again, this is quite a remarkable response for someone who otherwise urged his fellow scientists to stick to the facts and to abstain from moralizing.

Emile Durkheim, Spirituality, and the Religion of Humanity
Something similar goes for Durkheim. In his first book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964 [1893]), he critiqued Auguste Comte's notion that the social solidarity of modern industrial societies can be based on religion and shared moral norms and values (Gouldner, 1958). Rather than on these cultural similarities between people ('mechanical solidarity'), he

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argued, solidarity could in these societies only be based on differences pertaining to occupational activities, embodied by the division of labor ('organic solidarity'). Acknowledging that in modern society 'the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion', he underscored in this first book that 'it is not to society that [the cult of individualism] attaches us; it is to ourselves' so that 'it does not constitute a true social link' (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]: 172). At the beginning of his career, then, Durkheim rejected the notion that religion could constitute a source of solidarity in modern society and construed individualism as inevitably standing in the way of the social conceived as a shared moral order. Consistent with this, his references to the 'cult of individualism' in this early book tended to be 'decidedly negative' (Chandler, 1984: 571).

In his later work, Durkheim drastically revised these early insights into the relationships between religion, individualism and modernity (Seigel, 1987). In his essay 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' (Durkheim, 1973 [1898]), written as an intervention in the Dreyfus affair that shook France at the end of the nineteenth century, he responded to the anti-Dreyfusards' charge that liberal intellectualism's individualism paved the way for anarchy, disorder, and anti-social egoism. Quite to the contrary, Durkheim now argued: in modern society, the individualism that can be found in Kant's Enlightenment rationalism and Rousseau's Romanticism alike constitutes 'the only system of beliefs which can ensure (…) moral unity (…)' (1973 [1898]: 50). This type of 'moral individualism', he now maintained, needs to be sharply distinguished from 'utilitarian individualism', because unlike the latter it does not legitimate the pursuit of self-interest. It does not value that which separates people from one another, but rather sacralises their shared humanity, so that the resulting 'religion of humanity' entails a 'religion in which man is at once the worshipper and the god' (1973 [1898]: 46). In stark contrast to his analysis in *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim here thus construes individualism as providing social solidarity and cohesion to modern societies – as the religion of modernity *par excellence*.

Indeed, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, his latest book, Durkheim came to conceive of religion as a major source of solidarity and cohesion in any type of society, 'primitive' and modern alike. He here defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community (…) all those who adhere to them' (1995 [1912]: 44). He calls this community a 'church' to convey 'the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing' (1995 [1912]: 44). Of particular interest for the viability of a sociology of spirituality is his brief discussion of speculations among his contemporaries

'whether a day will not come when the only cult will be the one that each person freely practices in his innermost self' (1995 [1912]: 43) is. On the one hand, much like Weber, Durkheim here thus acknowledges the presence of aspirations and initiatives toward such a radically individualised type of religion 'that would consist entirely of interior and subjective states and be freely constructed by each of us' (1995 [1912]: 44). On the other hand, again much like Weber, his theory of religion as pre-eminently social informs his claim that such a type of religion is impossible: 'if that radical individualism has remained in the state of unrealized theoretical aspiration up to now, that is because it is unrealizable in fact' (1995 [1912]: 427).

Like Weber, in short, Durkheim was aware of the spiritual longings and initiatives in his own days, yet informed by his own theoretical logic he also dismissed the latter as basically impossible. What prevented him from theorizing them was first of all his notion of both religion and the sacred as inevitably collectively shared cultural phenomena. Whereas from such a perspective a strictly personal and radically individualised type of religion is indeed impossible, it however also raises the question of whether longings after the latter are not in fact rooted in a collectively embraced notion of the sacred. If, as Durkheim argues, basically anything can be sacred – not only God, but also 'a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything' (1995 [1912]: 35) –, then surely the same goes for a self that is seen as preceding and transcending the social realm. The argument that the resulting self-based spirituality cannot 'really' exist is hence beside the point, because for Christian religion to exist God does not need to 'really' exist either. From a sociological point of view it is simply irrelevant whether or not God, or indeed any other conception of the sacred, does or does not 'really' exist. This is because sociology of religion is not about the study of the sacred, but about the study of how people collectively imagine it and ritually worship it, so that all that is needed for religion to exist is a collective belief in a particular conception of the sacred.

There is hence no reason to treat the notion of a spiritual self that precedes and transcends the social and that as such underlies a cult 'that each person freely practices in his innermost self' (1995 [1912]: 43) differently from any other collectively embraced conception of the sacred. Yet, it is clear that such a spiritual notion of the self is not identical to the notion of the individual as it is sacralised in the moral individualism that is central to Durkheim's religion of humanity. The latter individual is endowed with inalienable rights because 'the dignity of the individual (comes) (…) from the higher source (…) (of partaking) in humanity' (Durkheim 1973 [1898]: 48), so that its rights are even 'above those of the state' (1973

[1898]: 46). This 'moral' type of individualism thus foregrounds shared moral obligations towards the individual and in effect legislates how it deserves to be treated by others. It as such needs to be distinguished from the 'expressive' type of individualism that underlies spiritual longings and initiatives. The latter type of individualism has been central to Romanticism ever since it emerged alongside and in response to the disenchanted and rationalised modern order (Taylor, 1991; Lindholm, 2013). Just like all other religious traditions, this Romanticism introduces its own distinction between the sacred and the profane, more specifically between respectively a 'real', 'spiritual', and 'authentic' self on the one hand and the modern, disenchanted and rationalised modern order that aims to fence it in on the other.

Modern Sociology of Religion and the Study of Spirituality: Yet another Unhappy Marriage

The Romanticist and expressivist notion of a spiritual self played a major role in the so-called 'counter culture' of the 1960s in the West. This counter culture boasted spiritual longings and desires in reaction and opposition to an overly disenchanted and rationalised society that was experienced as alienating, 'abstract' (Zijderveld, 1970) and inducing 'metaphysical homelessness' (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1973). It was in this cultural climate that New Age spirituality took shape to gradually become more widespread and more mainstream, especially from the 1980s onwards (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Houtman & Mascini, 2002). New Age spirituality can as such be theorised as a shared cultural discourse about the sacred and the profane (Durkheim) that flourishes in response to the disenchantment and rationalization of the modern world (Weber). Modern sociology also failed to theorise it as such, however, deeply influenced as it was by the bleak futures Weber and Durkheim had painted for religion as the West had known it for ages. Central to Weber's theory of the progressive disenchantment of the world was after all the notion that belief in the supernatural was basically doomed, whereas Durkheim argued that even though religion as such could not disappear, it could only survive in a massively secular form in which belief in the supernatural was replaced by a sacralization of the individual as a moral category. These notions deeply influenced post-Second World War sociology of religion, where secularization theory became the virtually uncontested new orthodoxy.

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Secularization Theory: Social Differentiation, Religious Decline, and Religious Privatization
The secularization theory that became dominant in postwar sociology is not simply one single and unitary thing, but not a hopelessly unstructured mess either (Tschannen, 1991). Its virtually uncontested theoretical backbone is a thesis of differentiation that subsequently informs two more specific sub-theses, i.e. these of religious decline and religious privatization (Casanova, 1994).

According to the differentiation thesis a separation between institutional realms defines the modern constitution. Unlike in societies that preceded modernity, it maintains, social functions are dealt with by specialised institutions that are no longer infused with religion. Medieval art, for instance, was still basically religious art; during the Renaissance science and religion were still inextricably intertwined; and the separation of state and church in Western countries likewise constitutes the outcome of a long and painful historical process (e.g. Wilson, 1982). With the institutional separation of the economy, the family, the state, science, art, etcetera, these realms all came to be governed by their own institutional logics (compare Bell, 1976). Examples are the principles of caring and nurturing in the family, of maximization of utility in the economy, of pursuing truth in science, and beauty in art. Due to this process of differentiation, religion lost its ability to morally overarch all of society as a sort of 'sacred canopy', to use Peter Berger's (1967) famous metaphor. Instead, religion became just one separate sphere besides other institutional realms. In effect, its impact on politics, the economy, art, science, etcetera, has on the one hand declined, whereas on the other hand tensions and potentialities for conflict have been created. Examples are conflicts between religion and art (think of blasphemy), between religion and science (think of stem cell research), and between religion and politics (think of legislation pertaining to gay marriage, abortion, or euthanasia). Due to social differentiation, in short, religion becomes a realm in and off itself rather than permeating all of society.

The sub-theses of religious decline and religious privatization subsequently address two different consequences for religion of such a differentiated modern order. According to the former, more and more people become less and less religious, due to the disappearance of the religious monopoly and the subsequent emergence of a range of co-existing and competing truth claims. Berger (1967) argues that this undermines the plausibility of all of the latter, resulting in a decline of religion. According to the privatization thesis, the second sub-thesis informed by the differentiation thesis, religion does however not necessarily decline, but rather loses its collectively shared status and recedes from the public realm to become a matter of strictly personal choice. Writing about the post-Christian cults, the late Bryan

Wilson (1976: 96) has for instance argued that the latter 'represent, in the American phrase, "the religion of your choice," the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns'.

In his book *The Invisible Religion* (1967), one of the most influential books in postwar sociology of religion, Thomas Luckmann followed a tack that was largely similar, yet nonetheless slightly different. While agreeing that under conditions of differentiation religion tends to privatise, he did not construe this as secularization, but rather as a massive process of religious change. The major shortcoming of post-classical sociology of religion, he maintained, was its one-sided focus on churches, church attendance, and allegiance to official church doctrines. In Luckmann's perspective, the erosion of the Christian religious monopoly does not simply mean the end of religion, but rather the emergence of a 'market of ultimate significance', with religious consumers shopping for strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences. In a later publication (Luckmann, 1996: 75), he pointed out that New Age spirituality exemplifies such privatised syncretism and *bricolage*, i.e. the free and unrestrained combination by spiritual seekers of elements that are taken from a wide range of different religious and/or psycho-spiritual traditions. From a theoretical point of view, this New Age spirituality does indeed constitute a critical case for the study of the spiritual turn in the West, precisely because it constitutes the most extreme break from church-based Christian religion. This is why I focus my attention on it in what follows, only to return afterwards to the question of whether and how a similar spiritual turn has transformed Christian religion in the West.

Religion beyond Tradition: 'Pure' Religion and 'Real' Sacrality
As much as Luckmann's book is to be praised for its much-needed widening of the scope of modern sociology of religion beyond the study of firmly institutionalised Christian religion, it also needs to be critiqued for forcing religion onto the Procrustean bed of a distinction between the institutional and the private realm. Indeed, his characterisation of modern religion as privatised, exemplified by New Age spirituality, has almost attained the status of a sociological truism. New Age spirituality has again and again been portrayed as strikingly different from Christian religion, as strictly personal, ephemeral, uncommitted, shallow and superficial, as a radically privatised 'do-it-yourself-religion' (Baerveldt, 1996), 'pick-and-mix religion' (Hamilton, 2000), as 'religious consumption à la carte' (Possamai, 2003), or as a 'spiritual supermarket' (Lyon, 2000). Kelly Besecke (2005: 186) does not at all exaggerate when she concludes that 'Luckmann's characterization of contemporary religion as privatised

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is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one'. She is however correct to observe that the notion of 'private' in Luckmann's hands 'is really a catch-all word for everything that falls outside of (…) primary (economic or political) social institutions (…) or (…) specialized religious institutions' (Besecke, 2005: 186). The Durkheimian notion of religion as a cultural discourse about the sacred and the profane, however, opens up a third realm that coincides with neither the institutional nor the private realm. It as such raises the question of whether New Age spirituality is really as 'privatised' and 'individualised' as the theory of religious privatisation takes it to be.

Luckmann's theory about religious privatisation, just like Berger's (1967) about religious decline, assumes that people find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to adhere to just one single religious tradition and/or institution if the latter exists alongside many alternative ones. Yet, such a situation does not necessarily spark either secular and non-religious identities (Berger) or strictly privatised and personal ones (Luckmann). It also evokes and stimulates a spiritual discourse that is neither rooted in institutions nor strictly privatised and individualised. Such a discursive understanding of spirituality exposes spiritual seekers' characteristic syncretism and *bricolage* as discursive practices, informed by an anti-institutional and anti-traditionalist spiritual discourse that is basically uncontested in the holistic milieu. This discourse understands the presence of a wide range of competing and incompatible religious and psycho-spiritual voices as standing in the way of an exclusive identification with just one of these. Rather than rejecting all of these contrasting voices, however, it sidesteps their idiosyncrasies and particularisms so as to foreground what they allegedly have in common.

New Age spirituality does as such not reject religious traditions *tout court*, but rather understands them as placing too much emphasis on what it understands as ritual conformity and institutional side issues. They are nonetheless understood as referring 'deep down' to a single identical and universal spiritual source, so that they are only understood as flawed and misleading to the extent that they define themselves as different from, conflicting with and superior to others. This differs from religious decline and religious privatisation in that the resulting spiritual discourse is the outcome of a cultural logic of 'religious purification' that downplays all that is human-made in religion as made-up, invented and inauthentic (Roeland, Aupers, Houtman, De Koning, & Noomen, 2010). Such a discourse posits a spiritual realm that cannot be captured in human-made institutions and cannot be reduced to religious doctrines either. In effect promising 'pure' religion and 'real' sacrality, both situated beyond

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essentially trivial and human-made differences and incompatibilities between religious traditions, it is nonetheless neither institutionalised, nor privatised and individualised.

This notion that what religious traditions have in common is more important than what sets them apart is the so-called *philosophia perennis* or 'perennial philosophy'. The latter plays a major role in esotericism, especially in Helena Blavatsky's New Theosophy (Hanegraaff, 1996). It teaches that all religious traditions are equally valid, because they ultimately all worship the same divine source: 'There are many paths, but there is just one truth'. The three following explanations by Dutch New Age teachers, interviewed in the context of an earlier study (Aupers, 2004; Aupers & Houtman, 2006), exemplify just how central the perennialist outlook is to New Age spirituality:

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

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

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

What is typically portrayed by sociologists of religion as shallow and consumerist *bricolage* and syncretism hence needs to be understood as an outcome of a shared discursive rejection of religious exclusivism that immunises religious pluralism's harmfulness for religion. Indeed, British sociologist of culture and religion Colin Campbell (2007) has demonstrated along similar lines how the shift towards New Age spirituality in the context of the counter culture of the 1960s was informed by desires to overcome religious plausibility problems sparked by religious pluralism and by a differentiated and rationalised modern order. In doing so,

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Campbell does not construe New Age spirituality as privatised, individualised, and fragmented, but rather as exemplifying a discursive shift toward what he understands as a basically non-western and non-dualistic worldview. Even though the 'New Age' label has lost much currency from the 1980s onwards for reasons to be discussed below, the type of spiritual discourse at stake has become only more widespread and mainstream since (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Houtman & Mascini, 2002).

Spirituality as Discourse: A Cultural-Sociological Understanding

A Spiritual Discourse that Demands Privatisation
The fact that New Age spirituality rejects loyalty to any particular religious tradition does hence not mean that it lacks shared and uncontested beliefs and ideas. Central among these are the notions of 'self-spirituality' and 'holism', both intimately tied up with a conception of the sacred as an immanent and non-personal force or power. 'Self-spirituality' refers to the belief that a 'natural' or 'spiritual' self lies hidden beyond or underneath the 'mundane' or 'conventional' self. Whereas the latter is demonised as the 'false' or 'unreal' product of society, the former is understood as 'sacred', 'higher,' 'deeper,' or 'spiritual', as who one 'really' or 'by nature' is: 'The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated (…) by mainstream society and culture' (Heelas, 1996: 18). This 'spiritual' self is understood as basically unpolluted by society and its roles and institutions, so that listening to it entails breaking away from the socialised self and embarking on a process of spiritual growth: 'Perfection can be found only by moving beyond the socialised self – widely known as the "ego" but also as the "lower self", "intellect" or the "mind" – thereby encountering a new realm of being. It is what we are *by nature*. Indeed, 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 (…) "inner spirituality". (…) The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life' (Heelas, 1996: 19, emphasis in original; DH). The notion of self-spirituality, in short, holds that in the deepest layers of one's own consciousness the 'divine spark' – to borrow a term from ancient Gnosticism – is incessantly smoldering, waiting to be stirred up, obeyed and succeed the socialised self.

Establishing contact with this allegedly 'true', 'deeper' or 'divine' self is held to enable one to connect to 'everything', which is where New Age's second major belief comes in. This is the notion of 'holism', i.e. that invisible unity exists beyond the world's dualisms and fragmentations. The notions of self-spirituality and holism are logically interconnected and presuppose one another in the sense that the 'deeper' self is precisely understood as spiritual, because it partakes in an impersonal spirit or life force that permeates and connects 'everything' – nature, the cosmos, and human beings alike. To put it simple, human beings are understood as knots in a field of spiritual energy that as a universal and impersonal spirit or life force connects 'everything', so that the (re-)establishment of contact with the spiritual self through meditation, yoga or other spiritual exercises enables one to 'get connected' with basically all that exists. Whereas self-spirituality thus assumes holism, one can also argue the other way around to the effect that holism assumes self-spirituality, so that 'getting connected' enables one to experience the sacred in the deeper layers of one's own consciousness. Neither notion is more fundamental than the other, in short: one cannot connect to the cosmos without a belief in a deeper spiritual self and one cannot believe that one has an essentially sacred self without a belief in holism. This is because both notions are informed by a conception of the sacred that differs strikingly from the Christian one of a transcendent personal God who has created the world and the universe. Here, the sacred is understood as an immanent and non-personal spirit, energy or life force that permeates all of the world and the universe and that as such connects 'everything' ('holism') and can also be found 'within' ('self-spirituality').

Belief in self-spirituality and holism entail a rejection of 'external' and 'pre-given' authoritative sources of meaning and identity, like established religious traditions and religious institutions. The latter are replaced by the 'internal' compass of the spiritual self, which means that New Age entails an 'inner' knowing that relies on listening to one's 'inner voice' and trusting one's 'intuition'. This 'experiential' route to truth – known as 'gnosis' – thus entails a rejection of the two epistemologies that have since the Enlightenment struggled for cultural dominance in the West, 'reason' as embodied in science and 'faith' as central to religion. In Wouter Hanegraaff's (1996: 519) words: 'According to (gnosis) truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation, insight or 'enlightenment'. Truth can only be personally experienced: in contrast with the knowledge of *reason* or *faith*, it is in principle not generally accessible. This 'inner knowing' cannot be transmitted by discursive language (this would reduce it to rational knowledge). Nor can it be the subject of *faith* (…) because there is in the last resort no other authority than personal, inner experience' (emphasis in original; DH).

Given the logical and mutually validating and legitimating notions of self-spirituality, holism, gnosis and a spirit or life force that permeates and connects 'everything', it is remarkable to find how the academic literature again and again denies New Age's cultural coherence and foregrounds its fragmentation and privatisation. While indeed one spiritual seeker may use tarot cards in combination with crystal-healing and Hindu ideas about chakras, whereas another may combine traditional Chinese medicine, western psychotherapy and Taoism, while a third one may rely on yet another idiosyncratic concoction, accounts that construct the resulting diversity as proof for the absence of shared beliefs miss the point. This point is that the characteristic fragmentation and diversity of the holistic milieu is in fact called for and encouraged by a shared and basically uncontested spiritual discourse. Given that established religious traditions and institutions need to be distrusted and rejected, while one instead needs to 'follow one's personal path' by taking one's own experiences, feelings and intuition seriously, New Age simply cannot exist otherwise than as a 'consumerist market religion' in which the individual spiritual seeker-consumer rules sovereign (Aupers & Houtman, 2006). Given the basically uncontested spiritual discourse that informs and demands this fragmentation, New Age spirituality cannot simply be construed as 'privatised'.

The Social and Public Significance of an Allegedly Privatised Religion
In today's holistic or spiritual milieu, in short, it is taken for granted that in deciding what to do and what to abstain from, one needs to take one's feelings, intuitions and emotions seriously, because the latter are seen as emanations of a 'deeper' or 'spiritual' self 'within'. At a closer and more culturally informed look, the characteristic New Age desire to pursue one's personal spiritual path does as such not at all constitute a strictly privatised desire. It can indeed be mockingly referred to as New Age's central 'dogma'. From a theoretical point of view it is a very special and most interesting dogma, to be sure, precisely because it forbids the acceptance of dogmas or, more generally, obedience to 'externally' provided truths. Nonetheless, this is what it is: the central dogma of the holistic milieu, where what is 'really' true cannot come from the outside, but can only come from 'within' and be personally experienced. Such a discursive understanding of New Age spirituality delivers major intellectual payoffs, because it brings precisely these features into focus that fly in the face of the notion that it is merely privatised and individualised. It not only discloses how precisely the presence of a shared and uncontested spiritual discourse accounts for the staggering diversity of the holistic milieu, but also brings two other phenomena into focus that would otherwise remain concealed.

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Firstly, because cultural discourses can be activated and mobilised in a wide range of different realms, a discursive shift in the study of New Age spirituality brings its public significance into focus. Whereas the public significance of Christian religion is traditionally closely tied to the realm of politics, with Christian political parties pushing for the inclusion of Christian moral principles in public policies (e.g. Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015), this is clearly not where New Age spirituality plays its most important public role. Under the guise of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), central to which are notions of the unity of body, mind, and spirit, it has however come to play a major role in contemporary health care in the West (Raaphorst & Houtman, 2015). It has also come to penetrate and transform the world of work and management, basically because of its compatibility with neo-liberal capitalism, itself as a matter of fact also an (ironic and largely unintended) outcome of the counter-cultural critiques of the 1960s and 1970s (Houtman, Aupers, & De Koster, 2011: 1-24). Since then, a 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) has emerged that boasts job autonomy, self-management, and personal creativity, notions that 'draw around work the discursive contours of liberating the entire "self"', with the result that '(work) becomes a stage for self-expression' (Costea, Crump, & Amiridis, 2007: 250). The result is a major break with the bureaucratic organisational and managerial forms of the past, with New Age spirituality seamlessly fitting into the new order, as can be seen from the vast and expanding literature about 'business spirituality'. Central to the latter is the notion that employees who have learned to 'unleash the God within' can mobilise unsuspected powers and capacities to become much more successful in their work (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Lockwood, 2014). Cynically commenting on the relentless portrayal of New Age spirituality as radically privatised, Grant, O'Neil and Stephens (2004: 281) rightly observe in this context that 'if it appears to sociologists that spirituality cannot take root within secular bureaucracies, it may be because their theories have not yet allowed it'.

Yet another major payoff of a discursive approach of New Age spirituality is that it provides an understanding of the tendency among those concerned to close their eyes to what they have in common. Indeed, New Age's 'anti-dogmatic dogmatism', its spiritual taboo of following, obeying, or being like others, explains why the label 'New Age' itself has meanwhile lost most of its currency. It would be a mistake to conclude from this that New Age is in the process of disappearing, because in fact precisely the contrary has happened. Since the 1980s, when New Age was lovingly and massively embraced in the media and in popular culture (think of Shirley MacLaine in the 1980s, James Redfield and his *The Celestine Prophecy* in the 1990s, and Oprah Winfrey, Dr. Phil, etcetera in the 2000s), it has

become full part of the Western cultural mainstream. Precisely this growing popularity sparked an awareness – or rather an anxiety – among its advocates that it was on the way of becoming an established religious tradition like any other, in effect conflicting with its own characteristic rejection of restrictive religious traditions and its own emphasis on the primacy of personal experience. In these circles, after all, being a member of an established religious tradition with its own heritage, canonical texts, routines and doctrines, and (perhaps worst of all) herd of dedicated followers comes alarmingly close to the New Age rendition of the Christian notion of 'sinfulness.'

This cultural logic explains why the term 'New Age' lost currency and why New Agers have turned towards more indeterminate labels like 'spirituality' ('Are you a New Ager?'; 'No, I am not; I am very interested in spirituality, though!'): '[B]y the beginning of the 1990s, more and more people attracted to alternative spirituality began to distance themselves from the label New Age (...). During the 1980s it was still possible to investigate the New Age movement (...) simply by questioning people who identified themselves as involved in New Age; during the 1990s, participants have increasingly refused to identify themselves as such, preferring vague and non-committal terms such as "spirituality"' (Hanegraaff, 2002: 253, see also Heelas, 1996: 17). The demise of the 'New Age' label does hence not prove that longings for a strictly personal spirituality have disappeared, but rather proves the opposite. Heelas & Woodhead (2005) have even suggested that a 'spiritual revolution' may be underway, consisting of a major transition from 'religion' to 'spirituality', and Campbell (2007: 41) even goes so far as to observe 'a fundamental revolution in Western civilisation, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment.'

Now, it is one thing to observe that New Agers are eager to turn a blind eye on what they have in common. What is even more problematic, however, is that many a student of religion has accepted the resulting New Age rhetoric about personal authenticity as a valid description of the holistic milieu. This results, to put the problem in classical cultural-anthropological terms, in academic studies that uncritically reproduce 'emic' understandings of those involved in New Age spirituality as intellectually valid 'etic' representations of the holistic milieu. Sociologist of religion Steve Bruce, who cannot be suspected of being sympathetic towards New Age, let alone of identifying with it, offers a good example of this tendency. Attempting to hammer home what he understands as the radical individualism of the holistic milieu, he writes the following about one of the oldest New Age centers in Europe, Findhorn in Scotland: 'Findhorn (…) *requires* of those who take part in its various

forms of group work that they confine their talk to "I statements". The point of this is to establish that, while each participant has a right to say how he or she feels or thinks, *no-one has a right* to claim some extra-personal authority for his or her views' (2002: 83, emphasis added; DH). Ironically, what Bruce completely misses here is how these proclaimed rights and duties stem from a taken-for-granted spiritual discourse. As such, these rules do not simply underscore the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu, but rather demonstrate how it demands conformity to its own rules. This does in effect reveal precisely the religious commonality that Bruce denies. The failure to study New Age spirituality as a cultural phenomenon with marked discursive features thus produces representations that largely coincide with emic understandings. It leads to representations of New Age spirituality as privatised and individualised and as radically different from religion, in that it has allegedly done away with moral guidelines that tell people how to live their lives.

Matthew Wood's work provides an instructive example of how even critiques of this tendency to reproduce emic New Age rhetoric about self-authority as a valid representation of the holistic milieu may ultimately result in something very similar (Wood & Bunn, 2009, Wood, 2009). On the one hand, Wood aims to contribute to the much-needed critique of intellectual representations of New Age spirituality as radically individualized and privatized. More specifically, he sets out to critique what he calls 'the sociology of spirituality' with its central assumption of 'self-authority', i.e. 'the notion that spirituality, unlike "traditional" religion, is a realm of social action in which the individual's autonomous ability to choose is paramount, reflecting self-reflexivity, subjectivization and detraditionalization' (Wood & Bunn, 2009: 287). On the other hand, while the article thus aims 'to move beyond analysis in terms of self-authority' (Wood & Bunn, 2009: 287), it ultimately leads back to a point confusingly close to what it initially set out to critique. This is all the more disappointing given the significance the authors attribute to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu's notion of a 'field' with a cultural logic of its own, imposed onto players who compete for symbolic capital, has much to offer to the development of a sociological analysis of spirituality. More than that: these notions are particularly fruitful for the analysis of fields that easily appear socially and culturally unstructured to the sociologically untrained eye. Examples are the field of art with its traditional rhetoric about innate giftedness and artistic authenticity (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996), the field of popular music culture with its equally subtle distinctions in terms of authenticity, hipness, and coolness (Thornton, 1996), and indeed the field of holistic spirituality with its emphasis on personal authenticity and the need to follow one's personal spiritual path.

An analysis along such lines would easily produce a sociologically mature analysis of the holistic field that foregrounds the roles of a cultural logic of spiritual distinction (i.e. rejecting religious and spiritual authorities as being lost in secondary side issues) and of competition for what may be called 'spiritual capital' (accumulation of theoretical and practical knowledge of the widest possible range of religious and spiritual traditions, without identifying with any of these). Indeed, Wood and Bunn's case study of 'Anne' and her discontents about the orthodoxy of the Steiner group in which she participated has much to offer towards the development of such an analysis of the cultural logic that underlies the field's rhetoric of personal authenticity and self-authority. Wood and Bunn do however move consistently away from such an analysis to arrive at the conclusion that 'authorities were relatively unable, and were not expected, to formatively shape individuals' subjectivities or dispositions, due to their relativization alongside diverse other authorities' (2009: 296). This conclusion is however quite close to what the authors had set out to critique and what they miss is how precisely this relativisation of authorities and traditions provides the holistic milieu with its distinctive cultural logic. Anne's rejection of the orthodoxy of the Steiner group, for instance, is informed by precisely this logic, whereas this Steiner group does itself not constitute a particularly good case study for the holistic milieu, unless understood as a 'deviant' case to study how participants like Anne reject its orthodoxy from a 'spiritual' point of view.

Despite this, Wood is basically correct about the shortcomings of what he calls the 'sociology of spirituality'. Both those who over-identify with New Age spirituality and those who reject and hope to expose it as radically individualised and fragmented, and as such not a 'real' religion, produce representations of it that largely coincide with the holistic milieu's self-image. Both in effect miss the sheer irony and ambiguity of its characteristic 'individualism', which operates as a socially sanctioned obligation of personal authenticity, with spiritual centers like Findhorn playing a major role in socializing spiritual seekers into compliance with it. Of course, Heelas et al. are correct in claiming that the spiritual practitioners they have interviewed do not 'tell their group members or clients what to think, do, believe or feel' (2005: 28). It is however equally clear that they do tell them that they should not trust external authorities, that they should take their personal feelings seriously, that a one-sided reliance on thinking at the cost of feeling is detrimental, and that they should follow their hearts. What all this means, is that New Age spirituality is less unambiguously privatised and individualistic than many students of contemporary religion hold it to be and that a cultural turn in the sociology of spirituality is needed to bring its neglected collective

features into focus. Research should not so much be directed at what participants in the holistic milieu do, and not even simply on what they have to say, but rather on the shared cultural logic that informs what they say and do.

Conclusion: From Religion to Spirituality, from Institutions to Discourse

Linda Woodhead (2010) correctly observes how many an academic observer has characterised New Age spirituality as overly idiosyncratic, vague, obscure, shallow, and privatised. Remarks made in papers by Flemish theology students in my course in sociology of religion at the University of Leuven bring forward similar images of New Age as overly syncretistic, individualistic, fragmented, ephemeral, and ultimately narcissistic and sometimes even immoral. These images tell us that from a Catholic standpoint, central to which is religious collectivism and community, we are dealing with a type of religion in which the latter are eclipsed by an individualism that prevents it from being 'truly' religious. The other way around, New Age images of Christian religion represent the latter as overly institutionalised, ritualised, formalised, and exclusivist – if not worse: as suffocating, stifling, barren and lifeless. Indeed, those concerned understand Western religion, especially in its churched variety, as less 'spiritual' and more 'externalised' (and hence more 'alienating') than oriental religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism (Aupers & Houtman, 2003). Buddhism in particular is a favorite among New Agers, precisely because of its emphasis on meditation, experience, and – quite tellingly – its alleged absence of a need to believe in anything whatsoever. Hardly surprising, then, that Philip Mellor (1991: 77) can list the following as the major problems and shortcomings of Christianity in the eyes of native-British Buddhists: 'authoritarianism, institutionalism, dogmatism, triumphalism, ritualism and formalism'.

Needless to say, such images of Christianity among New Agers and images of New Age among Catholics are to a large extent stereotypes that reveal as much about the observer as about that the observed. They should as such not be treated as representations of reality, but are nonetheless useful as Weberian-style ideal-types, i.e. empirically informed, yet analytically constructed and 'purified' types that simplify an overly complex reality and that are as such indispensable in empirical research. Indeed, defined in this way, 'religion' and 'spirituality' come close to Max Weber's (1963 [1922]) ideal-typical distinction between 'ascetic' and 'mystical' religion. Ascetic religion demands the believer to define himself or

herself as a 'tool' in the hands of God. Whereas it thus demands subordination to God's commands and a life devoted to their active pursuit, mystical religion rather invites believers to define themselves as a 'vessel' of God. Here, the aim is not to obey God by actively following his commands, but rather to be passive and silent, so as to open oneself up and ultimately become one with God.

Generally speaking, the western monotheistic 'Abrahamic religions of the book' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have more in common with the ascetic than with the mystical ideal-type. The former conceive of the sacred as a transcendent personal God who has created the earth and the universe, who makes ethical demands on believers, and who is not part of the world that he created. This ontology of the sacred is logically associated with an epistemology of belief, because a God who is not part of the world that he created cannot be experienced, but needs to be believed in. Needless to say, this western religious ontology and epistemology is stronger in some traditions (e.g. Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, in Christianity, and Sunnism in Islam) than in others (e.g. Catholicism in Christianity and Shi'ism in Islam). Yet others, like Jewish Kabbalah, Christian mysticism (e.g. Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi), and Sufism in Islam are even more clearly mystically inclined, bringing them even closer to religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism. The latter do themselves not conceive of the sacred as a transcendent God who has created the world, revealed the truth and needs to be believed in, but rather as an immanent spirit or life force that can only be experienced and that people need to open themselves up to for the attainment of salvation. Colin Campbell (2007) correctly points out that New Age spirituality has more in common with this eastern type of mysticism than with western ascetism.

Even though theoretically constructed distinctions between 'ascetism' and 'mysticism', between 'western' and 'eastern' religion or, as most commonly used today, between 'religion' and 'spirituality', should hence not be confused with reality, they are nonetheless needed for the study of religious change. The principal research questions are where, why, and with what wider societal consequences identifications with spiritual New Age discourse have increased whereas allegiances to church-based Christian religion have declined. It is likely that the latter shift, much like the former, entails an increased rejection of exclusivist religious traditions and institutions towards ecumenical positions that define the differences and incompatibilities between religious traditions and institutions as secondary side issues and that foreground what they have in common. Indeed, in her book about 'believing without belonging' Grace Davie (1994) maintains that the outflow from the

Christian churches has been much higher than the outflow from a Christian religious outlook, so that a large share of today's Christian religion can no longer be found within the churches, but rather outside them. This de-institutionalisation of Christianity does probably not remain limited to its disembedding from church settings, the downplaying of other institutional aspects, and the relativisation of official church doctrines, but also entails a shift towards more 'depersonalised' and immanent conceptions of God (ontology) and a stronger emphasis on the significance of religious experience (epistemology).

Studying processes of religious change like these demand a cultural turn in the study of religion. Central to such an approach of religion are neither churches, nor official church doctrines, nor rates of church attendance, nor laypeople's allegiances to church doctrines, but rather the ways in which people do actually conceive of the sacred and of their relationship with it, and the ways in which the resulting religiousness affects their lives beyond the private realm. Such a cultural turn is urgently called for, because even today articles in sociology's quantitative top-notch journals feature variables called 'religion', 'religiosity' or 'religiousness' that typically amount to nothing more than answers to superficial and basically meaningless questions like 'how often do you attend church'? Answers to questions like these relegate all those who embrace a Christian identity yet maintain a distance from the churches ('believing without belonging') to a 'non-religious'/'non-Christian' category. As such, institutionally-based questions like these underestimate the presence of Christian religion in the contemporary West. Yet, they are simultaneously likely to overestimate the degree to which regular churchgoers are actually religious in any meaningful sense, especially as regards young people living with their religious parents and expected to accompany them to church. The problem, in short, is that questions about churchgoing do not even start to scratch the surface of what it actually means to call oneself 'religious' and/or 'spiritual' nowadays.

In a world where religious and spiritual discourses, worldviews and beliefs have increasingly escaped their former institutional bulwarks to find new homes in social networks, media, and markets (Besecke, 2005, Noomen, Aupers, & Houtman, 2011), sociology of religion's traditional focus on religion's institutional manifestations has become deeply problematical. In the ensuing religious field, where churched religion is giving way to spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) and where 'believing' no longer necessarily coincides with 'belonging' (Davie, 1994), the organisational-institutional and cultural domains have drifted apart to become increasingly separate spheres rather than closely integrated ones. Under these circumstances, sociology of religion's traditional focus on religion's institutional manifestations means that much of today's religious field – and worse:

apparently its most dynamic and most rapidly expanding part – is maneuvered out of sight. Under these circumstances, privileging religion's institutional manifestations as somehow more 'real' and more important than its discursive cultural manifestations becomes a major source of distortion and a major obstacle to empirical and theoretical advancement in the social-scientific study of religion.

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