

Christianity, secularisation and spirituality

what the interest in mysticism and spirituality tells us about
the state of religion in the contemporary world

In 1966 sociologist Wilson presented a Weberian inspired secularisation thesis, which stated that the process of rationalization and the marginalisation of (Christian) religion within modernity was both inevitable and inexorable.¹ This 'classic thesis', which exemplifies the sociological stance of the 1970's, has been challenged in recent years by an increased interest in 'the spiritual and mystical'. This essay discusses different sociological and socio-historical scholarly perspectives on 'the state of religion' within this context of contemporary spirituality, through a twofold interpretative approach to the given question.² In part one, it discusses the counter-cultural nature of 'New Age spirituality',³ and its rejection of the two 'dominant pillars of western culture', namely reason (i.e. naturalism), and faith (i.e. Christianity).⁴ In part two, it subsequently attempts to nuance the assumed negative correlations between contemporary spirituality and (Weberian) secularisation,⁵ and contemporary spirituality and Christianity, which arise from this counter-culturalism. It argues that the general existence, as well as the specific countercultural nature of this spirituality, is dependent on the previous existence, and continued influence of both (Weberian) secularisation and Christianity. Therefore, although this spirituality openly opposes Christian and naturalistic worldviews, and as such seems to tell the story of their decline, it actually tells us that both Weberian secularisation and especially Christianity are still highly influential within Western thought.

Part I

Most scholars agree that the rise of contemporary spirituality within mainstream culture has its

¹ J., Fox, 'Secularization', in J., Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 295.

² Within this essay 'the state of religion within the contemporary world' will both be taken as one entity, relating to (Weberian) secularisation, and will be split up into 'the state of religion' and 'within the contemporary world', as to relate to the influence of Christianity, within secularised, "spiritualised" society.

³ Within this essay, Heelas' and Hanegraaff's 'New Age spirituality', Campbell's 'Easternization' and Mercadante's 'spiritual-but-not-religious' will be assumed to be discussing the same general semi-collective movement of contemporary spirituality.

⁴ W., Hanegraaff, 'New Age Religion and Secularization', in *Numen, Vol. 47, No. 3, Religions in the Disenchanted world* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 307.

⁵ Within this essay 'Weberian secularisation' refers to the 'progressive disenchantment' of Western society, i.e. the increase in rational or naturalistic worldviews at the expense of Christianity.

origins in the 1960's.⁶ The notion of distinguishing between being 'spiritual', which is understood as having inward and personal experiences of the sacred, and 'being religious', which is understood as having allegiance to a specific form of organised religion, however, can be traced back to the Enlightenment.⁷ In, *'The Easternisation of the West'*, Campbell argues that contemporary spirituality reflects a flourishing of the 'Eastern paradigm', which was made possible by the self-undermining of the 'Western paradigm' within the nineteenth and twentieth century.⁸ These centuries first witnessed the undermining of people's faith in traditional religion, with the rise of science, only then to subsequently witness the undermining of the optimism surrounding science itself.⁹ Contemporary spirituality is therefore grounded in a dissatisfaction with both Christian and naturalistic worldviews. Despite the heterogeneity in beliefs found within New Age spirituality this 'implicit or explicit culture criticism' can be seen as a consistent, underlying factor.¹⁰ Although this counter-culturalism is very much associated with the cultural revolution of the 'Long Sixties',¹¹ it also echoes the thoughts of the Romantic Era. This has led some scholars to view contemporary spirituality as a sign of a new Romantic movement.¹²

This Romantic framework lends itself to a further understanding and nuancing of the 'anti-rational', and 'anti-religious' sentiments within contemporary spirituality. In, *'Spiritual But Not Religious: The Influence of the Current Romantic Movement'*, Owen argues that the anti-religious sentiment of the current Romantic movement reflects the same anti-religious sentiment found in the 19th century. The current attitude towards naturalistic science, however, is occasionally more affirmative, due to the rise of postmodern science.¹³ As such, it seems that the anti-rational sentiment of contemporary spirituality might better be understood as a supra-rational sentiment. For it understands itself to be reacting against the 'over-rationality' of contemporary society, rather than against rationality in itself. It is felt that mainstream, secular culture does not allow for 'certain important dimensions of personal human experience'.¹⁴ Owen's equation of Romantic and 'neo-Romantic' anti-religiosity needs nuancing as well. Within its historical context the term 'anti-religious' bears strong negative emotive connotations. It allows for the

⁶ See C., Campbell, 'The Easternisation of the West', in B., Wilson & J., Cresswell, eds., *New religious movements challenge and response* (London: Routledge, 2001), 37. & L., Mercadante, *Belief without Borders, Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 24.

⁷ R., King, 'Mysticism and spirituality', in J., Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 306.

⁸ Campbell, *Easternization*, 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 291.

¹¹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 24.

¹² See: O., Thomas, 'Spiritual but Not Religious: The Influence of the Current Romantic Movement', in E., Wondra, ed., *The Anglican Theological Review, Vol. 88, No. 3, 2006*.

¹³ Thomas, *Spiritual but Not Religious*, 410-12.

¹⁴ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 291.

assumption that there is a strong emotive cause for, and aspect to, the anti-religiosity. However, Mercadante's qualitative research into the beliefs of the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' (SBNR), shows that this is, generally speaking, currently not the case. She found that the objections to (Christian) religion, which concerned a rejection of conservative Protestantism, were predominantly conceptual and theological in nature.¹⁵ Thus both the current anti-rational and anti-religious sentiment cohere with Campbell's claim that counter-culturalism should be understood conceptually and as such is experienced as being more compatible with modern thought.¹⁶

The aforementioned nuances concerning the counter-cultural nature of contemporary spirituality do not change the fact that counter-culturalism, by nature, assumes negative correlations between itself and that which it opposes. Thus, if the interest in anti-Christian and anti-naturalistic spirituality is increasing, this is understood to mean that the popularity and influence of Christianity and Weberian secularisation theories are decreasing. To some extent, this seems like a *prima facie* accurate representation of how the 'interest in spirituality and mysticism' and 'the state of religion within the contemporary world' interact. In, *Challenging Secularization Theories: the Growth of "New Age" spiritualities of life*, for example, Heelas illustrates that the growth of the 'holistic milieu' shows that 'the secularisation theory' is ineffective in describing the current state of religiosity within Britain.¹⁷ Within this context his understanding of 'secularisation' is Weberian in nature, since he draws a distinction between the holistic milieu and the secular milieu based on (lack of) coherence with science.¹⁸ In, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*, he nuances the aforementioned claim. On the basis of data derived from the Kendal Project, he states that decline and growth are not mutually exclusive, but depend on the nature of the belief. Secularisation (understood here as general decline) does not apply to 'subjective-life forms of spirituality', but it does apply to 'life-as forms of religion'.¹⁹ This, he concludes, can be explained by 'the subjectivization thesis', which affirms the negative correlation between spirituality and religion.²⁰

Part II

Appealing to the increased subjectivity within modernity, however, also lends itself to arguing

¹⁵ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 17-18, 72.

¹⁶ Campbell, *Easternization*, 44.

¹⁷ P., Heelas, 'Challenging Secularization Theory: The Growth of "New Age" Spiritualities of Life, in, *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 8, NOS. 1-2, *After Secularization*, 2006, 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ P., Heelas, L., Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 9-10.

²⁰ See: Heelas, Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: 'Chapter Four: Bringing the Sacred to Life: Explaining Sacralization and Secularization'*, 75-128.

for the continued influence of both Weberian secularisation and Christianity, and thus to nuancing the claim of negative correlation. Contemporary spirituality opposes Protestant thought on the assumption that 'any insistence on truth claims, religious beliefs, or conceptual clarity is really the hegemonic thought control of organized religion'.²¹ This opposition to (religious) external authority coheres with the growth of the 'autonomous' self within modernity.²² This 'shift in the locus of authority to the self' seems consistent with (Weberian) secularisation, were it not that the 'diverse beliefs' include ones that do not appeal to empirical and rational evidence.²³ Rather than 'universal reason', contemporary spirituality takes 'personal experience' as its epistemological reference point. As Mercadante concludes: 'Diffuse, diverse, even idiosyncratic beliefs – and the freedom to select from this cafeteria of options – is one hallmark of this new spirituality.'²⁴ This is the crux of this spirituality's aforementioned counter-culturalism. For, as Hanegraaff points out, this experience-centred epistemology opposes both 'traditional, dogmatic theology and church institutions' and 'everything associated with a purely rationalist scientific worldview.'²⁵

This experience-centrality is building upon the foundation provided by the processes of individualisation and rationalization which were integral to secularisation. Heelas argues that 'locating the "sacred" – with its powers – within the subjectivities of the self' is a logical consequence of the secular value ascribed to being autonomous.²⁶ A similar causality can be derived from Sharf, who states that the 'rhetoric of experience in the modern world' is a (scholarly) response to the challenges presented by empiricism.²⁷ The fact that New Age spirituality exists to challenge notions of (Weberian) secularisation, is thus due to the process of secularisation itself. This process, furthermore, has its roots in Protestantism, as Weber himself observed.²⁸ Wilson, elaborating on this, argued that the advent of Protestantism led to religious belief becoming a matter of faith, rather than axiomatic.²⁹ This, in combination with the Church's (arguable) inability after the Reformation to govern the beliefs of the people, started the shift in locus of authority towards the self.³⁰ This Protestant heritage can also still be found within the beliefs of the SBNR community, for within the anti-Protestant nature of its self-identification, it

²¹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 8.

²² Heelas, *Challenging Secularization Theory*, 51-52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 72.

²⁵ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 307.

²⁶ Heelas, *Challenging Secularization Theory*, 51-52.

²⁷ R., Sharf, 'The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion', in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, No. 11-12, 2000. 268.

²⁸ Fox, *Secularization*, 293.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁰ Fox, *Secularization*, 295.

assumes, celebrates and benefits from Western (Christian) streams of thought.³¹ Fundamental to this is the “Protestant principle”, the belief that ‘one has both the freedom and obligation to continually reform beliefs and practice.’³² Ironically, within a contemporary context, this includes a reformation of the stream of thought associated with the Reformation. Yet it still illustrates how the influence of (Protestant) Christianity and (Weberian) secularization is reinforced within the current attempt to oppose it.

Even when contemporary spirituality is understood to be ‘the transformation of religion under the impact of secularization’, one could still argue that the end result should not be understood as a mere continuum of the history of Christianity in the western world.³³ In, *New Age Religion and Secularization*, Hanegraaff takes up this latter position, and as such provides an interesting challenge to the thesis this essay proposes. Hanegraaff emphasises the unprecedented, unique nature of ‘New Age religion’.³⁴ He defines religion as ‘any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning’.³⁵ Secularisation, albeit a Christian history, he states, has led Christianity to lose ‘its central position as the foundation collective symbolism of western culture’.³⁶ It is being replaced by the secular New Age Religion, which is based on individual manipulation of both religious and non-religious systems of symbols.³⁷ Thus, he concludes, ‘for the very first time in history, spiritualities are detaching themselves entirely from specific existing religions.’³⁸

From Mercadante’s research it can be derived that both the nature of the ‘individual manipulation’ as well as the structuring of the ‘symbol systems’ is grounded within the western understanding of rationality. Symbol systems are judged on their conceptual validity (be it in relationship to the individual’s experience), and structured in such a way as to be as coherent as possible.³⁹ Although this so far seems consistent with Hanegraaff’s understanding of belief systems, it alone does not explain the difference in rationality attributed to contemporary spiritualists and, say, ‘the experiencers’. These alien abductees also present their belief systems with consistency, sincerity, and as a population do not show an increased propensity toward, or prior history of psychopathology.⁴⁰ Yet, as a generalisation based on intuition, one would be

³¹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 301.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

³⁷ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 296, 307.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

³⁹ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 18.

⁴⁰ Sharf, *The Rhetoric of Experience*, 280-281.

more inclined to question the rationality and therefore validity of these latter belief systems. The rationality of belief in aliens is (as a whole) viewed differently than the rationality of belief in chakras. This shows that within contemporary, detraditionalized society, there is still an assumption that traditional religion holds a certain authority and validity which links it to rationality. It therefore seems that (at least) mainstream spirituality is in fact reliant on association with traditional religion.

This does not necessarily argue for the continued influence of Christianity within the rise of contemporary spirituality, since the religious traditions appealed to are predominantly Eastern. Different scholars, however, have argued that practices from the 'the mystic East', as well as the notion of the Eastern experience-centrality, are Western products.⁴¹ In, *'The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion'*, Sharf traces 'the valorization of experience within Asian thought' back to a few twentieth-century Asian religious leaders and apologists, who were all closely acquainted with Western thought.⁴² He argues that Eastern experience-centrality was their answer to Western cultural imperialism and Occidentalism.⁴³ As such, it responded to the pre-existing western notion, and thus invention, of the 'exotic Other'.⁴⁴ The 'Mystical East' therefore functions as a western reinforcement of the identity of the Western 'Self'.

In response to this, one might argue that this dynamic of Otherness does not currently apply due to the positive connotations attributed to the East. It is true that within contemporary spirituality, with its strong Theosophical influences, the East is understood to be more spiritually developed (rather than generally undeveloped), in opposition to the spiritually hindering Christian 'Other'.⁴⁵ This understanding and valuation of 'the East', however, is a (by-) product of the western changes in how the Western, Christian 'Self' has come to understand and value itself. It is shaped by, and reflects the countercultural self-identification of contemporary spirituality with all its previously discussed (anti-)Christian and Weberian influences. This process of self-identification has led to the (historically Protestant) notion of 'dogmatic, organised religion' as the rigid 'Other' which is being opposed. However, this understanding of the 'Christian Other' within contemporary spirituality also reflects the 'religious illiteracy' of our secular times.⁴⁶ In fact, contemporary spirituality and Christianity are not increasingly in opposition, but are rather increasingly overlapping. Although the emphasis of this essay has been on showing the continued influence of Christianity within contemporary spirituality, it

⁴¹ See: Sharf, *The Rhetoric of Experience* & R., King, *Orientalism and Religion, Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴² Sharf, *The Rhetoric of Experience*, 272-273.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴⁴ King, *Mysticism and Spirituality*, 320.

⁴⁵ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

must also be noted that contemporary spirituality is influencing Christianity. Hanegraaff uses the term 'Innere Emigration' to refer to this shift towards within organised religion contemporary spirituality.⁴⁷ This 'Innere Emigration' affects both church-goers and clergy (who increasingly self-identify with the SBNR community),⁴⁸ as well as our modern theological understanding of Christianity in general.

This brings us back to the question at hand, concerning that what (the increase in) contemporary spirituality tells us about the state of secularised society, and the state of Christian religion within the western world. This essay has attempted to challenge the assumptions of the declining influence of (Weberian) secularisation and Christianity that arise from the counter-culturalism that underlies contemporary spirituality. It has argued, on the basis of socio-historical scholarship, that this counter-culturalism in general, as well as its specific characteristics, including the appeal to the 'mystical East', has its roots in processes of (Weberian) secularisation and Protestantism, and thus reflects their influence on Western thought. In a final nuance to the claim made by this essay, it has been noted that although Christianity still shapes our contemporary secularised, spiritualised society, it in itself is also being shaped by this secularised, spiritualised society. Religion, spirituality and secularisation therefore do not have a mutually exclusive application, but rather collectively make up the contemporary Western understanding of the self and the spiritual.

⁴⁷ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 311.

⁴⁸ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 17.

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