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Characteristics of Contemporary Religious Change

Globalisation, neoliberalism and interpretative tendencies¹

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Introduction

In this chapter, we focus on changes in contemporary religion and in particular in relation to the globalisation process. Globally, one aspect of recent religious change is that fundamentalist religious movements are thriving, aiming at reviving tradition and making religion influential again in contemporary society. While these movements can be conceived of as responses to globalisation in the particularistic mode, in this paper we will explore the more vague religious expressions of Western culture, related to New Age and the spirituality discourse, as responses to globalisation in the universalistic mode. In addition to this, we will also discuss the concepts of New Age and spirituality, and argue that essentialising a New Age category no longer makes sense in a globalised society. Instead, we attempt a focus on the dichotomy of institutionalised religion on one hand, and uninstitutionalised, or popular religion, on the other hand.

Finally, we will raise some critical questions. In the final part of the chapter we will point to some significant similarities between, on the one hand, the characteristics of contemporary religious change and, on the other, neoliberal politics and culture. We claim that this does not merely indicate vital similarities between the two, as well as ways in which neoliberal politics and culture have affected religious change. Rather, we emphasise the need to critically reflect on the interpretative role of the scholar and the demands for reflexivity and the ethical considerations that follow. Our interpretations involve implicit or explicit conceptions of man and society. These are embedded in the discourses we rely on, in this case a neoliberal framework. This does not deny the directions of contemporary religious change that have been put forward by many scholars, but requires a continuous, nuanced and critical conceptual awareness.

The New Age concept and the discourse of spirituality: different voices

The New Age subculture has been called “a major phenomenon in popular religion, with a considerable cultural and religious significance”.² However, in spite of much research and discussion, its nature and contents have remained vague. New Age has been categorised as “religion” (Hanegraaff 2005), “a religion” (Hammer 1997), “a movement” (Heelas 1996), or several movements (York 2005).³ Some scholars have likened New Age to a “smorgasbord” where everyone is free to compose his or her own plate.⁴ But what is presented on the “smorgasbord” in the first place – what is New Age and what is not – has remained problematic. Several authors claim, however, that there is a certain coherence of beliefs and structure, which legitimate the use of an essentialising label for these currents.⁵ Others focus on one essential trait: e.g. healing (Frisk 1997; York 2005), self spirituality (Heelas 1996), or the literal significance of the concept of New Age,⁶ that a new age is on the way.⁷ Still others question if New Age is at all a real and identifiable phenomenon, or merely an artificial construction created by scholars or the media.⁸

One of the most radical critics of the concept of the New Age, who also discusses concepts as “popular religion”, “spirituality” and “alternative spirituality”, is Steven Sutcliffe, who in his 2003 book claims that the formulation of a New Age movement simply essentialises a set of mixed and divergent social processes, and that New Age as a movement is a constructed, etic category. Sutcliffe suggests the removal of New Age from the field of “movement studies” and a reevaluation of it as a harbinger of a shift in contemporary religious practice to small groups and a discourse of spirituality.⁹ Sutcliffe sees New Age as a codeword for the heterogeneity of alternative¹⁰ spirituality, best classified as a subtype of popular religion. Some typical concerns of religion in a popular mode are, according to Sutcliffe, grass roots activism, strategies for everyday living, ideals of spiritual autonomy and egalitarianism, and an ideology of direct, unmediated access to experiences.¹¹ Sutcliffe argues that a popular, functional everyday spirituality increasingly displaces New Ageism, and is a product of its genealogy. “Spirituality” has, according to Sutcliffe, emerged as a hybrid discourse, constructed from alternative and popular sources, and is associated with lived experience and inner discourse, in contrast to a religion which is associated with systems and dogma. Sutcliffe speaks of the emergent spiritual discourse as being *dissident*, striving at finding something other, more and better than institutionalised religion; being *lay*, having a domestic

setting which undermines traditional boundaries between public and private space; being *populist*, recognising the supremacy of the will of the people, and being *functional*, emphasising short term achievements of goals and the active creation of meaning in everyday life.¹²

The recent discourse of spirituality has also been discussed by several other interpreters of contemporary popular religion. Paul Heelas, for example, claims that a spiritual revolution is gradually taking place, as religion gives way to spirituality.¹³ By “religion” Heelas means “obedience to a transcendent God and a tradition that mediates his authority”, while he defines “spirituality” as the “experience of the divine as immanent in life”. Whilst the former is under threat, the latter is, according to Heelas, thriving, and is doing well both amongst those who are not involved with institutionalised religion, and within the field of traditional religion itself.¹⁴ Heelas views New Ageism as symptomatic of a wider, spiritual revolution, widespread in mainstream culture. The New Age is, according to Heelas, just the most visible tip of a much larger iceberg.¹⁵

Linda Woodhead argues along much the same lines, claiming that a “turn to life” is one of the most significant trends in religion and spirituality, as well as in the wider culture, in the West since the Second World War. Woodhead characterises the “turn to life” as having two poles: one personal, living out one’s own life in all its fullness, “selfing”, to do things “in my own way” – and one cosmic pole, turning to the life force, of which the small self is ultimately only an aspect. The turn to life also places more emphasis on nature and/or on human relationships. It is this-worldly and “holistic”, and there is also an emphasis on a radical egalitarianism, a radical empowerment of each individual.¹⁶ Woodhead emphasises, as does Paul Heelas, that this “turn to life” is effective not only in alternative, post-Christian and counter-cultural movements, but it is also becoming widely influential in post-war Christianity in the West, especially in its more liberal wing, and in feminist theology as well. Punishment, hell, damnation, and demonology have almost dropped out of the picture, as has a strong emphasis on asceticism and self-mortification. Experience, egalitarianism, and this-worldly development continue to eclipse earlier emphases on sacrifice and denial in this life in preparation for a more real life to come.¹⁷

Woodhead discusses the “turn to life” in terms of “the flight from deference”, meaning a flight from submission to a higher authority, as well as a flight from the deferral of personal gratification. The flight from deference is, according to Woodhead, not confined to the

religious sphere: The World Values Survey of 1990 indicates a decline in deference to many institutions which would formerly have commanded respect. A loss of confidence in governmental, party-political and religious institutions is evident^{18, 19}

In their book, Heelas and Woodhead are taking this theory one step further, discussing an on-going, major cultural shift, meaning a turn away from “life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived with reference to one’s own subjective experiences”.²⁰ They find some support for this thesis, at least as tendencies.²¹ Several other authors also discuss the discourse of spirituality along much the same lines as Heelas and Woodhead. “Spirituality” is presented as being a more personal and individual concept than “religion” (King 2001, Roof et al. 1995, Barker 2004a; Hanegraaff 2005), more anthropological than theological (King 2001, Barker 2004a), syncretistic and pluralistic (Roof et al. 1995, Barker 2004a), anti-hierarchical (Roof et al. 1995, Barker 2004a) and innerworldly (Barker 2004a).²²

Globalisation and contemporary religious change

Although there are reasons to be critical of some of the above representations²³ - “a major cultural shift” may for example be far too strong an expression – there are nevertheless several indications that there are tendencies towards a change of focus in aspects of contemporary religion. In the words of Eileen Barker: “something important is going on, which students of religion ought to recognise”.²⁴

As to the changes, each author describes them a little differently, but there are a few characteristics that several of them bring up. In this paper, we will focus on six of these characteristics: *Eclecticism* and syncretism; emphasis on *personal experience* at the expense of ideology or dogma; non-institutionalism, or religiosity in the *private* mode; radical *egalitarianism* or recognising each person as his/her own spiritual authority; *self-spirituality* or a shift from God to human being; and emphasis on *this-worldliness* rather than emphasising life after death. Below we will, based on field observations and the above discussed authors, discuss these characteristics as six interlinked processes of change in the light of globalisation theories, as we believe this is one of the most important explanations for these changes. Globalisation is of course only one of the processes triggering this shift, but we think that as a major cause it has been quite neglected in the discussion so far.

Together with some of the above discussed authors, we reject the concept of New Age as an essentialised category, and focus instead on the whole field of unofficial, or popular religiosity²⁵ in contrast to the institutionalised²⁶ religions. The different elements of popular religion are today, as a consequence of globalisation, increasingly interrelated and mixed. It is questionable if it makes sense any more to distinguish or essentialise special categories such as New Age. There certainly are some characteristics which historically belonged to the cultic milieu of New Age, but these characteristics are today so well spread and mixed with other elements in popular religion, that we would argue that, while it might have made sense in the 1970s and even in the 1990s to speak about “new religiosity” or even “New Age”, it does not make sense today. Communication in the globalised world is increasingly dense, and because of the syncretism and ecumenism in uninstitutionalised popular religiosity in the post-Christian western culture, today all these elements are mixed to a degree that it makes no sense to speak about “new religiosity”²⁷ as a separate category. At the most, one could speak of different tendencies in popular, uninstitutionalised religiosity.

Moreover, this syncretistic tendency is also slowly making it more and more unsatisfactory to speak of different religions as essentialised categories, even if this process is much slower. The religious change discussed above relates to both institutionalised and uninstitutionalised religion, but more to the latter category, as there is an inherent resistance to change in institutionalised religion.

Six interlinked processes of religious change related to globalisation

From particular to eclectic

Several authors, for example Olav Hammer and Ursula King, note the eclecticism of the contemporary spirituality discourse/New Age. Many different religions are used eclectically as *resources* rather than identified with exclusively with one religious tradition being the only *source*.²⁸ Irving Hexham, professor of religious studies, and Karla Poewe, professor of anthropology, who discuss New Age in a globalised context, write that one of the main characteristics of New Age is that it consists of fragments of different cultures. New Age selectively combines aspects of many traditions to create a new culture, a process which is only possible under strongly globalised conditions.²⁹

Today communication is worldwide and increasingly dense. People, cultures, societies, and civilisations that were previously more or less isolated from one another are now in regular contact.³⁰ Structurally, the contemporary, strongly globalised conditions explain the existence of elements of several cultures in one place. But to explain why this leads to eclecticism, we have to look at a special process of globalisation as described by the sociologists of religion Roland Robertson and Peter Beyer and called *relativisation*. Through the process of globalisation particular societies are set in a wider system of societies, resulting in the relativisation of both societies and individuals.³¹ All particular cultures are relativised, including the religions.³² Individuals form their religious identity in the knowledge that their religion is only one among several possibilities.³³ This process, together with the radical empowerment of the individual discussed below, gives rise to the wild eclecticism we see today in popular culture. As elements of one religious culture are as good as other elements of another religious culture, the individual can pick according to individual choice. However, this choosing is of course not completely at random: some religious cultures – like, for example, Western esotericism, Indian religion, Chinese religion and Native American religion – are more represented in popular Western religious culture than, for example, African or Arabic religions. Global currents are more inclined to flow in certain directions, depending on, for example, aspects of power, and on aspects of prevalent discourses, such as the discourse of Orientalism.³⁴ This eclecticism also gives rise to an extreme tolerance: if all religions are relative, they are all equally true. Further, this characteristic undermines religions such as Christianity, which claim to have a *particular* truth.

This eclecticism also in some sense makes the boundaries between different religions more vague. The difference between religions has, for the individual, become increasingly unimportant. In some contexts, elements from different religions are mixed, without awareness even that there is a mixture. This is so far evident especially with religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which have some similarities and about which there is limited knowledge in the West.³⁵

From dogma to experience

It is characteristic in a globalised world that many different belief systems and ideologies coexist side by side. Many of them oppose each other, and it must be clear to the individual

that not all of them could be true. For example, if you go to heaven after death, you cannot at the same time reincarnate. As a consequence, for the individual, the plausibility of *all* belief systems is undermined. The solution, for the individual, is to change focus away from dogmas and belief systems and towards other aspects of religion. The ideological dimension loses importance, and, together with the radical empowerment of the individual, discussed below, the dimension of subjective experience stands out as the most important aspect of contemporary religion.

Another argument for the decline in importance of the belief dimension in contemporary religion is that several recent and large-scale quantitative studies of religious beliefs show that there is a good deal of uncertainty in religious belief and this is spreading in Western society. The “don’t know” answers, as well as “believe a little”, and “maybe” answers are well represented.³⁶ This might also be an expression of a change of emphasis from dogma to experience.

From collective to personal

In popular spirituality, there is also a new emphasis on the personal individual, as opposed to collective institutions. Religious establishments have, for the post-war generation, broken down or at least substantially weakened in influence.³⁷ As Linda Woodhead notes, the results of the World Values Survey indicate a decline in deference to many institutions – governmental, party-political and religious. Woodhead argues that the social, political and economic transformation from at least the 1970s onwards all serve to empower more and more individuals to make decisions for themselves. Much of religion has thus moved from the public to the private sphere.

Peter Beyer argues, that globalisation structurally favours the privatisation of religion (although it also could provide fertile ground for the renewed public influence of religion). For religion to be publicly influential, it is required that religious leaders have control over a service that is indispensable in today’s world, in the same way that health professionals, political leaders, scientific or business experts do. The structures of modern/global society greatly weaken most of the ways that religious leaders have accomplished this before. The central structural feature of modern and global society is, according to Beyer, differentiation on the basis of function. There is a difference between how a subsystem relates to the society

as a whole – which Beyer calls “function” – and how it relates to other subsystems – “performance”. In the context of the religious subsystem, “function” refers to “pure” religious communication, whereas “performance” occurs when religion is applied to problems generated in other systems (e.g. the economy, politics). Beyer means that “performance” is a problem for religion today, because of its special nature of encompassing holism, which runs counter to the specialised and instrumental pattern of other dominant functional systems. The major applications dominated by religious experts in the past – for example higher education, or healing – have been taken over by experts of other functional domains.³⁸ Therefore, Beyer argues that religion has a comparatively difficult time in gaining public influence, and is more visible in the private, personal sphere.³⁹

Hierarchical to egalitarian

Steven Sutcliffe is one of the scholars who emphasises that contemporary spirituality is populist, meaning that it recognises the supremacy of the will of the people, and that the authority to interpret is reclaimed by lay doers and thinkers.

This egalitarianism may also be connected to the prevalent globalisation. Peter Beyer argues that a global society has no outsiders who can serve as the social representatives of evil, danger or chaos. The person who used to be the outsider is now a neighbour. According to Beyer, under globalised conditions there are two main responses for religion: the conservative option, which reasserts the reality of the devil (and persons/cultures who are seen as outsiders or evil) and the liberal option, which dissolves the devil. Liberal religion seeks to address the problems engendered by the global system, but on the basis of the prevailing global values and not in opposition to them. Liberal religion thus correlates with the structural tendencies of a global society, and according to Beyer the liberal option might be seen as the trend of the future. Liberal religion is ecumenical and tolerant, and more or less agrees that there are comparable possibilities for enlightenment and salvation in different religions. The possibility of salvation, enlightenment, or wisdom is for all; everyone is included. Liberal religion works for the fuller inclusion of all people in the benefits of the global community.⁴⁰

Tolerance and inclusivity go together well with egalitarianism and democratic values. Everyone’s voice commands the same respect today. Therefore, the reasons for heeding authorities diminish, or even disappear. The individual is radically empowered, and knows as

much as the priest about spiritual matters – not through studies or revelation, but through inner experience.

From theological to anthropological

In popular religiosity there is a radical emphasis on the human being. According to Ursula King, spirituality has moved away from the theological to the anthropological dimension. Salvation in popular religion is conceived of as more of an inner realisation than as related to an outer divinity.⁴¹ The individual has become radically empowered, a process connected to and interlinked with the processes of privatisation and egalitarianism. Characteristic of this is that the spiritual potential of every human being is affirmed, and that spiritual growth is conceived of as closely related to the individual's psychological development and maturation. Some scholars, like Paul Heelas, even mean that "self-sacralisation" or "selfing" is the very basic characteristic of contemporary popular spirituality today.

The new emphasis on the human being also means that religion has become more secular, interlinked with the sixth and last process discussed below. Contemporary religion is manifesting itself in far more secular ways than before, of which the emphasis on the human being, at the expense of supernatural beings, is but one aspect.

From after death to this-worldliness

According to Linda Woodhead, the "turn to life" is one of the most significant trends in religion and spirituality in the West since the Second World War. Today the emphasis in religion is on this world, not on the world to come. In popular spirituality, the divine is conceived of as immanent in both the individual and in this world. Aspects of this world, such as nature or intimate relationships, are seen as sacred.⁴² Together with the flight from the deferral of personal gratification and the emphasis of the divine immanent in this world, Woodhead points out that also subjects like punishment, hell, damnation and demonology have almost completely dropped out of the picture, in popular spirituality as well as in institutionalised religion. According to Peter Beyer, the globalisation of society does not lead mainly to the death of God, but to the death of the devil, because of the liberal tendency to be

all-inclusive. Without forces of evil, the forces of order and good also become more difficult to identify, undermining or relativising, for instance, moral codes.⁴³

Alver et al. point out that popular spirituality today expresses itself not only in contexts we are used to calling religious, but also everywhere in secular culture. There are no longer any sharp borders between the religious and the secular, between holy and profane. The profane is sacralised, and the sacred is rendered profane. The sacred is no longer confined to church, or to life after this life, but is conceived of as immanent in the human individual in nature and in intimate relationships.⁴⁴

Globalisation – an outline to a further understanding

Globalisation is a complex process, generating vastly variable impacts across cultures. This paper has not considered the processes that Peter Beyer calls the particularistic religious responses to globalisation, for example the Hindu nationalists, the Muslim fundamentalists or the Christian Right in the United States. To problematise Beyer's classification, however, the particularistic responses to globalisation also in different ways absorb globally transmitted cultural values – most of them, for example, use media technology characteristic of globalisation.⁴⁵

There are also cultural responses which are core elements of the global economy and society, but at the same time are affirming cultural identities. Elaborating on this theme is Manuel Castells, who uses the idea of the *information society* as a key notion for the contemporary global world. The information society is, according to Castells, based on knowledge generation and information processing, and is organised in networks. Castells writes that the global trend for the informational economy is to connect to its network those who are valuable to it, but disconnect those who are valueless. This results in increasing social injustice in the form of income inequality, polarisation, and poverty. Global networks of information and wealth often do not respect the values of historically rooted identities, and has generated a situation in which dominant values threaten other cultural identities. This creates instability and potentially fundamentalist reactions; questions the legitimacy of the development, and creates what Castells calls *resistance identities*.⁴⁶

The core of the theory of the network society is thus the tension between the rise of the network society and cultural identity. The global informational economy threatens cultural identities. Thus, nationalism and religious fundamentalism are basically increasing with the rise of the network society. Castells, however, questions whether the information society always needs to be in conflict with different cultural identities.⁴⁷ Further, Castells writes in another book that resistance identities resist – they do not communicate. They are built around sharply distinct principles, defining an “in” and an “out”.⁴⁸ The social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships, and resistance identity is generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions which are devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society.⁴⁹ For those social actors excluded from or resisting the individualisation of identity attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth, cultural communes of religious, national, or territorial foundation seem to provide the main alternative for the construction of meaning. These cultural communes are characterised by three features: they appear as reactions to prevailing social trends, which are resisted on behalf of autonomous sources of meaning; they are defensive identities that function as refuge and solidarity, to create a defence against a hostile, outside world; and, they are culturally constituted, that is, organised around a specific set of values whose meaning and sharing are marked by specific codes of self-identification - the community of believers, the icons of nationalism, and the geography of locality. The constitution of these cultural communes works on raw materials from history, geography, language, and the environment. They are constructed around historically and geographically determined reactions and projects.⁵⁰

According to Castells, religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism are defensive reactions: reactions against three fundamental threats - globalisation, which dissolves the autonomy of the institutions, organisation and communication systems where people live; against networking and flexibility, which blur the boundaries of membership and involvement and against the crisis of the patriarchal family. When the world becomes too large to be controlled, social actors aim to shrink it back to their size and reach. When networks dissolve time and space, people anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic legacy. When the patriarchal sustenance of personality breaks down, people affirm the transcendent value of family and community, as God’s will. These defensive reactions become sources of meaning and identity by constructing new cultural codes out of historical materials.⁵¹

Castells also describes a third kind of identity besides resistance identity and legitimising identity, this third kind being introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination – which he calls project identity. A project identity is when social actors build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of the overall social structure. Identities that start as resistance may induce projects, and may also become dominant, thus becoming legitimising identities.⁵²

Ronald Inglehart also writes about the knowledge society in contrast to the industrialised society. Industrialisation, says Inglehart, brings rationalisation, secularisation, and bureaucratisation, but the rise of the knowledge society brings another set of changes that move in a new direction, placing an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy, self-expression, and free choice, and giving rise to a new type of society that is increasingly people-centred. Inglehart demonstrates by means of survey data from 81 societies containing 85 % of the world's population, collected from 1981 to 2001 (The World Value Survey), that the basic values and beliefs of the publics of advanced societies differ dramatically from those found in less developed societies – and that these values are changing in a predictable direction as socioeconomic development takes place. Changing values, in turn, have important consequences for the way societies are governed, promoting gender equality, democratic freedom, and a good governance. In the post-industrial phase, there is a shift from survival values to self-expression values (or individualism), which brings increasing emancipation from authority.⁵³

To summarise, several components may underlie the specific developments of globalisation regarding the religious change described in this article. What direction globalisation takes seems to be related to economic and historical developments, and also to power relations. In this case, the parts of the world most affected by globalisation in the way described above, have as a base a rapid and stable socio-economic development, which according to Inglehart leads to individualistic values and effective democracy. It also concerns parts of the world with no recent history of suppression or minority complexes, and a part of the world with more power (economically and otherwise) than other parts, and with a minimal glorious past. Parts of the world with the opposite characteristics – weak socio-economic development, no power, a glorious history – may be more open (as may parts of cultures with these characteristics) to particularistic responses to globalisation.

A neo-liberal framework?

In the following we will briefly shed light on the basic features of neoliberalism, based on how it is presented by David Harvey (2005) and Raymond Plant (2010). The aim of this brief presentation is first and foremost to underline some of the shared features between on the one hand neoliberal thought and culture and, on the other, the received understanding of central parts of the contemporary religious landscape. From this background we will finally point to some potentially critical issues concerning our position as scholars of religious studies. As we stated earlier in this chapter, there are reasons to be critical of some of the above representations. Despite tendencies towards a shared understanding of changes in contemporary religion, both difficulties and differences concerning how to express and articulate these are obvious from our discussion. Further, representations of contemporary religion might also suffer from value judgements. Finally, from the discussion about the relevance of globalisation we could claim that important societal issues are involved.

Our brief description of neoliberalism should not, however, overrule the fact that within neoliberal thinking we on the one hand have a set of quite divergent theoretical or philosophical positions (see Plant) and, on the other, that the practices and implementations of neoliberal politics varies globally to a large extent (see Harvey). Finally, neoliberal ideologies are inherently connected to the European tradition of political thought, but whether or not characteristic aspects of Western European history are compatible with neoliberal practices is a complex issue (See Plant 13-16).

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices. According to Harvey this theory proposes that “human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.” (Harvey: 2) Plant’s definition does not differ much from Harvey’s but he emphasises that within neoliberal systems political institutions are expected to provide a “framework of general rules which facilitate the pursuit of private ends, however divergent such ends may be”. (Plant: 6)

Neoliberalism involves a strong emphasis on the rule of law.

In neoliberalism the notion of a common good is set aside. There is no idea of a common good in terms of some essential and collectively endorsed moral goal or purpose in society. This often entails an opposition to social justice as an organising principle in societies and the assertion of social justice is by some proponents seen as a kind of old-fashioned nostalgia

rooted in a time and place that allowed for societies to direct individuals and groups to contribute to and facilitate the achievement of a common good (Plant: 94) Hence, neoliberalism is not about the ‘what’ of politics, such as specific goals to be collectively attained. It is rather about the ‘how’ of politics, i.e. defining the practices in relation to general terms and conditions for the implementation of a neoliberal politics, together with the rights and duties which will enable individuals to pursue their diverse goals according to these. (Plant 6-7) As Plant writes: “[t]his theory sees freedom as part and parcel of human agency – the ability to construct and carry forward what Hayek calls a ‘coherent plan of his own’. “ (Plant: 71) Hence, individuals have a moral right to freedom of action and this right places constraints on the actions of others and on the individual concerned. Exercising this freedom should not infringe the similar rights of all others. (Plant: 51) This view includes the idea that the individual also has some assured private sphere, that private property is given high priority and an emphasis on the market is the main mechanism by which these conditions are achieved.

Concerning conceptions of human nature it should be clearly stressed that most neoliberal thinkers avoid normativity and understandings of human nature that go beyond focusing on the person as a centre of subjective choice (Plant 253). This ‘realist’ stance is also present in other ways. Some neoliberal thinkers lean towards evolutionary perspectives through which neoliberal practices are rendered more or less natural. Hayek, for example, presents the view that we are now living in a condition that can be characterised as a ‘Great Society’. The former tribal-like society was, according to this, based on shared values, informal relations and solidarity while the new modern condition is based on diversity and anonymity and generates abstract and complex relationships and the need for new forms of interaction. (Plant 31-36)

However, references to a natural development, or a realist, non-normative stance embedded in neoliberal thinking should not allow us to neglect other aspects. The neoliberal global trend is not just a matter of economic practices. It is just as much a matter of a cultural trend, or “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all formerly held ethical beliefs” (Harvey: 3) Further, neoliberal economic practices cannot be facilitated and implemented in a vacuum. For a set of ideas and practices to become dominant as common sense, i.e. to be taken for granted and not open to question, it also has to appeal to our intuitions, instincts, values and, desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social

world we inhabit. Or to put it in the words of Margaret Thatcher “economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul” (cited in Harvey: 23).

When we look at neoliberalism in terms of culture we can also more easily recognise some overlapping areas between, on the one hand the received understanding of contemporary religious change presented above, and neoliberalism. The main component in this overlapping area is, of course, a strong emphasis on individualism and freedom, a feature of neoliberalism that holds a very prominent place in neoliberal thinking. Plant (p12) writes: “[i]ndividualism and liberty are not just subjectively endorsed ‘bright ideas’, nor are they metaphysically grounded. Rather, they are complex ideas with equally complex historical roots and very different forms of expression: religious, philosophical, ethical, political, and aesthetic.” From the neoliberal perspective, as well as in many cases of contemporary religiosity, it is considered a basic value that individuals themselves can choose the ends, goals, and the goods of their own lives.

The neoliberal emphasis of individualism is the focal point through which other dimensions emerge that connect to significant characteristics of contemporary religious change. Briefly, we can claim that this is evident in particular for the following features: from a neoliberal perspective the possibility of developing a normative ‘science’ is denied. ; if all ends are determined by individual subjective choice there cannot be such normativity. (Plant 58). It is claimed that a person cannot be mistaken about these choices since they are non-cognitive. The emphasis on experience is also a feature of neoliberal thinking, derived from the focus on individualism, since individual choices are based on desires, passions, and emotions and not discovered by the exercise of reason. (Plant 53, 60). This emphasis of the subjective position involves, of course, an anti-authoritarian position and a recognition of a society strongly marked by complexity and diversity.

Hence, within the neoliberal position we find striking similarities with characteristics of contemporary religious change. Except for individualism and the radical emphasis on the human being, together with the resulting move away from collectivism, we also find forms of egalitarianism and eclecticism. The shift towards subjective experience further involves a specific distanced position in relation to rationalisation. The idea of the rule of law takes the form of a moral ideal that is closely related to ideas about the spontaneous order and a fragmented and dispersed nature of knowledge (Plant 25).

The similarities between on the one hand characteristics of contemporary religious change and neoliberal culture and politics on the other, are based on general received understandings and explored very briefly in this chapter. Still, we find that they are striking and give reason to raise some general issues. In this chapter we will not, however, pose any questions concerning these similarities as such or, for instance, how neoliberal culture has affected contemporary religious development. Rather, we would like to raise a question about the role of scholarly interpretations.

Even though the scholarly work about contemporary religious change presented and summarised in this chapter is based on thorough reflection and often also on empirical analyses, it still always involves an element of interpretation. Hence, the similarities also need to be understood in terms of the expressive and articulating act of language and discourses (see Taylor 1985: 131, 263, 290f). Further, all forms of engagement with politics, or more general conceptions or representations of man and society are associated with and require imagination, no matter how natural or realistic they claim to be. This involves the pursuit of both fantasies and illusions (see Geuss 2010).

This notion involves by necessity the idea that scholars do not only represent more or less well grounded descriptions of contemporary religious landscapes, but that they also take part in forming and shaping these landscapes for both people involved in religion and scholars of religion. However, this does not imply that the idea about contemporary change is misguided, or strongly distorted, or that the main direction of contemporary religious change depicted above is wrong. Neither is it a claim that scholars are ‘doing politics’. Rather it is an observation that the kinds of similarities outlined here indicate how scholars are dependent on dominant societal and cultural discourses in their effort to interpret and communicate their findings. This implies that there is a continuous need for an explicit critical distance in combination with a high level of conceptual reflexivity. Conceptions of man are vital elements in research on religion and bear significant underlying attitudinal dimensions (Nynäs 2006). Hence, there are strong ethical implications embedded in how we as scholars make sense of contemporary religious change. These need to be made explicit and evaluated, in particular as the conception of man and society in neoliberal thought is controversial in several ways (Plant 2010). The fact that neoliberal thought dismisses the issue of social justice is of course an additional reason for aiming at a high level of conceptual reflexivity. The neoliberal discourse on interpretations of contemporary religious change might have a

negative effect on the scholarly work that is done and make us blind to certain aspects of contemporary development.

Conclusion

Several observations indicate that there are silent changes happening in contemporary religiosity that need more attention from scholars of religious studies. The thesis discussed in this paper is that globalisation is a key factor in this religious change. Essentially the contributions of globalisation are connected to the inclusion of all and everything in a globalised world, and the consequential process of relativisation. Reasons for such responses to globalisation in Western cultures may connect to issues of socio-economic developments, power and future-oriented identities, as responses to globalisation may also manifest in radically other ways.

Essentialised categories of “religion” and different kinds of religion, whether New Age or Christian, make less and less sense in the global world. All borders blur and elements migrate freely with individual choice as the only limit. Elements of the historical field of alternative religion mix more and more with other elements of religion in the popular mode, and have become part of the current mainstream. As indicated in the introductory chapter, it has become relevant to reflect on religion in terms of liquidity. Hence, with Linda Woodhead, we want to emphasise that the changes discussed in this paper involve a change *in* religion, not *from* religion. Thus this paper is also a contribution to the secularisation debate. As one of the key processes involved in the contemporary religious change is a sacralisation of the profane, there is, however, a new difficulty for scholars of religious studies: that of recognising and sorting out which expressions are religious and which are not. This is also discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume.

Finally, difficulties and differences concerning how to express and articulate contemporary changes in religion makes research vulnerable to dominant cultural and societal discourses and with them limited conceptions of man and society. In what has been discussed here we might observe some vital similarities between representations of contemporary religion and neoliberal discourse. This is not necessarily only a matter of empirical observation, but also of tendencies in scholarly interpretations. This problematic scholarly condition requires a high

level of conceptual reflexivity and ethical sensitivity, especially because of the close connection between contemporary religious development and globalisation.

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Notes

¹ Extensive parts of this chapter have been published in the article by Liselott Frisk: Liselott Frisk, XXXX

² Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1996), 1.

³ Wouter Hanegraaff “Spectral Evidence of New Age Religion: On the substance of ghosts and the use of concepts,” in *JASANAS* (London: Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies Association, 2005); Olav Hammer, *På spaning efter helheten. New Age – en ny folktro?* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1997); Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Michael York, “Wanting to Have Your New Age Cake and Eat It Too,” in *JASANAS* (London: Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies Association, 2005).

⁴ Liselotte Frisk, “Vad är New Age? Centrala begrepp och historiska rötter,” *Svensk religionshistorisk årsskrift* (1997).

⁵ Hammer, *På spaning efter helheten. New Age – en ny folktro?*; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, 514.

⁶ Frisk, “Vad är New Age? Centrala begrepp och historiska rötter”; York, “Wanting to Have Your New Age Cake and Eat It Too”, 29; Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*.

⁷ Gordon J. Melton, “A History of the New Age Movement,” in *Not Necessarily the New Age. Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Basil Buffalo (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 35-36.

⁸ York, “Wanting to Have Your New Age Cake and Eat It Too”, 17.

⁹ Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 5–6.

¹⁰ There has also been a scholarly discussion as to whether New Age should be considered "alternative" and "countercultural", or if it should be viewed as "mainstream". For example, James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton call New Age "an integral part of a new, truly pluralistic 'mainstream'" (Lewis & Melton 1992: ix), while Hanegraaff means that all New Age trends are intended as alternatives to currently dominant religious and cultural trends, and that there is a persistent pattern of New Age culture criticism, directed against what are perceived as the dominant values of Western culture in general, and of modern Western society in particular (Hanegraaff 1996: 515-516). Sutcliffe argues that the term "alternative" is problematic when used in connection with New Age, as some of its spiritual styles have fully entered popular culture and are circulating in advertising, television, the world wide web, paperbacks and magazines. Sutcliffe suggests the use of "alternative spirituality" for the extensive historical field from which New Age emerged, thereby suggesting that what was alternative yesterday is mainstream today (Sutcliffe 2003: 5). A similar view is taken by Hanegraaff in a later paper, where he says that New Age has developed from a distinct counter-culture to a dimension of mainstream culture (2005: 48).

¹¹ Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, 9.

¹² Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, 214-223.

¹³ Paul Heelas, "The Spiritual Revolution: From 'Religion' to 'Spirituality'," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, eds. Linda Woodhead et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 365.

¹⁴ Heelas, "The Spiritual Revolution: From 'Religion' to 'Spirituality'", 358

¹⁵ Heelas, "The Spiritual Revolution: From 'Religion' to 'Spirituality'", 361

¹⁶ Linda Woodhead, "The Turn to Life in Contemporary Religion and Spirituality," in *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium*, eds. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (Brighton/Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 111-113.

¹⁷ Woodhead, "The Turn to Life in Contemporary Religion and Spirituality", 113-117.

¹⁸ Woodhead traces these changes back to a combination of significant social, political and economic transformations from the 1970s, or even earlier, which typify "late

industrial” society: unprecedented levels of affluence and post-secondary education, the growth of the service sector of the economy, and the information revolution. All these changes serve, according to Woodhead, to empower more and more individuals to make decisions for themselves, to shape their lives as they wish, and to extend the power of choice and consumption into more and more spheres of life (2001:117-121). In this paper, we focus on globalisation as one of the key factors of the contemporary religious change. Globalisation is, however, only one factor triggering this change and other aspects of modernisation must of course also be taken into account.

¹⁹ Woodhead, “The Turn to Life in Contemporary Religion and Spirituality”, 117-121.

²⁰ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2.

²¹ Heelas and Woodhead *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*.

²² Ursula King, ed., *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton/Portland: Sussex Academic Press 2001), 5–9; Wade Roof Clark, Carroll W. Jackson and David A. Roozen *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), 247-252; Eileen Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?” in *Religion and Patterns of Social Transformation*, eds. Dinka Marinovi Jerolimov, Siniaa Zrinaak and Irena Borowik (Zagreb: IDIZ, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, 2004a) 23–47; Hanegraaff “Spectral Evidence of New Age Religion: On the substance of ghosts and the use of concepts”.

²³ We do not find the subjectivisation thesis of Heelas & Woodhead convincing, especially as their representation is loaded with subjective judgements: for example the mode of life as it is represented as “conformity to external authority” (2005: 4) or “neglect of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives” (2005: 7), while the mode of subjective-life is presented as an “authentic connection with the inner depths of one’s unique life-in-relation” (2005: 4) or to “live in accordance with the deepest, sacred dimension of their own unique lives” (2005: 7).

²⁴ Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?”

²⁵ The sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire defines “non-official religion” as a set of religious and quasi-religious beliefs and practices that is not accepted, recognised, or controlled by official religious groups. Whereas official religion is relatively organised and coherent, nonofficial religion is unorganised, inconsistent, heterogeneous, and changeable. Unofficial religion is sometimes called “folk”, “common” or “popular”, because it is the religion of ordinary people rather than the product of religious specialists in a separate organisational framework. McGuire writes that popular religion is no single entity, and that its elements are diverse (McGuire 1992: 104-105). In this article, we will use the concepts popular, unofficial and uninstitutionalised religion as interchangeable concepts, not going into, for the moment, the different meanings different labels might have.

²⁶ There are, of course, different degrees of organisation and institutionalisation, which forms a spectrum from institutionalised to uninstitutionalised, rather than two separate categories. Although popular religion to a great extent is expressed in the private mode, there are also institutional forms and social expressions. Every healer or channeller has her/his embryonic organisation, and there is social transmission and interaction in sessions, courses and lectures. Other social arenas for popular religion are media, books and the internet.

²⁷ The label “new religious movements” could of course also be discussed, but we would argue that, in spite of many difficulties, it at least makes more sense to speak about new religious movements as a separate category, as “newness” in connection with religious organisations often relates to some special characteristics, such as a living charismatic leader, a deviating belief system, an authoritarian structure, a dichotomous world-view and tension in relation to society (Barker 2004b).

²⁸ King, *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium*, 5-9.

²⁹ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 41–43.

³⁰ Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, (1994), 2.

³¹ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 26-27.

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- ³² Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 9.
- ³³ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 30.
- ³⁴ Liselotte Frisk, "Globalization or Westernization? New Age as a Contemporary Transnational Culture," in *New Age Religion and Globalization*, ed. Mikael Rothstein (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001).
- ³⁵ Liselotte Frisk, "The Satsang Network: A Growing Post-Osho Phenomenon," *Nova Religio*, 6, no.1 (October 2002).
- ³⁶ Göran Gustafsson, *Tro, samfund och samhälle: Sociologiska perspektiv* (Örebro: Libris, 1997), 35.
- ³⁷ Roof et al., *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, 244.
- ³⁸ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 79-81.
- ³⁹ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 71-72.
- ⁴⁰ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 87-104.
- ⁴¹ Liselotte Frisk, "Religion och medicin inom nyreligiositeten: Deepak Chopra och Stephen Levine som två föreläsare," *Chakra*, 2 (2004).
- ⁴² This tendency is interrelated also with other changes in our society, above all the material surplus, triggering a need for religious legitimation.
- ⁴³ Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 72.
- ⁴⁴ Bente Gullveig Alver et al., *Myte, magi og mirakel: I møte med det moderne* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1999), 7-13.
- ⁴⁵ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000).

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- ⁴⁶ Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen, *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–10.
- ⁴⁷ Castells and Himanen, *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model*, 127-128.
- ⁴⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 421.
- ⁴⁹ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7-8.
- ⁵⁰ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 68-69.
- ⁵¹ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 69.
- ⁵² Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7-8.
- ⁵³ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–5.