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3. TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF CONSTRUCTING “RELIGION”: NEW AGE DATA AND UNBOUNDED CATEGORIES

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In this paper, I will use the general theory of religion by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge from the 1980s as a starting point to discuss some challenges of constructing religion. Stark and Bainbridge presented their general theory of religion in several books and articles, the main ones being *A Theory of Religion* from 1987 (paperback edition 1996) and *The Future of Religion* (1985). The theory highlights some important issues concerning religion generally, but in particular focuses on new religious movements and the more unorganized environment popularly called “New Age”¹. The issues it deals with are still very much up-to-date, and attempts to solve them have been classical in religious studies for decades. Triggered by some results in my research in the contemporary New Age environment, and in relation to more recent discussions about how to understand and deal with the problematic concept of religion, I would like to discuss their theory anew.

The aim of this chapter is thus to discuss selected parts of the Stark and Bainbridge theory of religion in relation to contemporary empirical studies and some recent theoretical discussions about “religion”, including the prototype theory of Benson Saler ([1993] 2000). In particular, I will use material from a local mapping project of religion and worldview that I have conducted in Dalarna since 2008.² A questionnaire distributed by one of my students to participants in a yoga class in Dalarna is also used as a base to discuss parts of the theory of Stark and Bainbridge, as one of the aims of this questionnaire was to operationalize some of their postulations (Andersson 2010)³.

In particular, three special issues, addressed by Stark and Bainbridge and crucial to their theory, are discussed and problematized in this paper. These issues are: degree of organization; degree of tension to society (the surrounding sociocultural environment); and the secular/religious dichotomy. The last issue is given particular attention. The paper will conclude by presenting some ideas which may be valuable for fruitful approaches to the concept of religion, oriented towards a new paradigm for the study of religion.

THE STARK AND BAINBRIDGE THEORY OF RELIGION

The theory of Stark and Bainbridge as a whole is quite complex. I will below explain and discuss only the parts most relevant in the context of New Age phenomena and to the purpose of this paper.

Rewards and compensators

The starting point of the theory is the postulate that humans seek what they perceive to be *rewards* and avoid what they perceive to be costs. Through the quest for rewards, people are forced into exchange relationships, where everyone seeks high exchange ratios. Power is defined as degree of control over one's exchange ratio, and Stark and Bainbridge observe that individual and social attributes which determine power are unequally distributed among persons and groups in any society (Stark & Bainbridge 1996: 27–34).

In the absence of a desired reward, Stark and Bainbridge claim that explanations will often be accepted which posit attainment of the reward in the distant future or in some other non-verifiable context. In this context, they introduce the concept of *compensators*, which they define as postulations of rewards according to explanations that cannot be immediately evaluated. Compensators are a promise of a reward in the future. If the promise turns out true, the compensator becomes a reward. If not, it remains a compensator, a substitute for the desired reward. Compensators could be *specific*, that is they could substitute for single, specific rewards like the curing of a disease; or *general*, that is for a cluster of many rewards or for rewards of great scope and value. The most general compensators offer explanations for questions of ultimate meaning, such as questions like "Does life have a purpose?", "Is death the end?", or "Why do we suffer?". Some of these questions require, according to Stark and Bainbridge, a supernatural answer, as "purpose" implies a conscious agent beyond the natural world. Other general compensators could encompass untestable and extremely general explanations like "God created heaven and earth", or philosophies of life or theologies, or the promise of eternal life (*ibid.*: 27–39). Compensators fall along a continuum from the specific to the general, so there is really no clear boundary between them (Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 7).

Religion, magic and science

As clarified above, the most general compensators can be supported only by supernatural explanations. "Supernatural" refers, according to Stark and Bainbridge, to forces beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter or ignore physical forces. Stark and Bainbridge define *religion* as referring to systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions. *Magic* is, in contrast, limited to compensators for fairly specific rewards. Religion may, for example, promise eternal life, while magic would be limited to recovery from a particular illness or to a charm against contracting the illness.

As magic deals in specific compensators, it may become subject to empirical verification. Therefore only magic, not religion, is vulnerable to scientific test. While religion is always based on supernatural assumptions, magic is not necessarily, but could be. Another difference between religion and magic is that religion may create stable organizations because the most general compensators do require long-term, stable patterns of exchange. Magicians, however, serve individual clients, not lead organizations (Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 31–3).

Stark and Bainbridge distinguish magic and *science* on the basis of the results of empirical testing (*ibid.*: 31). Magic consists of beliefs that are assumed true in the presence of disconfirming evidence (Stark & Bainbridge 1996: 105). In short, science works; magic does not.

Church, sect and cult

Stark and Bainbridge differ between *church*, which is a conventional religious organization, *sect* which is a deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices, and *cult* which is a deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices.⁴ Sects come into being through schisms with existing organizations in their religious tradition. Cults represent either cultural innovation or cultural importation. Another way to describe religious deviance is, according to Stark and Bainbridge, that both sects and cults are in tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment. A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists. There is, however, a continuum running from high to low tension with society (Stark & Bainbridge 1996: 124–7). Cults could differ in their degree of tension to society, depending on their degree of organization.

Stark and Bainbridge further classify cults into three categories, depending on degree of organization. The least organized category they call *audience cult*. An audience cult has no formal organization, and the participants could rather be seen as consumers (of lectures, magazines or books) than members. *Client cults* are more organized, and offer specific compensators, which means that they deal with magic. Client cults are also characterized by a relationship between therapist and patient or between consultant and client. Considerable organization may be found among those offering the cult service, but the clients themselves remain little organized and may often retain an active commitment to another religious movement or institution. Only *cult movements*, the third category, offer the most general compensators, the kind we have defined as available from religions. Cult movements basically explain the meaning of the universe and how to gain everlasting life. Thus, only cult movements are fully developed religious movements, aiming at satisfying all religious needs of converts. There is no dual membership with another faith (Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 26–30).

Cults can enjoy relatively low tension with their environment as long as they do not organize into religious movements. Audience cults often stay in low tension with their environment. Client cults, too, do not provoke great hostility in the surrounding sociocultural environment. It is when cults become religious movements that their environment heats up, since according to the model the more total the movement, the more total the opposition (*ibid.*: 36).

SOME RESULTS FROM THE MAPPING PROJECT IN DALARNA

New Age activities mapped in Dalarna

Having sketched the salient features of Stark and Bainbridge's ambitious theory of religion, I turn now to my empirical findings on New Age in Sweden. Dalarna is a predominantly rural and small industrial area in Sweden with about 270,000 inhabitants, including some smaller towns, two with a population of 40–50,000 inhabitants. The project aimed at mapping all groups with religious social activities, or meetings with some kind of religious connotation in a broad sense (with two or more participants present), with special focus on activities outside traditional Christianity. The reflections below are based on the preliminary results of this study, in combination with a basic knowledge of the New Age field in Sweden studied since the beginning of the 1990s.

From an organizational perspective using Stark and Bainbridge's terminology, both audience cults and client cults were found to be abundant in Dalarna. We found, for example, several annual or biannual fairs taking place all over Dalarna, with a predominantly New Age content attracting a relatively large attendance taking the form of audience cults. They would offer no long-term commitment, but opportunities to try, for example, short séances, tarot readings or energy massage, as well as an opportunity to buy books with New Age content, or crystals or other items with New Age implications. In several of these fairs, however, we found that the New Age activities were often presented side by side with mainstream activities like, for instance, physiological massage, foot care, handicrafts or local chocolate goods. The fair was often called "health fair" or "harmony fair", not signaling any specific spiritual content, although the "spiritual" would be the dominant generic content.

We also found some small holistic centres where different New Age practitioners worked together and shared premises offering treatments like yoga, mindfulness, healing, acupuncture or different kinds of massage. According to Stark and Bainbridge, these would be client cults. Interestingly enough, there were also sometimes mainstream health activities in the same premises, for example mainstream physiotherapists, health advisers, or even doctors and psychologists. Sometimes the same persons conducted both

mainstream health activities and New Age-related activities, as in the case of one producer who had stress management, weight management and stop smoking advice on the programme, but also personal spiritual development.

Also classifiable as client cults were the seven retreat centres situated in the relatively small area of Dalarna. They all have different orientations, but several mix different kinds of activities and sources of inspiration. Examples, both situated close to the town Rättvik, are the Baravara retreat centre with a post-Osho inspired orientation, and Berget, a predominantly Christian retreat centre where different body practices like Zen meditation or yoga are also practised.

There seems, however, to be less engagement in what Stark and Bainbridge call cult movements and sects. Few of these were found in Dalarna, and when found they attracted relatively few members. Our tentative conclusion is that, compared to twenty years ago, there seems to be an increasing engagement in activities with less degree of organization, that is, audience cults and client cults. It also seems that the borders with “mainstream activities” are weakening.

From the perspective of content, the market of health and healing seems to be quite dominant in Dalarna. There were several different kinds of healing techniques, like Reiki healing, reconnective healing, diksha, or acupuncture, and body practices like yoga. But there were also several health activities closer to mainstream sociocultural interests, like spa procedures or advisers for diet and exercise.

There seemed also to be a certain emphasis on psychological orientations and the personal development sector, often with some roots in the human potential movement from the 1960s (see Anderson 1993). This would include, for example, reincarnation therapy and personal development. Recently the “life coaching” phenomenon has grown, very much based on the concept of inner potential and personal development. Much of this development is also part of the dominant sociocultural environment, with societal institutions like schools, universities, hospitals and even churches offering courses and sessions with this content. We found several personal life coaches in Dalarna, who included what they themselves called spiritual dimensions, some working in mainstream areas like the employment office, or as “existential advisors” at a health centre otherwise inclined towards mainstream treatment.

Finally, we found many Eastern-inspired body, breathing and awareness practices like yoga and mindfulness. Yoga boomed in all parts of Sweden at the turn of the twenty-first century. National surveys show that around 20 per cent of the Swedish population have practised yoga⁵ and courses in all kinds of yoga are abundant in Dalarna. Also these courses are sometimes offered in established societal institutions, such as in hospitals for pregnant women, or in the Christian retreat centre. Neither the amount of yoga on offer, nor its mainstream orientation, was the case twenty years ago.

The questionnaire distributed to fifteen yoga practitioners in Dalarna

In spring 2010, as part of a student assignment at Högskolan Dalarna, one of my students constructed a questionnaire which was distributed to fifteen participants in yoga classes in Dalarna. One of the purposes of this questionnaire was to operationalize the Stark and Bainbridge concepts *rewards* and *specific and general compensators*, and to discuss those concepts in relation to a small empirical study. The number of respondents was quite small and the respondents were not chosen according to any particular method, so the study should be considered as a pilot case study rather than being representative of any larger group of yoga practitioners. The method and results are discussed in an unpublished thesis (Andersson 2010).

There were several questions in the questionnaire, but only two items are discussed in this paper. First, "What is yoga?" Here, the respondents were instructed to mark statements they thought corresponded to their understanding of yoga. Several statements could be marked by each person. The options were devised to correspond to Stark and Bainbridge's definitions of specific and general compensators. Below the number of marks for each statement is indicated:

Yoga may help with physical problems like back pain and head ache	14
Yoga is good for the spiritual dimension of the human being.	8
Yoga can diminish depression	13
Yoga can give enlightenment.	9
Yoga can diminish stress and give relaxation	15
Yoga can make you come closer to god	2
Yoga can improve your karma	6

As we see, almost everyone marked the statements intended to correspond to specific compensators (physical problems, depression, stress). But around half of the respondents also marked alternatives intended to correspond to general compensators, statements which included a spiritual dimension, enlightenment or improving of karma. Further, two respondents marked the alternative that yoga can make you come closer to god.

The second question was open-ended and the answers subject to interpretation:

"Why did you begin to practise yoga and what did you at that time think that the practice of yoga would give you? Have you found what you wanted?"

The answers could be classified in more than one category. Fourteen of the fifteen respondents gave answers that related to physical or mental health, like physical training, balance, increased mobility, pain relief or inner peace. One replied that she searched for help to meditate. All except two said that they had found what they wanted from yoga.

In summary, the motivations to start to practise yoga seemed to be more oriented towards specific rather than general compensators. However, most

of the respondents claimed to have received what they were looking for from yoga. In Stark and Bainbridge's terminology, this would move the motivations from compensators to rewards. This matter will be further discussed below.

DISCUSSION: CAN STARK AND BAINBRIDGE'S THEORY OF RELIGION EXPLAIN NEW AGE?

Degree of organization

Classification is a problematic subject. One problem is that reality often does not seem to fit into the boxes that a classification system constructs; there are often cases in between. Second, the basic criteria for a classification system have to be chosen with care. To be meaningful, the criteria should be chosen so that the subjects sorted into one and the same category share more features than the one criterion that the category is based on (see the discussion in Hammer 2004b). Stark and Bainbridge's criterion of *degree of organization* seems to fill this basic demand. Degree of organization appears to reveal something characteristic about the group which may also predict other features with some certainty. Although a relation is not always the case, a high degree of organization, a high level of participation and an expected participation in one unique organization are often related features (cult movements). Likewise, a low degree of organization, a low level of participation and simultaneous participation in several phenomena also often belong together (audience cults).

The preliminary results of the mapping project in Dalarna seem to indicate that there is an inclination towards participating in audience and client cults rather than towards membership in sects and cult movements in contemporary Sweden. This tendency is connected to the increasing individualism in Nordic and Northern European societies. People are expected to select and choose for themselves in all areas, and also to be responsible for their choices.

In the religious sphere there seems to be a trend towards not belonging to an organization, but choosing one's own life style and combining and composing belief elements with inspiration from different sources. The unwillingness to engage in organizations may be illustrated by some statistics from the Swedish Lutheran Church, where membership figures fell from 95.2 per cent in 1972 to 89.0 per cent in 1990 and to 71.3 per cent in 2009, while confirmation figures fell from 76.3 per cent in 1972 to 63.4 per cent in 1990 and as low as 32.0 per cent in 2009.⁶

Not only religions but also political parties and welfare organizations have problems engaging people in contemporary Sweden. Ronald Inglehart connects this trend to the increasing growth of the post-industrial society in Western culture, where there is a shift from survival values to self-expression

values or individualism, which brings increasing emancipation away from traditional sources of authority (Inglehart & Welzel 2005: 1–5).

The structure of audience and client cults fits into this pattern of individualism and choice, and the observation that these categories are well represented in the religious sector is therefore quite expected.

Degree of tension to society (the surrounding sociocultural environment)

Degree of tension to society is another criterion that Stark and Bainbridge use to categorize religious groups. Like their other criteria, the degree of tension is postulated as a spectrum from low to high degree, and it is also related to other features in religious groups like degree of internal organization. It is a criterion often used in classical typologies concerning religious organizations, starting with Troeltsch's typology of church and sect (Troeltsch 1981).

However, there are some problems with the conceptualization of tension to the "surrounding sociocultural environment". One implicit postulation is that there is a kind of "mainstream" sociocultural environment, and that there are phenomena which are not part of this mainstream. Exactly in what ways sect and cult differ from the postulated surrounding sociocultural environment is, however, not made clear.⁷

Based on the empirical material from Dalarna, I make the observation that the borders between mainstream and New Age activities seem to be weakening. Not having yet identified what is meant by "mainstream", this statement may be seen as problematic. I do not intend to discuss this problem thoroughly here but will below make some hints as to in which directions solutions could be attempted. By "mainstream phenomena" I first include state-funded institutions like hospitals, schools, universities and the employment office. Secondly, such healthcare activities that are paid by the state insurance system, like physiotherapists, acupuncture for pain relief, or psychotherapy. Thirdly, private healthcare and related activities that might seem very peripheral to "religious" or worldview questions (but see the discussion below about the secular/religious dichotomy). These activities could include foot care or classical physiological massage. Fourthly, maybe traditional Christianity, represented particularly by the Swedish Church, should be counted as mainstream. This matter could, however, be discussed from different angles, since church and state were divorced in Sweden in 2000 and Christian orientations are weakening in the Swedish population. When I point to a weakening of borders between New Age and mainstream activities, therefore, I intend to denote activities where phenomena with "more" of a religious or worldview orientation, but with some distance to traditional Christianity, are either incorporated in or funded by state institutions, or become mixed with mainstream secular activities in such a way that the borders and boundaries in the individual perception may become vague or even disappear.

During the fieldwork in Dalarna, it became obvious that “traditional” and “nontraditional” phenomena are now mixed together in the same premises. Established institutions arrange courses in yoga or mindfulness, and traditional foot care (chiropractic) mixes with acupuncture and healing. My impression is that, due to the continually stronger individualism in our culture, traditional boundaries have broken down and are today continually crossed over, creating new cultural phenomena. Thus the criterion of degree of tension to the sociocultural environment suggested by Stark and Bainbridge is still interesting as an analytical instrument: however, in the empirical field, such differences tend to be more and more vague.

The secular/religious dichotomy

The definition, boundaries and understanding of religion has been a heated debate in religious studies for many years (for a recent contribution, see Vásquez 2011). One of the areas where this question becomes important is in the New Age context. The New Age environment demonstrates a strong orientation towards different kinds of physical and psychological therapies, which seem to exist on the very borders of what might be considered religious.

Stark and Bainbridge try to solve the problem of differentiating between religious and nonreligious (secular) by defining religion as “systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions”. The first element in their definition, as discussed, is the distinction between rewards and compensators in which a reward is something you get, and a compensator is something you hope to get in the future. One problem with this differentiation is that it is sometimes a subjective interpretation if you get what you wish or not. Stark and Bainbridge exemplify a specific compensator with a cure of warts, which may be quite easy to judge if it works or not. There are, however, also problems of a more vague and subjective character, like for example “pain”, “depression” or “disharmony”. These problems may also be graded: you can have “more” or “less” pain or disharmony, and they could thus also be cured “more” or “less”.

Most respondents to the yoga questionnaire replied that they had hoped to get either physical or mental rewards from yoga, like physical training, balance, increased mobility, pain relief or inner peace – specific compensators, in other words. But at the same time almost everyone also responded that they had received what they hoped for. This means that in their own interpretation they received rewards, not compensators.

The concept of compensator builds on the notion that “magic” does not work.⁸ But although many therapies in the New Age environment may not “work” in a scientific way (in the sense that the warts disappear by a process which could be scientifically explained and replicated), the *experience* that they work or not is subjective. The process of therapy may change the individual’s attitude to and perception of the problem and thereby the

experience of the situation. In these cases, it seems that the outcome has to be considered a reward, not a compensator. Which might move these activities, in the terminology of Stark and Bainbridge, from magic to science – which is certainly not what they intended.

The same problem holds for what Stark and Bainbridge call general compensators. Even general compensators do not necessarily postulate future rewards. I am, for example, thinking of an "enlightenment movement" with retreat centres in Dalarna and with influences from the Indian advaita philosophy. Here, "enlightenment" should, as far as I can see, be categorized as a general compensator – but nevertheless there are several people in Sweden claiming to have received the "reward", to be "enlightened".⁹ In the subjective experience, enlightenment may not be something hoped for in the future, but something already here and experienced. In this case it must be conceived of as a reward, not a compensator.

Furthermore, what is the exact difference between specific and general compensators? Stark and Bainbridge elaborate surprisingly little on this matter. At one end, the compensators are more "specific" – like the curing of warts – and at the other end the compensators are more "general", like a cluster of different compensators, or compensators of great value. At one end of the spectrum there is magic and at the other end there is religion.

Evidently the constructed difference between rewards and compensators has many problems, and is based on the faulty presumption that it can be objectively determined what works or not. Concerning specific and general compensators, this categorizing seems to fill the basic need that the approach says something interesting about the topic and that the basic criteria coexist with other important characteristics. However, the only way of using the concepts of specific and general compensators constructively, as far I can see, would be to use a graded terminology like "more or less of an orientation towards the specific spectrum", and "more or less of an orientation towards the general spectrum". These categories should be seen as open and not bounded, and could then be used as one perspective among others to increase our thinking and understanding about the borders of religious and secular phenomena.

The natural and the supernatural

Another problem with the application of Stark and Bainbridge's theory to New Age phenomena is the "supernatural" criterion which refers to forces beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter or ignore physical forces.

Just as it is difficult to differ between general and specific compensators, it is difficult to differ between what should be considered natural or supernatural. Like specific and general compensators, these are analytical constructions. As seen from the questionnaire, the individual may practice yoga with the aim of getting increased body mobility, pain relief or inner peace, but may just as well connect yoga to realizing enlightenment or getting

closer to god. However, whether any of these aims are perceived of as connected to “forces beyond or outside nature” is very much subject to individual understanding and interpretation. The postulation of a differentiation between forces “inside” and “outside” nature may also have the basic fault of being culturally biased. In fact, from my fieldwork in New Age environments, I would suggest that a difference between natural and supernatural is not one that many people make or which appears important to them. “Enlightenment” or “inner peace” may well be seen as a condition immanent in nature, if it is even thought of in these terms at all. Often, the intentions, motivations and explanations of individuals active in this environment seem to be very much connected with emotions, experiences and identity, with no emphasis on consistent and intellectually oriented world interpretations where a differentiation between “natural” and “supernatural” would make sense. Individuals form their own religious expressions and symbols, mixed with secular elements. This postulation by Stark and Bainbridge may therefore not be possible or advisable to apply in a New Age environment.

STARK AND BAINBRIDGE’S THEORY OF RELIGION IN A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Theories of religion, like all theories, are historically and culturally situated. The theory of Stark and Bainbridge was created in the mid 1980s. Since then, post-industrial (?) society has been through some changes. A few decades ago, Christianity was still the dominant religious tradition in many Western societies and it could at that time make sense to model the concepts of sect and cult against this influence, as Stark and Bainbridge did in their theory. Today, however, this approach could well be questioned, as the innovative and imported characteristics have intermingled over time with the traditional elements, creating new traditions, however none of them “dominant”. With increased globalization and religious pluralism it has become more problematic to determine what is meant by “the surrounding sociocultural environment”. Which particular sociocultural environment are we measuring against in a pluralistic society?

The theory of religion of Stark and Bainbridge also shares some premises with earlier theories of religion in that the concept of “religion” has a Western and Christian background, and the understanding of the concept has been deeply coloured by the characteristics of Christianity (McGuire 2008: 19–44). The secular/religious dichotomy makes perfect sense from a Christian perspective as Christianity historically has been a sector quite distinct from the secular world, but is less evident in many other forms of religion. In the same way, the dichotomy natural/supernatural makes more sense in a Christian context than in many other cultures. Christianity may thus be an example of a quite special and unusual religion in comparison to other religions, yet it has strongly coloured academic understanding of what

religion is. To study other religious approaches, like contemporary New Age spirituality, some new thinking is necessary.

TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF CONSTRUCTING RELIGION

Based on my research in the New Age environment, I would now like to present some thoughts about fruitful approaches to contemporary religion. Basically, I start by perceiving "religion" as a cultural phenomenon, with no clear boundaries towards other cultural phenomena. In the context of New Age, there are certainly no clear cut borders between what should be considered religious and what should be considered secular. "Enlightenment" or "self realization" may, for example, be interpreted by the individual practitioner as either psychological or religious, but most probably the individual is not even thinking in those terms. In a global and historical context, it may even be the case that clear borders as to what should be considered religious or not is an exception, and that unclear borders, and blending of different kind of phenomena, is the normal state.

How then to solve the problem of defining religion? Do we need definitions at all? Yes, certainly we need definitions in different contexts. For example, as researchers with the task of studying religion, we need to know what phenomena should be included and excluded in our studies. My point is, however, that the definitions we use are always artificial constructions and should be treated as such. From this it follows that there is no universal "best" definition, but that several different definitions could and should be postulated and worked with, depending on their usefulness in different contexts. A multidimensional approach should be encouraged.

In *Conceptualising Religion* ([1993] 2000), the anthropologist Benson Saler presents one interesting approach in which he suggests approaching religion as an unbounded and graded category, with "centrality" and "more or less" as important concepts. Saler uses a blend of Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblances combined with selected insights derived from prototype theory in the contemporary cognitive sciences. For analytical purposes, Saler suggests that religion could be conceptualized in terms of a pool of elements that often cluster together but may do so in greater or lesser degrees. The various examples of the category popularly called "religion" need not, however, all share one feature, or some specific conjunction of features. We should deal with religion in terms of a pool of elements without supposing that any one element should be necessary.

Prototype theory works with central tendencies and peripheries rather than necessities and borders. The clearest or best examples should, according to Saler, be treated as the prototypes of their categories. As the category religion is a relatively recent Euro-American creation Saler claims that we should acknowledge that for most Western scholars the clearest examples of

the category religion, the most prototypical exemplars, are the families of religions that we call Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Those families of religion are connected in complex ways to the development of religion as a Western category, and ideas about them continue to influence how Westerners and persons educated in the West use the term religion. Because of that, Saler suggests that the Western monotheisms might be used as markers that map a productive starting place. Saler argues that some amount of ethnocentrism is probably unavoidable as a cognitive starting point in the search for transcultural understandings. By recognizing such bias, Saler means that we are in a better position to correct for it.

Saler, however, also recommends that anthropologists selectively borrow non-Western categories and experiment with them for describing the cultures of people who do not employ them, just as they use religion as a category for describing the cultures of people who have no word and category for religion. Concepts from native categories could be experimented with as transcultural tools in an attempt to go beyond a Western framework to produce a multicultural anthropology. Saler suggests the concept of “dharma” as one example.

Saler emphasizes that the categories used should rest on central tendencies. Centrality, however, is a concept that implies distance and periphery, and Saler notes that peripheral cases are in fact extremely interesting. With this approach, there will be some clear cases of what we mean by religion, and then candidates that are increasingly less clear and more problematic. As our typicality features diminish, there are fewer reasons to term peripheral candidates religions. Saler recommends deciding by reasoned arguments whether or not to include under the rubric religion candidates that strike us as representing lesser degrees of prototypicality. Ideally, our reasoned arguments will include some statement of what we hope to accomplish by designating phenomena “religions” or “religious”.

In the approach that Saler recommends, there are no clear boundaries drawn about religion. Rather, elements that we may perceive as religious are found in phenomena that many people may not be prepared to call religions. But if our ultimate purpose as scholars is to say interesting things about human beings rather than about religions and religion, appreciation of the pervasiveness of religious elements in human life is far more important than “bounding” religion (Saler 2000). By systematically exploring elements that we associate with religion among less clear exemplars of religiosity, we expand our opportunity to study “religious” elements in a rich diversity of cultural settings. Saler says that we may hope to transcend “religion” as such while coming to understand more about the religious dimension in human life (Saler 2009: 180).

CONCLUSION: NEW AGE AND UNBOUNDED CATEGORIES

Definitions of concepts and classification systems are definitely necessary to clarify our thoughts, conceive of patterns and reflect about new insights in how cultures, societies and human beings work. However, definitions and classification systems are all constructions, some being useful in some contexts, and others in other contexts. As this is the case, multiperspectives in these matters should be encouraged.

Stark and Bainbridge's theory of religion discusses many important features relevant to New Age. Their three interrelated criteria of degree of organization, degree of tension to the sociocultural environment, and the secular/religious dichotomy all relate to classical discussions about different kinds of religious organizations. Based on empirical research in the New Age environment, their theoretical assumptions can, however, be problematized. Some of their postulations seem to be culturally biased and do not fit into how contemporary individuals engage in this environment. One suggestion is that their postulated categories should rather be understood as unbounded than bounded, and also that more subjective and experience-related approaches to religion have to be considered.

An example of an approach to the New Age environment, based on unbounded categories and central tendencies, is a study I conducted in the mid 1990s. My approach was not as elaborate as the approach of Saler, and only dealt with New Age, not with religion as a wider category. Unwilling to construct any borders around the concept of New Age, I investigated which concepts were central in this environment, and which were gradually more peripheral. I found that the concept of "healing" was the most central concept in this kind of spirituality, and that also "energy" was quite central. Very central were also different kinds of practices, like meditation, crystals, massage and Reiki, which indicated a practical orientation rather than a belief orientation. "Body" also got high scores, which indicated corporeal body-centredness and this-worldliness. Also "reincarnation" scored quite high. Concepts quite peripheral, however, were, for instance, "god" or even the notion of "New Age" (Frisk 1997).

One disadvantage with adapting Saler's approach may be the risk that non-Christian religions would still be constructed as marginal and atypical, since Saler recommends using Western monotheism as a starting place. Personally, I believe it is important to try out other possibilities. Instead of focusing on the constructed New Age category, the concept of "healing" could be used as the prototype, as it was found to be central in my own investigations from the 1990s. This attempt would break the boundaries of the constructed category of New Age, and also include as central, for example, charismatic healing currents and different kinds of traditional healing. Some other features, which are traditionally included in the New Age category, such as certain kinds of divination, may be found to be peripheral in

this approach. In this way, cultural expressions may be categorized in new ways, which may bring some new insights as to how human beings deal with the world.

Another disadvantage with Saler's approach is his emphasis on intellectual elements as central in religion. I would like to add that religion, for the individual, is also deeply connected to other dimensions of the human being, such as emotions, attitudes, experiences, social exchange, and identity creation and confirmation (how people position themselves and navigate in life). These aspects of religion may be more difficult to pinpoint and analyse, which is one reason why they are under-researched in religious studies (Riis & Woodhead 2010: 1–3).

Theories are always historically and culturally situated. Today, in comparison to the time when the Stark and Bainbridge theory was launched, individualism is a stronger cultural tendency. In contemporary Dalarna, there is a tendency towards individual experiences and less organized religious engagement. Further, the effects of globalization and increasing pluralism challenge all kinds of traditionally conceived borders. Religious features mix, especially on an individual basis but also organizationally. In an increasingly pluralistic society, it becomes problematic to conceive of a mainstream sociocultural environment set over against a separate New Age environment.

Many theoretical approaches to religion reflect a historical and cultural base in Christianity, and it is clear that we need new ways to think about religion. The New Age environment as such especially actualizes problems with the constructed secular–religious border and thus with the concept of religion itself. In this context, I would welcome experimentation in the spirit of Saler, who suggests working with prototypes and unbounded categories. It is important, however, that we do not stay within the borders of the families of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but that we also take into account other religions and popular cultural expressions, as well as the increasingly more important subjective dimensions of religiosity. In this connection New Age data offer rich possibilities for constructing a new prototype of “religion”.

NOTES

1. No discussion about the definition of New Age is conducted here, but see for instance Frisk 1997 for one discussion about what kind of phenomena could be included.
2. Together with Peter Åkerbäck of Stockholm University, with funding support from The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet).
3. Thank you to my student Mariella Andersson for permission to use this material.
4. This classification of religious organizations differs from most other sociologists of religion. See, for instance, McGuire (2002). Stark and Bainbridge have particularly developed the concept of “cult” to cover not only loosely organized religious orientations but also more strict religious organizations, making the main criteria not the looseness of organization but novel beliefs and practices.

5. See, for example, the survey by the newspaper *Dagen* reported in various articles in 2008. Divided by age, the survey showed that among young people (younger than age 29), about 40 per cent had practised yoga.
6. www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=645562 (accessed October 2010).
7. For a discussion about different understandings of society and sociocultural environment, see Frisk 1993.
8. The concept "magic", as Stark and Bainbridge use it, is of course highly negatively loaded. "Magic" means something that does not work. I would, in the New Age context, prefer to use the concept of "therapy". As this is also the emic concept used in this environment, it may, of course, also be questioned. It seems to me, however, to be more neutral than the concept of magic. However therapy may have mainstream healthcare connotations which are not really valid.
9. See for instance Shanti Kristian, www.uniomystica.se/shanti.html (accessed August 2013).