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Religion in a Secular Society: Popular Religiosity in Sweden

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< Abstract >

This article outlines popular religiosity in Sweden, known as one of the most secularized countries in the world, based on an empirical study of the local area Dalarna. 441 producers offering 738 activities were found.

The methods were classified in eight categories. Most of the methods related to healing in different aspects. Holism is a key principle. The contemporary popular religious milieu has developed from different sources. The mixture of elements from different parts of the world is an expression of the ongoing globalization process.

The article argues that there are, in the popular religious milieu, both culture-specific characteristics and traits with similarities in

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popular religious milieus across cultures. In a secular country like Sweden, religion expresses in secular modes and relates to therapeutic perspectives and personal growth. Other popular religious traits, like healing, divination and communication with the deceased, are discussed from the perspective of cognitive optimality.

Keywords: popular religiosity, Sweden, healing, holism, globalization, the therapeutic turn, optimal cognitivity

I. Introduction

Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world, according to criteria like belief in God, perception of oneself as a religious person, praying, or attending divine service. Additionally, engagement in the traditional churches is constantly declining (worldvaluessurvey; www.svenskakyrkan.se). However, there is something happening outside the churches, on popular arenas, which is important for academics to pay attention to. Retreat centers, healers, health institutes, and harmony fairs are vibrant with life and visitors, expressing elements with a potential to be interpreted from a religious perspective.

The historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith presents a model for religion with focus on spatial categories or places for religious

expression. Although focusing on religion in Antiquity and late Antiquity, from Iran and Mesopotamia in the East to the Mediterranean in the West, his model could well be applied to the contemporary religious situation in Sweden. Smith differs between religion *here*, which he defines as domestic religion in homes and burial sites, with the family as the focus; *there*, which he defines as civic religion and state religion, as practiced in temples and focused on dominant deities, and *anywhere*, which he defines as religious formations expressing as religious enterprises, religious associations and societies, as well as magic. Religion anywhere – which will be the focus of this article – manifests, according to Smith, in many forms, does not relate to any particular place, and is not officially acknowledged by powers within society (2004, 323–34). The term magic encompasses categories such as divination, healing, and execrative (2004, 218).

The aim of this article is to outline popular religiosity in Sweden, expressed on arenas outside the churches and chapels, and discuss these phenomena as expressions of “secular religion”. Perspectives like “the therapeutic turn” and “optimal cognitivity” will be explored. The material derives from the research project “The Meditating Dala Horse”,¹⁾ which was conducted between 2008 and 2011, with the purpose of mapping all kinds of religious activities in the district of Dalarna in Sweden. Dalarna is situated in mid-Sweden and has about 277,000 inhabitants. It has two bigger

1) The project was conducted together with PhD Peter Åkerbäck, Stockholm University, and was funded by the Swedish Research Council. See Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013; 2015.

towns, Falun and Borlänge, with around 56,000 and 48,000 inhabitants respectively. The rest of the district is composed of smaller towns and country side. The project encompassed the religious field as a whole, but focused on the arena in Smith's terminology called "religion anywhere". Our study was based on a survey of *producers* – that is to say, people and organizations (associations, retreat centers, businesses) that set up and arrange various kinds of religious meetings, sessions, and courses. The project did not investigate the receptors, or consumers (except for a modest attempt to a quantitative estimation of how many people use activities in this milieu).

II. The Popular Religious Milieu in Sweden

The project found 441 producers to include in the category "religion anywhere", who together offered a total of 738 activities. Of these findings, most referred to businesses and business-like set-ups of varying sizes. Eight categories were used to structure the methods found: Holistic Massage Techniques; Complementary Western Healing Methods; Eastern Body-Mind Techniques; Eastern Healing Methods; Holistic Psychotherapies; Mediums, Shamans, and Spiritual Beings; Divination and Personality Diagnosis Techniques; and Clearance (harmonization of surroundings). Characteristic of this section of the religious landscape is, among other things, the way in which the activities are structured in sessions, courses, and other types of group meetings, such as lectures.

<Table 1> Supply of holistic methods in Dalarna, Sweden, by type of method (%)

Number of practitioners	N=441
Number of methods offered by them	N=738 %
Holistic massage-techniques (e.g. shiatsu, acupuncture, reflexology)	21,0
Complementary Western healing methods (e.g. homeopathy, kinesiology, Bach-flowers, reconnection healing)	19,1
Eastern Body-mind-spirit techniques (e.g. yoga, meditation, mindfulness)	17,2
Eastern healing methods (e.g. acupuncture, Ayurveda, TCM, reiki)	15,7
Holistic psychotherapies (e.g. coaching, relaxation, personal development)	11,5
Mediums, shamans, and spiritual beings (e.g. mediums, shamanism, channeling, angels, animal communication)	9,6
Divination / personality-diagnosis (e.g. astrology, tarot, palm-reading)	3,9
Clearance (geomantics, feng shui)	1,9

Note: Percentages were calculated in regard to the total number of methods offered.

Holistic massage techniques, or body therapeutic methods, constitute the largest group. The most popular practices in this category are reflexology and acupuncture (pressure point methods with Western and Chinese origins respectively) followed by Rosen Therapy, a Western technique based on the belief that chronic muscle pain can result from repressed feelings, followed by shiatsu (Japanese origin) and different kinds of massage, such as Thai massage.²⁾

2) We included methods which disclosed either existential or super-empirical assumptions, providing, for example, ideological elements as the meaning

Almost as many complementary Western healing methods as holistic massage techniques were on offer in Dalarna. These methods have a partly Western esoteric/occult background, and are nowadays often studied as part of the Western Esotericism discipline (see, for example, Hammer 1999 or Bogdan 2007). Homeopathy is relatively popular, as is also kinesiology. Kinesiology is supposed to measure muscle strength and balance in the body, and is said to treat imbalances and energy blocks through massage and nutritional advice. A number of producers offered just ‘healing’, without specifying exactly which healing methods they use and where they originate. Some have presumably developed their own methods by creative thinking and experimenting.

Eastern body-mind techniques constitute the next category. Many producers use Eastern techniques that involve both body and mind. Yoga is the most popular technique in this category, followed by meditation and mindfulness. Often these methods are learnt in classes and sometimes practised in groups.

The most popular method in the following group, labelled Eastern healing methods, is acupuncture. One reason for the popularity of acupuncture in Dalarna is probably due to the existence of an institute for traditional Chinese medicine in Falun. Reiki, a Japanese healing technique which is said to transfer universal energy, is also popular, as well as diksha, a form of

of life or what happens after death, or non-empirical beliefs such as those concerning energy dimensions in the body or the existence of supernatural beings. Thus, ordinary muscular massage methods were not included in the study. To differ between different kinds of massage techniques, we named the ones interesting for our study “holistic” massage techniques.

healing using touch, originating from India.

The next category is called Holistic psychotherapies. In this category there are methods of Western origin which are therapeutic and psychological in character. In some cases, the body could be used as well, but is not the main instrument, like, for example, in yoga. Examples of methods in this category are coaching, positive thinking, and stress management.

All the categories so far – which constitute more than 80% of the methods – relate to healing in some sense. This will be further discussed below. The three last categories, which are much smaller, deal with communication with spirits, angels, animals or UFOs; divination techniques or techniques for personality diagnosis and personal growth like Tarot or astrology; and clearance or harmonization of the surroundings, like Feng Shui or the more traditional technique of using a dowsing rod (traditionally used to find water, but in popular contexts also used to find and clear so called energy disturbances of different kinds).

1. Healing

The sociologist Meredith McGuire points out that religion and medicine have a long tradition of close relations (2008, 119). After the Reformation, McGuire describes that religion had control over the spiritual sphere only, whereas the treatment of the body was relegated to the profane realm. Elements that were excluded from the sphere of religion often survived in popular religion, and frequently focused on material concerns, such as health, security, and success (McGuire 2008,129–36). This focus is actually what

we see in the contemporary popular religious milieu, the target being especially health and healing. Frisk (1997) indicates healing as a key term in contemporary popular religiosity, and also points to the similarities to the religious concept “salvation”, in the shared aim of attaining a kind of ideal state of being. “Healing” in this context does not refer only to the physical domain, but indicates several other dimensions as well. The sociologist Lena Löwendahl (2002) writes that in the popular religious milieu, health is often perceived as being a normal and primordial condition that comes about when all dimensions of a human being are in balance. When this balance is upset, the result is ill-health (Löwendahl 2002, 212). According to Löwendahl the term health in the popular religious milieu is closely associated, not only with physical health or absence of illness, but also with personal growth, happiness, a sense of meaningfulness, peace of mind, harmony, spirituality, love of the self, and divinity (Löwendahl 2002, 188). The causes of sickness are often explained as being of the mind – thoughts, feelings, and past experiences – or of the spirit – energies and especially events from previous lives. Lifestyle-related causes are also described, such as poor eating habits (Löwendahl 2002, 212), explaining the different types of diets and dietary advice flourishing in these contexts. Healing thus incorporates psychological factors – the healing of inner problems and traumatic experiences – as well as physical factors, since improved physical health is seen as one step towards becoming a whole individual. There is also a dimension of healing that involves the individual getting to know him or herself and grow as a person (Löwendahl 2002,190). In

our material, the latter aspect is notably present in the category Holistic psychotherapies.

McGuire points out that the official religions, in particular Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, legitimize patriarchal hierarchy, and historically have represented the interests of the privileged and dominant social classes, while the non-official religions, like folk healing and magic, have traditionally been female domains. In the Dalarna study, around 80 per cent of the producers were women, a figure which is confirmed by other studies of popular religiosity (Frisk 2000; Woodhead 2007, 115; Ahlin 2007, 57; Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 94). McGuire explains that women have a cultural role that she labels relational, both towards other people and towards the sacred, with the task to help, care and heal (2008, 154-5). It seems that the domain we studied for the project offers a continuation of the traditional cultural role of women, encompassing relationing, healing and caring. At the same time, the popular religious milieu offers women possibilities for powerful religious identities. In this milieu, as Linda Woodhead points out, women can develop new and strong identities that surpasses conventional roles (Woodhead 2007, 121-3).

2. Holism

A concept often used in the context of popular religiosity is “holism”. Holism is commonly understood as a perspective stressing perception of systems as wholes, not as just collections of parts. From a cosmic perspective, adopted in the popular religious milieu, holism refers to the belief that different

dimensions in the world and in the human being are invisibly connected to each other. Regarding disease, for instance, a physical disease might be conceived of as related to mental, spiritual, energy, and life style dimensions respectively, and to heal the disease, changes on several levels might be seen as necessary. Closely related to the concept of holism is the concept “correspondences”, coined by professor Antoine Faivre as one of the six fundamental characteristics of Western Esotericism. Correspondences, seen and unseen, are perceived of as existing among all parts of the universe. Faivre calls correspondences “the principle of universal interdependence”. The concept expresses in different ways. In for example astrology, there are assumed correspondences between the natural world and the invisible departments of the celestial and supercelestial world (Faivre 1994, 10-11).

In our contemporary material of popular religiosity in Dalarna, the holistic principle is definitely a key principle. Healing techniques, comprising more than 80 per cent of the practices in popular religiosity, whether using energy, positive thinking, or clearing past lives, demonstrate the assumption that different dimensions of the human being relate to each other in significant ways. So do also the last three categories in our structure, even though they do not relate to healing. Relations to the deceased, or to angels or other spiritual beings, point to perceived connections between different kinds of worlds, and divination – of which astrology and Tarot are parts – of course presupposes relations between an individual’s life and either the stars or the Tarot cards

or whatever instrument is used for divinatory purposes. Also techniques of clearing, like Feng Shui, work with assumed connections between the physical world and other dimensions, as the way physical objects are placed are thought to influence universal harmony and balance.

3. Globalization

Scrutinizing the methods used in the popular religious milieu, as manifested in our categories, it is clear that the contemporary milieu has developed from a mixture of different sources. There are methods with roots in what today is called Western Esotericism: Western and Eastern ideas rooted in traditions outside Christianity, like the nineteenth-century movements Theosophy and Spiritualism, as well as homeopathy and other traditional healing methods. Also non-Western religions have been influential, especially Eastern religions, although there are influences for example from American Indian native cultures as well. Included in the methods from the East is for example yoga or reiki healing, but also Eastern medical traditions like Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine. There is, as well, a strong psychological and therapeutic component that has its roots in various schools of psychology, though principally in that of the American Human Potential Movement from the 1960s, to be discussed below.

This mixture with components from different parts of the world is a result of the ongoing globalization process. The contemporary world is becoming more and more compressed as a result of increasing worldwide communication, leading to flows of ideas,

people, products, and services between all regions of the world. In this way, elements, ideas, and methods, from different parts of the world, today coexist in one and the same place, side by side, and are either used by the same individuals, or used in the awareness of the existence of a pluralism of other ideas and methods. Due to power structures in the globalization process, however, some parts of the world are more represented than other parts, and some parts are not represented at all (Frisk 2014). It is also not uncommon for migrated popular religious elements to change and adapt to the new local culture, a phenomenon which has made it even more difficult to discuss cultural origin (some of these trends also mixed historically, like Theosophy assimilating elements from the Indian religions, which of course could make our categories in structuring contemporary popular religiosity, called “Western” and “Eastern”, to some extent misleading). We have, for example, recent cases of yoga forms which have been developed in USA, like power yoga, or a Swedish type of yoga – also existing in Dalarna – called life yoga (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013; Frisk 1998). Additionally, the abundance of different elements and methods in the popular religious milieu, together with the individualistic tendency in our culture, has led to developments of new and creative methods. In the Dalarna study, we found several yoga teachers and healers who had simply created their own new yoga and healing systems.

III. Discussion

In this section, I will discuss some of the characteristics of the popular religious milieu as outlined above and as expressed in a secular country like Sweden. First, I will focus on the characteristics in this milieu which are related to “the therapeutic turn”; and second, I aim at discussing the expressions in popular religiosity from the perspective of “optimal cognitivity”. My argument is that in the popular religious milieu we find both specific cultural characteristics – in a secular culture, religious expressions appear in secular modes – and traits which have many similarities to popular religion in almost any culture. The last traits may be explained by the tendency for religion to express in cognitively appealing ways.

1. The therapeutic turn in popular religiosity

Popular religiosity in Sweden has an open, or even negative, relation to the concept “religion”. The popular religious expressions tend to focus on healing and wellbeing rather than on traditional religious concerns as, for example, the question of the existence of God or the significance of life after death. Even in the contexts of communicating with spirits or deceased relatives, the focus is not on the coming world in itself, but rather on the life and personal development of the person attending the séance or meeting. Based on interviews in the Dalarna project, we found that many of the participants in the popular religious milieu would like to distance themselves from the concept “religion”. Some of the interviewees

would rather use the concept “spirituality”, talking about a more personal religiosity oriented towards inner experiences. “Religion”, on the other hand, was perceived of as indicating blind beliefs in dogmas, a characteristic most participants in this milieu did not like to identify with. However, several of the participants did not talk in any of these terms. Instead, they used expressions like “realizing my own inner potential”, “finding inner strength”, or “becoming more myself”, indicating that the focus was the inner harmony of the individual. Many of the statements reflected an essentialistic understanding of the human being, a belief that there is an inner authentic core within the person, something that he or she actually is, in addition to the problem-causing roles and false beliefs which humans tend to identify with (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013).

Thus, the inner harmony and personal growth issue stands out as one of the most significant characteristics of the popular religious milieu in Sweden. This tendency could well be described as an aspect of the “therapeutic turn” of contemporary society, or the trend for psychological orientations to permeate different spheres of society (see for example Madsen 2014). In the popular religious milieu, there are no clear boundaries between religion and psychology/therapy. Expressions like “becoming more myself” may have psychological as well as spiritual connotations, but many participants in the milieu do not construct any difference between these two arenas. Based on our interviews, we draw the conclusion that the assumed boundary between religion and psychology/therapy is an etically constructed boundary based on a traditional

understanding of religion or Christianity in our culture, and that it, to a great extent, is no longer used or applied by individuals engaged in the contemporary popular religious milieu.

Historically, the strong psychological and therapeutic component in the popular religious milieu derives from the secular psychological strands coming into popularity during the 20th century. Several psychological orientations have had a great influence on this milieu, for example Jungian psychology (Hammer 1997). However, the most significant orientation has been that of the Human Potential Movement, created in the 1960s in the USA, closely related to the Esalen Institute in California. It has its roots in humanistic psychology, but is more practically oriented. The focus of the Human Potential Movement is on the concept "human potential", meaning the inner capacity of humans to attain total mental health and self-actualization, and to be "authentic", free from inner and outer restraints such as defense mechanisms and social roles. Authenticity is to be attained through different practices and therapies, often with the aim of acting out emotions, seen as constrained and suppressed by social forces. Body therapies and body awareness are central components, and the focus is here and now, on the present moment, not on searching through the past for the causes of various problems. Group therapy is used, as the encounter with the group is seen as essential. Finally, the Human Potential Movement draws on ideas and practices from all parts of the world, mixing ancient and modern, East and West, science and religion. Especially from the end of the 1960s, religious elements became more prominent, often borrowed from Eastern

religions (Anderson 2004).

The therapeutic strand with origins in the Human Potential movement has entered into and mixed with popular religiosity during the last few decades. The therapy forms have become somewhat milder and less intense, but are still involving body, emotions, and the desire to become “oneself”. Additionally, methods from the Human Potential Movement have been taken up by one new religious movement, the Osho movement formed around the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Today, the Osho movement and its successors has become one of the main expressions of the contemporary Human Potential Movement in Sweden (Frisk 1998).

Another historical current, also significant for the therapeutic turn of popular religiosity, is the American New Thought and mind cure current originating in the middle of the nineteenth century. Innate in these orientations is the assumption that as God represents infinite love and abundance, health is the natural condition for the human being. The primary cause of sickness is conceived of as originating in the mind, a consequence of identifying with mistaken thoughts and beliefs. Wrong thinking manifests as disharmony in the body. The individual is able to create his or her own conditions by learning to use the divine laws by right thinking. To change one’s thoughts and beliefs is thus essential, and a kind of affirmative prayer developed, in which the main theme was to thank God for complete health. This practice in turn developed to the practice of affirmations, quite common in the contemporary popular religious milieu. Affirmations are explained as affirming

thoughts that you have for example health, however usually without the prayer part, being purely psychological. On the secular side, these current have been one of the strong influences of the positive thinking trend, common during the recent decades (Frisk 1998, 42-46).

The therapeutic turn of popular religiosity express in a multitude of ways. One interesting development during the last decade is the migration of the Buddhist practice mindfulness, not only to the popular religious milieu, but also to secular mainstream psychological cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The American doctor in Molecular Biology, Jon Kabat-Zinn, with a personal background of practicing different Buddhist schools, developed the method of MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) at the University of Massachusetts as a way of treating chronic pain and stress related disorders (Plank 2011, 200). A multitude of evidence exists of the effectiveness of MBSR in being of help for a lot of problems. The Swedish doctor Ola Schenström refers to several studies showing that MBSR significantly helps to alleviate pain, sleep disorders, inflammation, high blood pressure, and stress, that physical symptoms may decrease by on average 30 to 35 per cent, and psychological symptoms, such as worry, anxiety, and depression, by 40 to 50 per cent (Schenström 2007, 71-72).

Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as dealing with attentiveness and awareness, and defines it as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145). Kabat-Zinn writes that even if

mindfulness derives from Buddhism, this does not make it Buddhist. He maintains that the essence of the technique is universal and independent of any faith and ideology. However, he also writes that it is not simply by coincidence that mindfulness has its origins in Buddhism, since the aim of Buddhism is, as with mindfulness, to alleviate suffering and dispel illusions (2009, 12-13).

In Dalarna, our study found that mindfulness was widely used in mainstream contexts related to the health-care centres, counselling units, and hospitals throughout the county. Mindfulness was used especially for stress related health problems, and for problems related to chronic pain. Thus, mindfulness is a method which has not only become secularized and motivated in purely therapeutic terms, but has also found ways into the mainstream, legitimated by scientific evidence. There have been several discussions about this phenomenon from different perspectives. Some people, like the historian of religion Anne-Christine Hornborg, have raised doubts concerning if a traditional religious practice such as mindfulness can be reduced to a secular technique (Hornborg 2012b). Hornborg questions whether mindfulness used in Western health care really is a traditional religious technique, or whether it is a purely Western method referring to ancient Asian traditions simply as a guarantee of quality (Hornborg 2012a, 201). Another Swedish historian of religion, Katarina Plank, argues that therapeutic mindfulness is very simplified compared to the traditional Buddhist method, and uses the term mindfulness appropriator for individuals who take elements of Buddhism as a means of strengthening their own views and legitimizing their

own positions (Plank 2011, 188-98; 209-10).

Many therapeutic practices of the popular religious milieu, for example mindfulness, may or may not hold religious significance, depending on the individual and the definition of the concept “religious”. “Being attentive” cannot in itself be a religious act – however religion is defined – but such an attitude can, depending on the individual, connect to world views, values, experiences, and identities which have a religious potential. Professor Siv Ellen Kraft, University of Tromsø (Norway), describes how methods in the popular religious milieu are open to a number of interpretations, and calls these “hybrid products”. With this term she means that an understanding with religious elements is presented as a possibility, which each person can either choose, reject, or ignore (Kraft 2011, 78). Thus, these phenomena may be understood both in religious and secular ways.

In a secular culture, traditional religious interpretations are increasingly rejected, but from a wider perspective, many of the practices in the popular religious milieus have the potential to connect to existential questions and superempirical dimensions. Most certainly, on individual levels, they often do, although the individual participant may not be explicit in these matters. Thus, contemporary religiosity is expressing in the twilight space between religion and secular arenas, the therapeutic turn being one of the main influences as to how these expressions are formed.

2. Cognitive optimality?

The popular religious milieu in Sweden, expressed as healing,

divination and communication with the deceased, show striking similarities to popular religiosity globally, within, outside of and across a variety of different religious traditions. The British scholar of Religious Studies, Steven Sutcliffe, writes that popular religious expressions have been marginalized and ignored in the academic field of Religious Studies, due to the crucial influence of the world religion paradigm. Sutcliffe maintains that the popular religious expressions are neither deviant nor marginal, but on the contrary central to the entire religious field. Sutcliffe even opines that there might be, in this context, reason to discuss a modified form of Durkheim's classical and much debated concept "elementary forms of religion" (Sutcliffe 2013, 17-20). Also the anthropologist Martin Stringer (2008) suggested recently that the concept "elementary forms of religion" should be revived. Stringer talks about "coping religions", which he defines as a particular type of engagement with the non-empirical that helps people handle everyday life, and argues that this religious orientation is the most common, the most fundamental, and the most widespread religious form today (2008, 100-102). Stringer puts forward three particular elements of what he identifies as the fundamental layer of religious structure: (1) the situational and unsystematic nature of beliefs; (2) an intimate relation to the non-empirical; and, (3) an attempt to answer pragmatic questions concerning daily life and the coping of everyday concerns. Stringer also argues that the deceased have come to play the role as the non-empirical "other". Stringer writes that for people in general, these daily and intimate interactions with the non-empirical as a means to handle and cope with

everyday problems constitute the basis for the elementary forms of religion (2008, 108-111). The expressions in the popular religious milieu in Sweden, outlined above, would thus be part of and continuations of fundamental human processes found in any society.

The Danish historian of religion Olav Hammer discusses the popular religious milieu (new age) in light of “cognitive optimality”, basing his discussion on the presumption that the way human beings reason about religious concepts and actions is not fundamentally different from the way we reason about mundane concepts. Certain forms of religious expression will be more likely to appear than other forms, simply due to the functioning of the human mind. Hammer uses the four ways, suggested by Harvey Whitehouse, in which cognitive optimality affects religious concepts: anthropomorphism – deities are anthropomorphized in everyday forms of religions; ritualization – chances to transmit rituals increase if they are associated with ideas regarding purity and impurity; chains of causal reasoning, or the attraction of using elements like agency and agents; and narrativity – the role of well-formulated stories in transmitting religious concepts and practices (Hammer 2013, 214-18). Hammer adds some other cognitively optimal traits, out of which one, which he calls “clustering illusion”, will here be taken up for closer discussion. Hammer writes that humans have a tendency to assume significant patterns and causal relationships between events that co-occur. The ability to see patterns and causal relationships is very important for human survival, but according to Hammer we often tend to

perceive causal connections even when there are none, which is why he adds the word “illusion” (2013, 218). This tendency to assume significant patterns and causal relationships between events and different dimensions of existence is closely related both to holism and the Western Esotericism term correspondences, discussed earlier in this article. This pattern is present concerning most healing methods in the popular religious milieu, as well as in divination, communication with superempirical beings, and clearance of the environment. The optimal cognitivity perspective may thus explain the presence of this characteristic in popular religiosity: it connects to the cognitive presumptions of the human mind.

Another interesting characteristic, pointed to by optimal cognitivity perspectives, is the tendency to anthropomorphize deities. The term God seems to be more passively than actively used in the popular religious milieu, due to its religious connotations, and is mainly, in these contexts, conceived of as being a kind of impersonal force, which may be called for example life energy or cosmic intelligence (Frisk 2000; Hammer 2013). Day to day personal experiences of this impersonal energy seem to be rare. However, relations to other superempirical beings seem to be common, especially relations to the deceased. Thus, some of the popular religious expressions in this milieu are anthropomorphic in character, which would support the optimal cognitivity perspectives.

IV. Conclusion

The key elements of popular religiosity in Sweden seem to be connected to what Martin Stringer calls “coping religion”, mainly related to healing but also to some extent to spirit communication, divination, and clearance of the environment. Mostly engaging women, the popular religiosity connects closely to the traditional female cultural role of caring and relating. Globalization has had a tremendous impact, the methods used in this milieu originating in different parts of the world, however tending to adapt to local conditions.

Another key element in the popular religious milieu is the “therapeutic turn”, connecting historically to several of the psychological currents of the 20th century, in particular, however, to the Human Potential Movement. Unfolding on arenas in the space between religion and psychology/therapy, the popular religious practices could well be called “hybrids” in the sense of professor Siv Ellen Kraft, meaning they have a potential for religious interpretations when the individual so chooses, but could also be conceived of as completely secular.

Thus, religion in secular cultures find semisecular outlets, in the contemporary culture especially influenced by the therapeutic turn. My argument is that the interpretation of the religious and the secular as two different spheres is an etic construction, and is not commonly recognized by participants in this milieu.

Sutcliffe and Stringer point out the similarities of popular religious milieus all over the world. Some of these similarities may

well be explained by optimal cognitivity, or the way human minds work. Significant such traits expressing in the popular religious milieu in Sweden are the tendency to holistic thinking, or clustering illusion, as well as anthropomorphism regarding superempirical beings. Especially, the later traits seem to work well regarding continuing relationships with deceased relatives.

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