

(Re)Introducing “Secular Religion”

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(Re)Introducing “Secular Religion”: On the Study of Entangled Quests for Meaning in Modern Western Cultures

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Abstract

The disenchantment of reality has bankrupted conventional sources of meaning for many people in modern Western cultures. This has led a growing number of figures and groups to search for alternative sources of meaning. Typical of their quests for meaning is the entanglement of secular and religious discourses. Since the twentieth century, scholars have studied the social configurations of these figures and groups as “cults” or “new religious movements” and their ideologies as “New Age” or “spirituality,” which are seen as parts of a longer tradition of “Western esotericism” (Europe) or “metaphysical religion” (North America). Several leading scholars have also interpreted them as forms of “secular religion,” but this has yet to gain academic traction. This article argues that the former concepts are lacking or losing a logical connection with the socio-historical phenomena to which they pertain and reintroduces the latter concept as a more appropriate one.

Keywords

quests for meaning – modern gurus – cults – new religious movements – secular religion – new age – spirituality – Western esotericism – metaphysical religion

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I often, though not exclusively, define religion functionally as any set of symbols or rituals that provide a sense of life meaning and orientation,

regardless of whether they are drawn from traditional religions, philosophy, psychology, or aspects of an otherwise secular culture.

DENNIS FORD, *The Search for Meaning: A Short History*



In *The Search for Meaning* (2007), Dennis Ford reflects on some of the answers provided by different disciplines to questions about the reason for (“why?”) and the direction of (“what for?”) human existence. Taking his cue from Leo Tolstoy (1932 [1882]), Ford tells us how his existential search commenced in Christianity, gradually extended to other established religions and eventually also incorporated secular answers from various philosophies, psychologies, and natural sciences (xx–xxi). Ford’s entangled quest for meaning is far from unique. In *On Purpose* (2016), for instance, sociologist Paul Froese echoes Max Weber (1978 [1921–1922]), saying that modernity’s “disenchantment” of reality has bankrupted conventional sources of meaning for a growing number of people in modern Western cultures. Reminiscent of psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s reflections on *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1984 [1946]), Froese finds that these people have turned to alternative sources of meaning instead, secular and religious — including self-help strategies, psychotherapies, and various spiritualities — to find fulfillment in this world in something that is larger than themselves.

In this article, I will not delve into the details of these entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures. There is a growing library of academic publications available on them, many of which I will also refer to in my discussions below. In fact, my discussions below are *about* these studies about entangled quests for meaning of a wide range of figures and groups in modern Western cultures. I will reflect on how European and North American scholars — mostly sociologists and historians — since the early–mid-twentieth century, have studied these figures and groups as “cults” or “new religious movements” (NRMs) and their teachings as “New Age” or “spirituality,” which, in turn, have been studied as manifestations of “Western esotericism” (Europe) and “metaphysical religion” (North America). Given their historical overlap, I will include shifts in the study of their social formations and shifts in the study of their ideological foundations, but focus on the entangled nature of the latter.

These socio-historical reflections will show that none of the common concepts that are currently used for entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures adequately capture the figures and groups to whom they pertain. I will furthermore show that several leading sociologists and historians have convincingly interpreted those same figures and groups as exemplars of “secular religion,” but that this has been overlooked. Therefore, I will reintroduce their concept as a more adequate marker for the growing entanglements of secular and religious discourses in Europe and North America. By extrapolating similar elements from different interpretations, I arrive at a revised definition of secular religion. I conclude with a brief demonstration of the conceptual advantages of my revised version of secular religion by comparing it to the more common concepts that it intends to replace.

These are ambitious plans for an article. How can this limited space do full justice to the detailed contexts out of which the nuanced concepts above emerged? It cannot. For details and nuances, I must refer readers to my *The Secular Religion of Franklin Merrell-Wolff* (2018). This article builds on that socio-historical study but pursues more conceptual clarity. Why is more conceptual clarity necessary? Because there are many concepts for the entanglement of secular and religious discourses in modern Western cultures that do not, or no longer, fit the beliefs and practices of the figures and groups to whom they pertain. And for the one concept that does fit, there are many entangled interpretations again. Thus, we need to find the right words for what we are trying to understand. This is not a trivial matter of terminology but a fundamental matter of perception. For our concepts determine not just how we perceive things, but what things we perceive to begin with.

1 Conceptualizing Secular and Religious Entanglements

1.1 *The Cultic Milieu*

Early in the twentieth century, Max Weber (1985 [1906]) introduced a distinction between “churches” and “sects.” The first are central religious institutes that recruit by obligation, the second peripheral religious groups that do so by voluntary association. Fellow sociologist Ernst Troeltsch (1992 [1912]: 331–343) later added the more individualized and privatized “mysticism.” Richard Niebuhr (1929: 17–21) converted the strict contrasts between these types into a continuum, which categorizes religious groups based on their stance toward secular culture. Finally, our current notion of a “cult,” as a divergent but often short-lived socio-religious fringe group, seems to have come from Howard Becker (1932: 624–628).

During the second half of the twentieth century — as the number of religious fringe groups grew, or at least grew more visible, in Western cultures — other sociologists began to criticize church–sect typologies. Benton Johnson (1957, 1963), for instance, took issue with their socio-historical contingencies. He suggested looking for a single defining feature. Reminiscent of Niebuhr, for him, this was a religious group's acceptance (church) or rejection (sect) of their secular environment. Erich Goode (1967) discarded church–sect typologies altogether, including Johnson's, since none of them seemed universally applicable. When it comes to cults, Geoffrey Nelson (1969) agreed with his peers that these fringe groups, unlike sects, drew inspiration from sources other than the dominant religions of their host societies. Contrary to his peers, though, Nelson concluded that not all cults were as ephemeral and disorganized as scholars had made them out to be. Nevertheless, cults typically comprised "seekers." Most seekers were "floundering about among religions," as John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965: 869) put it. And this did appear to limit significantly the lifespan of most of such fringe groups. How to reconcile these contradictory observations?

In 1972, Colin Campbell came up with a clever answer to this question in his ground-breaking "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization" (1972). According to Campbell, cults can be equated with Troeltschian mysticism or with religious and scientific heterodoxy or with both (119–126). The fact that old cults continuously disappear, while new cults emerge, suggests they move within a larger milieu, which absorbs the debris of dead ones and gives birth to new ones. Such a "cultic milieu" is the cultural underground of society, Campbell argued, which fosters deviant religious and secular beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices are held together by a shared ideology of seekership, which is based on the idea(l) that one can explore both religious and secular sources in the quest for meaning.

The increase of the cultic milieu is due to the secularization of modern Western cultures, according to Campbell (1972: 131–133). For him, secularization means the declining influence of religion, on the one hand, and the rising influence of science, on the other. This process has demoted the role of the churches as custodians of truth and promoted universities to that position. Because the scientific community has neither the desire nor the ability to repress heterodox views with the same zeal as the church, divergent ideologies have been able to grow.

During the 1980s, Campbell's "cultic milieu" lost some of its academic appeal, despite its explanatory power. This was probably due to the increasingly negative reputation that cults were gaining in the public eye. In the wake of the widely publicized serial killing spree of the Manson Family in 1967, the armed

bank robberies of the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974, and especially the Jonestown mass murder-suicide of the People's Temple in 1978, "cults" got a bad name (van Driel and Richardson 1988; Richardson 1993; Richardson and van Driel 1997); they still carry this reputation today (Olson 2006; Neal 2011; Laylock 2013). As sociologist Eileen Barker noted soon after, "No new religion would be regarded in quite the same light or treated in quite the same way after Jonestown" (1986: 330).

Even though the People's Temple was not a typical case (Richardson 1980), anticult movements presented the general public with an image of cults as pseudoreligions, which disguise themselves as real religions for legal and fiscal benefits. As Anson Shupe and David Bromley (1979: 331) explain, cults were framed as vehicles for the selfish desires of egotistical charlatans, who mislead youngsters for financial, sexual, and other personal gains. Followers of cult leaders did not go through a process of religious conversion but of psychological coercion. In other words, they were "brainwashed." This popular theory briefly gained academic legitimacy when psychologists such as Margaret Singer (2003a, 2003b) weighed in with "scientific" explanations. Her peers soon disproved her explanations, but, by then, they were already deeply lodged in popular culture (Melton 2006).

Trying to shed their negatively biased image, scholars stopped referring to fringe groups as "cults" and started describing them as "new religions" or "new religious movements" (Robbins 2000; Melton 2004; Gallagher, 2007). Ironically, Barker (2004, 2014) points out, this concept has been no less criticized, given that many of the groups to whom it pertains are not that new, do not regard themselves as a religion, and do not form a movement so much as a loosely knit network. In addition, there are few beliefs, practices or lifestyles, if any, that are typical of new religions and atypical of older ones.

1.2 *The New Age Movement*

In the 1990s, scholarly interest in NRMs converged on the "New Age movement." Building on Campbell, the historian Wouter Hanegraaff concluded that "the New Age is synonymous with the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified 'movement' (although not a 'New Religious Movement' in the normal sense of the word)" (1996: 17). A recurrent theme among New Age figures and groups was their critique of the dualistic and reductionist tendencies of modern Western cultures, Hanegraaff argued (1996: 514–522). This consisted of five "basic tendencies": a (weak) this-worldly attitude; a holistic worldview; a teleological view of evolution; a psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology, with a focus on the

“realization” of “the self”; and the expectation of a better era in the near future, often portrayed as the apogee of a perennial wisdom tradition. New Age turns away from the dogmatic *faith* of established religions (Jewish and Christian traditions in particular) and the excessive *reason* of conventional sciences toward an experiential mystical *gnosis*.

Given the shared “tendencies,” New Age sounds very much like a unified movement. Yet Hanegraaff insisted the New Age movement was not a new religious movement in the regular sense of the word, given its “transorganizational” character as a diffuse cultic milieu. Sociologist Paul Heelas (1996: 9) similarly stressed that the New Age movement was not a new religion or a collection of new religions — despite his earlier description of it as “self-religions” (Heelas 1982, 1988). Many other scholars agreed with them. In fact, as George Chryssides explains, the term “New Age” itself has been criticized for covering too great a variety of concepts, blurring emic and etic views, and having lost its significance for the figures and groups to whom it pertains (2007: 10–13). Having said that, Chryssides himself still thinks it has sufficient emic and etic currency (22). However, as scholars were turning toward New Age, New Agers themselves were already turning away from it.

1.3 *Spirituality*

In the 1990s, the term “New Age” slowly disappeared in popular culture, as “spirituality” took its place (Jespers 2013: 198–199). Perhaps because scholars such as Hanegraaff (1996: 105) had pointed out the superficiality of its beliefs and practices — at least in the eyes of the intellectual elite — the concept of “New Age” fell out of grace with the very figures and groups to whom it was applied. The latter were now increasingly identifying themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” (Fuller 2001; Giordan and Swatos 2011).

Soon, academia caught up with this discursive change. Despite its prevalence in popular and academic circles, scholars have found spirituality notoriously difficult to define. Wade Clark Roof starts at the etymological root of *spiritus* as wind or breath, that mysterious, invisible force that moves (1999: 33–35). Leigh Schmidt adds that Christian theologians opposed this idea of spirit to matter (2005: 4), while for Philip Sheldrake their spirituality was not opposed to materiality but to carnality (2007: 2–3). Details aside, spirituality has long been taken as the metaphysical essence of religion (Huss 2014: 19). Gordon Lynch believes this has given way to a “progressive spirituality,” which sees the divine as the metaphysical intelligence beyond *and* the physical elements within this world (2007: 11). Regardless of what adjectives they stick to it, most scholars agree that contemporary spirituality refers to beliefs and

practices of figures and groups on a quest for meaning beyond themselves that is not restricted to a single tradition. Such quests for meaning are often inspired by a desire to realize “something more” in this world (Besecke 2014: 1–8).

Spirituality gained so much traction in the twenty-first century that some scholars started to speak of a “spiritual revolution.” Interdisciplinary scholar David Tacey (2004) and, less radically, sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005), for instance, maintain that religion is giving way to spirituality. Tacey claims that “Spirituality is now the concern of everyone, religious or secular” (2004: 1). Heelas and Woodhead explain that “spirituality” commonly expresses a “commitment to a deep truth that is to be found within what belongs to this world,” whereas “religion” expresses a “commitment to a higher truth that is ‘out there,’ lying beyond what this world has to offer” (2005: 6).

Such etic legitimations of emic distinctions have not been without their critics. The psychologist of religion Ulrike Popp-Baier (2010), for one, wonders whether spirituality is significantly different from religion. Reminiscent of Richard King and Jeremy Carrette (2005), she claims “spirituality” has been — questionably — commodified by the media and (religious) organizations for marketing purposes as well as by scholars of religion for the purpose of attracting larger audiences. Looking at the beliefs and practices of so-called spiritual seekers, she only sees a more individualized “self-controlled religiosity” (Popp-Baier 2010: 59–61). She advises her peers to drop the misnomer of spirituality altogether.

I would take her advice, without adopting her “self-controlled religiosity,” for that would restrict our focus to religion. Despite its etymological ties to the metaphysical, the one thing contemporary “spirituality” has going for it is its recognition of the entanglement of religious *and* secular discourses. As the scholar of religion Boaz Huss puts it, “contemporary spirituality challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms of life and enables the formation of new lifestyles, social practices, and cultural artifacts that cannot be defined as either religious or secular” (2014: 47).

In pursuit of more conceptual clarity, scholar of religion Frans Jespers distinguishes between religious and secular spirituality. Jespers (2014: 214) considers Peter van Ness’s definition of “spirituality” particularly adequate for religious studies, as “the embodied task of realizing one’s true self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality” (1996: 5). Jespers then clarifies the difference between its religious and secular variants.

Relying on Martin Riesebrodt (2010), Jespers (2014: 209, 212–213) correlates religious spirituality with promises of salvation by a supernatural power beyond this world. Riesebrodt himself defines religion as an assortment of practices marked by an interpretative cohesion based on the premise of the

existence of superhuman — be it personal or impersonal — powers that promise salvation (2010: 72–79). The distinction between “supernatural” and “superhuman” powers is significant for our discussion. Both adjectives imply invisible influences over dimensions that are beyond our immediate control, but the latter does not necessarily entail metaphysical entities or forces that do not belong to this world.

Relying on van Ness (1996), Jespers correlates secular spirituality with “the ‘this-worldly’: a secular way of life that involves all important things in this world” (2014: 207, 209). A secular way of life here implies a perception of the world that is not directly tied to religion and an organization of society that allows its members to pursue both religious and nonreligious paths to fulfillment (van Ness 1996: 7–8). “Fulfillment,” in turn, refers to positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “optimal experience” (van Ness 1996: 6), an extraordinary stream of consciousness that is sought for its own sake. Together, this leads Jespers to define secular spirituality with van Ness as “the attempt to locate optimal human experience within a non-religious context of existential and cosmic meaning” (7).

Despite such pursuits of more conceptual clarity, scholars agree that “spirituality” remains a problematic category (King and Carrette 2005: 1–2; Flanagan 2007: 5; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013: 5; Hense 2014: 1). To study New Age and spirituality with a less emically biased and less etically blurred vocabulary, many of them have turned to two other — second-order — concepts, which are “Western esotericism” and “metaphysical religion.”

1.4 *Western Esotericism*

New Age spirituality did not emerge out of thin air. Historians have traced many of its beliefs and practices to ancient, medieval, and modern traditions that similarly straddled the borders between — what we would today separate into — secular and religious domains (Ellwood and Partin 1973: 30–72; Hanegraaff 1996: 365–513; Versluis 2007; von Stuckrad 2005; Goodrick-Clarke 2008). In the 1960s, Frances Yates (1964) referred to them collectively as “the Hermetic tradition.” For her, this tradition was a self-contained counterculture grounded in the magic and mysticism of the ancient *Corpus Hermeticum*.

In the 1990s, Antoine Faivre reframed this Hermetic tradition as “western esotericism.” Faivre (1994: 10–15) defined Western esotericism as traditions and currents rooted in the Renaissance with a shared *forme de pensée*. This “form of thought” entails six recurrent beliefs: there are *correspondences* among the seen and the unseen aspects of the universe; a *living nature* permeates reality; through *imagination and mediation* of rituals, symbols, and spirits, one can access higher knowledge; this higher knowledge is the key to personal

transmutation; there is a *concordance* or common core among religions with regards to this higher knowledge; and this common core has been passed on from master to disciple by way of secret *transmission*.

In the 2000s, scholars criticized Faivre's "form of thought" for its temporal and geographical reductionism as well as for its historical and cultural essentialism (McCalla 2001; Bogdan 2010: 99; Bergunder 2010: 11–16). It fails to consider *that*, let alone *how*, Western esotericism may have changed since the Renaissance — for instance, due to developments such as secularization and globalization — which curiously suspends it in time.

Going beyond Yates's "quasi-autonomous counterculture of magic and mysticism" and Faivre's "quasi-essentialist form of thought," Hanegraaff (2001; 2005: 226; 2007: 107–108) borrows James Webb's label for the occult (1974: 191) by characterizing Western esotericism as "a wastebasket of rejected knowledge." Hanegraaff contends that Western esotericism is a product of an anti-image polemic, which goes back to the origins of monotheism. He calls this the "Grand Polemical Narrative." For him, mainstream Western society constructed "Western esotericism" as its Other, against which it constructed its own traditional identity. Images have played a — arguably even *the* — central role in this. From the perspectives of Biblical monotheism and Greek rationalism, images spell "trouble," Hanegraaff explains, since they undermine their understanding of the divine as radical alterity and of truth as having rational clarity.

Kocku von Stuckrad has criticized this view of Western esotericism. He concurs with Hanegraaff that "polemics and identities are at the core of esoteric discourses," but questions whether the grand polemical narrative goes back to beyond the scientific revolution, or whether such a quasi-essentialist narrative helps to understand the history of esoteric discourses in Western cultures to begin with (von Stuckrad 2010: 52). Instead, von Stuckrad regards "the esoteric" as a component of discourse in a twofold competition of knowledge — between different religions and different secular domains — throughout the histories of Western cultures (2005: 9–10; 2010: 59–64; 2014). Esoteric discourse in modern Europe and North America in particular reveal "discursive knots," whereby secular methods and theories are employed to elaborate and legitimate religious claims concerning a privileged experiential access to a hidden "higher knowledge" of reality (von Stuckrad 2012; 2014).

Egil Asprem has boldly suggested to move beyond both the "Western" and "the esoteric" of Western esotericism. Following von Stuckrad (2005: xi–xii), Asprem presumes that "esoteric discourse is *in principle* open for application to any knowledge claim in any culture at any time in history" (2014: 17). Contrary to von Stuckrad, however, Asprem also proposes to replace "the esoteric" with

“the problem of disenchantment” — responses to the perceived loss of a higher meaning in this world — at the center of the discussion (2014b: 549–550). According to him, such a Weberian shift of focus could better account for modern entanglements of religious and scientific discourses (2014b: 560).

In his reply to Asprem, Hanegraaff (2015) sympathizes with the desire to go beyond the “Western” of Western esotericism in our globalizing world, but says that a globalization of “esotericism” would sustain the very terminological imperialism it tries to escape. The term “esotericism” emerged as a convenient label for a range of beliefs and practices that the Enlightenment rejected. Why would people in Asia, Africa, or Latin America adopt a Western category to study their own traditional beliefs and practices, he rhetorically asks.

1.5 *Metaphysical Religion*

In search of a North-American-tailored counterpart to the arguably Eurocentric “Western esotericism,” scholars of religion across the Atlantic coined “metaphysical religion.” This concept also pertains to alternative quests for meaning outside conventional churches and schools, which budded in America during the nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth century. Typical examples are Theosophy and New Thought, whose beliefs and practices peaked in the New Age movement. The historian Robert Fuller says that their attention was on “a more-than-physical reality not yet recognized by science” (2001: 45–46). Fellow historian Catherine Albanese agrees, “metaphysics ... signals what its etymology suggests — those preoccupied in some sense with what lies beyond the physical plane” (2010: 12–13). In her masterful *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, she makes out four themes among metaphysical religions: a preoccupation with the mind; a predisposition toward a theory of correspondences between the microcosm and macrocosm; a strong focus on movement and energy, whereby the imagination magically joins forces with the will; and a longing for a felt and physical salvation for individuals as well as communities, typically characterized in terms of well-being (9, 13–15).

However, the preoccupation with “what lies beyond the physical plane” is increasingly at odds with the search for a “felt and physical salvation” in this world. Especially since the twentieth century, as Albanese herself says, “Metaphysical religiosity — in the declining New Age and in the new spirituality that was succeeding it — was different from the metaphysical religion of a century previous” (514). Typical of this new spirituality was that “the mind had ... acquired a body, and the body refused to stay out of metaphysical discourse” (514). This turn toward an “enlightened body-self” went along with a “re-enchantment of the world” (322, 515). Given this focus on an embodied transformation of the self in this physical world, the concept of “metaphysical

religion” has come to contradict the beliefs and practices of the people to whom it pertains.

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With this very short history of the study of entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures, we conclude that the seminal concepts sociologists and historians have used for the entanglement of secular and religious discourses are not adequate (anymore). However, some — of these same — scholars have suggested another concept for such discursive entanglements. Next, I will review various interpretations of this overlooked concept.

2 Conceptualizing Secular Religion

2.1 *Secular Religion as Political Religion*

Although similar concepts had already been introduced by intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the historian Emilio Gentile maintains that German political philosophers Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) and his French contemporary Raymond Aron (1905–1983) were the first to define “secular religion” (Gentile 2000: 21–22, 34). For Voegelin and Aron, secular religion was principally the sacralization of politics by totalitarian regimes.

In 1938, Voegelin published “The Political Religions,” which argues that modernity has not destroyed the divine but sacralized the secular (Voegelin 2000 [1938]: 60). As his editor Manfred Henningsen puts it, “the secularization of the world, this major achievement of modernity, has not silenced the quest for meaning, but has produced the urge to find alternative ways of satisfying this existential human need” (7). People no longer look for meaning beyond this world, but within this world. “Trans-worldly religions” (*überweltliche Religionen*) like Christianity are increasingly challenged and replaced by “inner-worldly religions” (*innerweltliche Religionen*) such as psychotherapy and communism, that is, secular systems with religious features or functions (Voegelin 2000 [1938]: 32–33).

In 1944, Aron argued a similar case in *The Future of Secular Religions*. Modernity has given rise to secular religions such as communism or national socialism, which “in the souls of our contemporaries, take the place of the faith that is no more, placing the salvation of mankind in this world, in the more or less distant future, and in the form of a social order yet to be invented” (Aron 2002 [1944]: 178). In *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, he adds that such godless

doctrines can be seen as religions, since they perform the same function that sociologists and psychologists attribute to a religion (Aron 1962 [1955]: 265).

In 1964, Voegelin’s one-time mentor Hans Kelsen (1881–1973) wrote a critique of these sacralizations of secular worldviews, which was published only recently as *Secular Religion*. Here, Kelsen calls secular religion an oxymoron: “to secularize an institution or a doctrine means to exclude all religious elements from it ... A ‘secular religion’ is a dereligionized religion, which means no religion at all” (2012 [1964]: 21). As a neo-Kantian believer in the pillars of the Enlightenment, Kelsen wanted to protect “rational” philosophy, science, and politics from a regression into “irrational” religion (271). Meanwhile, these “rational” and “irrational” domains were growing more entangled in popular culture.

2.2 *Secular Religion as Implicit Religion*

By the end of the 1960s, the discourse on “secular religion” moved away from politics. In 1969, James Dittes was among the first to articulate “the most striking religious phenomena of our time” (1969: 65), that whatever had been traditionally perceived as religious was now believed to be a barrier to the divine and whatever had been considered secular was now viewed as a bridge to the divine. In fact, the religious–secular distinction *as such* was being challenged, “epitomized with such implausible but increasingly popular paradoxes as ‘atheistic theology,’ ‘religionless Christianity,’ ‘secular religion’” (Dittes 1969: 66, 67).

In the same year that Dittes’ book was published, Edward Bailey (1969) finished his masters thesis on “secular religion.” In his doctoral dissertation, Bailey (1976) rephrased it as “implicit religion.” Bailey later clarified that the name change left more room for a connection to traditional religions and the inclusion of phenomena that may not be seen as religious by those involved (2002: iii, 9; 2010: 271–272). Based on theologian Paul Tillich’s famous reduction of faith to people’s “ultimate concern” (1957), Bailey equated his concept of implicit religion with “commitments,” “integrating foci,” and “intensive concerns with extensive effects” (2002: 2–4).

The strength of “implicit religion” is that it enables scholars to study the entanglement of secular and religious beliefs and practices, without adopting, let alone legitimating, the emic biases contained in popular concepts such as “New Age” and contemporary “spirituality.” But the problem with “implicit religion” is that the secular dimension of the beliefs and practices of those to whom it pertains remains, well, too implicit (pardon the pun). Incidentally, the same critique applies to similar concepts such as “invisible religion”

(Luckmann 1967) or “civil religion” (Bellah 1967), which arose around the same time, as well as to later ones such as “pseudo-” or “quasi-religion” (Bromley, Greil, and Robbins, 1994).

“Secular religion” all but faded from academic discourse until the 1980s. In 1987, scholar of religion Gottfried Küenzlen returned to it. Reminiscent of Voegelin and Aron, but without referring to them, Küenzlen claimed that the disenchantment of modern Western cultures had cleared the path for this-worldly views of salvation such as communism and national socialism (1987: 211–213). However, because “the hopes of an inner-worldly salvation have become void,” he reckoned “the cry for transcendence and for non-secular religious orientation will grow.” Just look at “all those new religious movements that spring up in the Western world and often, in a curiously syncretistic way, include elements of Indian religion,” he said. For Küenzlen, this demonstrated that completely secular hopes of salvation cannot fully satisfy our existential “hunger for experiencing ‘meaning’” (225).

2.3 *Secular Religion as New Age Spirituality*

In 1999, perhaps inspired again by James Webb (1976: 12), Hanegraaff published an article wherein he conceptualized those syncretic new religious movements that had sprung up in the West as “secular religions.” This makes it a seminal text for our discussion, even though it does have some issues. The most troubling issue is that Hanegraaff claims that “New Age exemplifies a new phenomenon which may be defined as ‘secular religion’ based on ‘private symbolism,’” without explaining what exactly he means by “secular religion.” (1999: 146). The reader is left to piece together its meaning from his definitions of “the secular,” or rather “secularization,” “religion” versus “a religion” and “spirituality.”

Hanegraaff sees secularization as “the whole of historical developments in western society, as a result of which the Christian religion has lost its central position as the foundational collective symbolism of western culture and has been reduced to merely one among several religious institutions within a culture which is no longer grounded in a religious system of symbols,” but in “popular *mythologies of science*.” (149–152). This departs from early interpretations of secularization as a decline of religion (e.g., Berger 1967), but corresponds with recent ones about a rising empirical interest in nature and a disembedding from a single religious worldview (e.g., Taylor 2007: 90–158).

Moving on, Hanegraaff sees religion as “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (1999: 147). Once such a symbolic system is organized as a social

institution, it becomes *a* religion. I really like this definition of (a) religion for our discussion about entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures. The reason I like it so much, though, is probably that religion is already tacitly tailored to such entangled quests for meaning. Speaking of a “general meta-empirical framework of meaning” rather than a more common meta-physical source, such as a god, *by definition*, creates space for religious *and* secular interpretations. It leaves the door wide open to mystical twists to quantum physics and various psychological and sociological systems (Hanegraaff 1999: 153), including, for example, spiritual “shifts in energy” or “shifts in (collective) consciousness.” I can imagine more conventional scholars of religion and religious practitioners would take issue with this unconventional definition of (a) religion.

Finally, Hanegraaff sees spirituality as “any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems” (1999: 147). The emphasis on practices could be problematic, but I assume beliefs are implied in “symbolic systems.” The main problem is that the figures and groups to whom “spirituality” pertains do not turn to a meta-empirical framework of meaning. They turn to empirical experts, experiences, texts, rites and rituals, places and buildings encountered in this everyday world, because these media hold out the promise of contact with an ultimate source of meaning, which they go on to explain in both empirical (e.g., “energy”) and nonempirical (e.g., “god”) terms.

Hanegraaff concludes that secularization has not so much caused a dissipation but a transformation of religion in modern Western cultures (151–153). With the above definitions in mind, he claims that conventional religions are facing a growing competition from meaning systems that are no longer based on or embedded in traditional religions, but which combine symbolisms from secular and religious traditions to give significance to everyday experiences. In the end, the conceptual confusion remains, though, for he labels them both as “secular *religions*” and “secular *spiritualities*” (146, 152; my emphasis).

Several other leading scholars have also introduced variations of “secular religion” for similar reasons. Martin Marty, for one, thinks we need a new model to describe a world that was once seen as religious *or* secular, but today as religious *and* secular. “In adjusting to the complex world around them, people confound the categories of the social scientists, theologians and philosophers: they simply ‘make do’ with a syncretic and characteristically modern blend of attitudes — call it religio-secular” (Marty 2003: 42). Kocku von Stuckrad (2013) also reckons that secularization is fitting religion within a new framework of meaning, whereby discursive knots of religious and secular discourses

are co-constructing new realities in modern Western cultures, which he goes on to designate as “secular religions” (2013).

Recently, “secular religion” has been introduced into popular discourse in similar ways for similar reasons as described above. One example is “Secular Buddhism” (Batchelor 2017), which focuses on mindfulness. As Jeff Wilson explains, “mindfulness does not need to be religious OR spiritual OR therapeutic OR secular. It can operate in any of these modes, in more than one of these modes at the same time, and the same person can move from one mode to another with ease” (2014: 194). Another example is “Bodhidaoism,” which “operates like a religion in holding Nature as its ultimate concern, and since it has beliefs and practices and advocates a way of life, one could consider it a secular religion” (Forrest 2018: 7). It focuses on “awakening to reality,” which “can be interpreted as union with God or union with Nature, depending on one’s belief system” (10, 75).

3 Defining Secular Religion

Based on these critical reflections on the study of entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures — combining the conceptual fortes and flaws of “cults,” “new religious movements,” “New Age,” “spirituality,” “Western esotericism,” and “metaphysical religion” with the conceptual variety of “secular religion” — I (re)define secular religion as follows:

Secular religion is any practical or intellectual commitment to an ultimate concern beyond the self that promises a fundamental transformation of the self within this world, which is deemed equally explicable in both physical and metaphysical terms.

Secular religion is any practical or intellectual commitment to an ultimate concern beyond the self, that is, any deliberate action or reflection in service of a source of meaning larger than our individual self. This source can be a natural or supernatural (state of) being, a socio-political utopia, a higher stage in biological or historical evolution, or a psychosomatic peak experience, as long as it promises a fundamental transformation of the self within this world. The promise of a fundamental transformation of the self may refer to salvation from sin, liberation from ignorance, psychological fulfillment, etc. This promise must depend on something beyond the self, since that suggests a collective or cosmic plan of a higher authority with a more comprehensive view of reality than our own, which lends a reassuring sense of purpose to our lives. This higher

authority may be a god, spirit, nature, energy, consciousness, or transcendental self — it could even refer to society or the state, but here the link to political religions starts to wear thin. As the source of transformation, this higher authority is often said to be ineffable in absolute terms, but relatively speaking, it is deemed *equally explicable in physical and metaphysical terms*. This means that secular and religious discourses are both viewed as valid but partial — that is, complementary — explanations of the same nondiscursive reality. This is what sets apart secular religions from secular and religious traditions, because the latter will ultimately reduce their perception of reality to one particular religious, philosophical, psychological, or scientific explanation.

4 Comparing Secular Religion

This last section addresses the advantages of using “secular religion” for the entanglement of secular and religious discourses in the quests for meaning of a growing number of figures and groups in modern Western cultures compared to the other concepts discussed above.

Compared to “the cultic milieu,” “secular religion” more explicitly reflects the seeker’s idea(1) that both religious and secular sources may be explored in the search for meaning. It also lacks the negative connotations that have accrued around “cults” in the wake of shocking events such as Jonestown. Finally, it is not restricted to new, religious or clearly demarcated movements, like the later academic alternative of “new religious movement.”

Compared to “the New Age movement,” “secular religion” similarly includes transorganizational phenomena, without falsely suggesting that this necessarily entails a unified movement. Unlike “New Age,” though, “secular religion” has not lost most of its emic and etic currency. In fact, it is starting to be used in similar ways by practitioners and scholars.

Compared to contemporary “spirituality,” “secular religion” more overtly challenges divisions between secular and religious domains, without being burdened by etymological ties to the purely metaphysical. This means, for instance, that “secular religion” does not need to construct contrived *secular* and *religious* subcategories, since it already inherently accommodates physical (often secular) and metaphysical (often religious) explanations of an ultimate concern that promises a fundamental transformation of the self in this world.

Compared to “Western esotericism,” “secular religion” retains the twofold competition of knowledge between different secular and religious traditions of “the esoteric,” but it does not necessarily restrict this to “Western” culture. Granted, “secular” and “religion” are both modern Western terms (Dressler and

Mandair 2011: 3–36). This makes it problematic to apply them to premodern and non-Western cultures. I, therefore, consciously focused this article on modern Europe and North America. Nevertheless, if we paraphrase Taylor's (2007: 1–24) influential take on secularity and religion as an awareness that the belief in a metaphysical power is one among many possible human perceptions of reality, I suspect “secular religion” could also be applied to modern non-Western cultures.

Compared to “metaphysical religion,” “secular religion” concerns similar quests for a felt and physical transformation of the self in this world. Yet it does not necessarily limit the source of this self-transformation to something beyond the physical plane that is not yet recognized by science. It recognizes that many figures and groups in modern Western cultures perceive their ultimate source of meaning as something physical, metaphysical, or both. Regardless of the perceived nature of their ultimate concern, these figures and groups all incorporate methods and theories from scientific and other secular domains to explain it — perhaps because they lack the vocabulary and authority of a single established tradition to corroborate their claims otherwise. As such, “secular religion” more accurately reflects the entangled nature of the quests for meaning of the people to whom it pertains.

5 Conclusion

Modernity's disenchantment of reality has bankrupted conventional sources of meaning for many in Europe and North America. This has led a growing number of figures and groups to search for alternative sources of meaning outside established sciences and religions. Typical of their quests for meaning is the entanglement of secular and religious discourses, which challenge the modern secular–religious distinction itself.

Since the twentieth century, sociologists and historians have studied the social configurations of these figures and groups as “cults” or “new religious movements” and their discursive entanglements as “New Age” or “spirituality,” which have been categorized as parts of “Western esotericism” (Europe) or “metaphysical religion” (North America). Some scholars have also conceptualized them as “secular religion,” but this has been overlooked.

In this article, I have demonstrated that the common concepts used in the study of entangled quests for meaning in modern Western cultures are not or no longer adequate. Emically, they are not recognized, or even rejected, by the practitioners to whom they pertain. Etically, they do not, or only partly, apply to the beliefs and practices they are meant to explain.

Therefore, I have suggested that “secular religion” is a more adequate concept, because it retains the strengths but lacks the weaknesses of the more common concepts.

Is this not merely a matter of terminology? Could we not use my revised definition of secular religion for one of our more common concepts? I think not, because these concepts are either lacking or losing a logical connection with the socio-historical phenomena they are supposed to explain. They do not say what they mean. It is a matter of discourse. As Sara Mills rephrases Foucault, “Discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality” (2003: 55). This shows what is at stake: our understanding of people’s changing perceptions and descriptions of “reality.” The words we use in studying the world around us do not only determine how we see things, but what things we see to begin with. To give a simplistic example, if we want to study modern means of transportation, we should not refer to them as “cars.” That would limit our view to four-wheeled, road-bound vehicles. Similarly, if we want to study unbiasedly the quests for meaning of a growing number of figures and groups in modern Western cultures who are entangling secular and religious beliefs and practices from Western and Eastern traditions to explain their ultimate concerns in physical and metaphysical terms, then we should not categorize them pejoratively as “cults” or “new religious movements” that are “spiritual, but not religious” and belong to “Western esotericism” or “metaphysical religion.” This is limiting or even distorting the popular interpretations of reality that we are trying to understand. Why not replace our arsenal of outworn concepts with a single concept that more accurately reflects people’s changing perceptions and explanations of reality; why not reintroduce “secular religion”?

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