BRILL

JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN EUROPE 13 (2020) 187-213

Journal of Religion in Europe

brill.com/jre

From the Trees to the Wood: Alternative Spirituality as an Emergent 'Official Religion'?

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Abstract

In this introductory study, we place the articles collected in this special issue on 'spirituality' in a more general context. In so doing, we contest the idea that alternative spirituality is best studied within the conceptual framework of the 'vernacular.' We argue that such an approach tends to unintentionally overstate the empirical particularities and overlook the broader aspects of the subject in question, which results in unreflexively accepting alternative spirituality's own claim that it is 'doctrine-free' and 'non-institutional' by nature. Contrary to this claim, we show that alternative spirituality is (a) pregnant with a distinguishable doctrine despite being glocal and inventive; (b) profoundly social and effectively socialized; (c) about to be visibly socially organized and institutionalized; and (d) a way of addressing and redressing the key existential issues of human life, just as any other religion.

Keywords

alternative spirituality – vernacular religion – New Age doctrine – religious institutions – religion/spirituality dichotomy – competing discourses

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1 Alternative Spirituality and the Vernacular

In the last decade, the research of alternative spirituality (sometimes still called 'New Age') has been conducted, to a large extent, from the perspective of the study of the religious vernacular.[1] Many authors have focused on the loose web of both individual and group bricolage that suppresses normative religion as prescribed by institutions in favor of unique cases of personal expression as practiced by individuals.[2] In his 2014 article, Steven J. Sutcliffe argues that there is no 'New Age,' at least not in the sense of a definable 'religion' or 'system.'[3] The only thing there is, as phrased by William Sims Bainbridge, is a "loosely defined set of collective behavior phenomena," a vernacular mixture of ideas and actions, which is amorphous, variable, and infinitely diverse.[4]

What's more, Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus argue that this formless and ever-changing phenomenon closely resembles religion in its 'pure' form (even in the sense of Émile Durkheim's 'elementary forms of religious life').[5] This position is in a stark contrast to the traditional view of religion

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1 The preparation of this study was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (project grant GA ČR 17-09685S).
We use the terms 'alternative spirituality' and 'New Age' synonymously. For us, alternative spirituality is not a monolithic and enclosed unit but rather a dynamic and creative set of ideas and practices that mutually interacts with surrounding 'traditional' religions, new religious movements, and popular culture and that is inseparable from the continual hybridizing processes of our glocal world. Following in the footsteps of Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism," in: Daren Kemp & James R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 25–50, we speak about 'New Age in a general sense,' which has been both historically connected to Western esotericism and thoroughly transformed by modernist and secular innovative factors, such as occultism, oriental renaissance, evolutionism, psychologization, and the market economy. The term 'spirituality,' as we use it here, does not refer to some kind of desirable 'universally human spiritual dimension' that is opposed to less valuable 'specific religious institutions and doctrines' (a use typical of the emic view). Instead, we use the term to refer to a historically specific discourse (and not as a neutral analytic, or etic, label).

2 See, e.g., Marion Bowman & Ülo Valk (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2014); Anna Fedele & Kim E. Knibbe (eds.), *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013); and Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild Sælid Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).

3 Steven J. Sutcliffe, "New Age, World Religions and Elementary Forms," in: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild Sælid Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London & New York: Routledge 2014), 17–34.

4 William Sims Bainbridge, "The New Age," in: idem, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 363–391, at 370.

5 Sutcliffe & Gilhus, *New Age Spirituality*, 1–16.

promoted by older sociology in which 'religion' was practically equated with 'religious institutions.' Naturally, this traditional approach is hardly sustainable in the fluid realm of alternative spirituality, which professes to be 'non-institutionalized.' With religious studies—from Thomas Luckmann to Timothy Fitzgerald—increasingly criticizing this former focus on institutions and increasingly incorporating empirical research in their methodology, the 'everyday,' 'lived,' and 'vernacular' have become the core categories through which religion is interpreted.[6] As for alternative spirituality, Sutcliffe and Gilhus conclude, we face the vernacular without the official, the lived without the normative. And while in the past religious studies tended to see non-institutionalized spiritualities as a less frequent case, it is in fact the highly organized form of religion that is the exception here:

> We have argued that the institutional model of religion has been the normal way of conceptualizing religion, and that the study of religion as an academic enterprise has largely been conceived as a task of comparing organizational types within a functionally differentiated system. Approached in relation to that model, what McGuire calls 'lived religion' appears inevitably to be something 'other' or 'in addition': it is religion with 'qualifications.' Instead, we claim that 'lived religion' is in fact a normal and even typical state of religion, perhaps a minimum version or elementary form: in short, what should simply be called 'religion.' From this perspective, new age spiritualities are core phenomena, similar to other 'lived' varieties, and giving particular insights into the production and distribution of religious representations in modern societies, especially in non-religious sectors. It is the sharply differentiated institutional forms such as 'world' and 'polis' formations that are really 'other' or 'peculiar.'[7]

In this article, we argue against such approaches that result in an unreflexive acceptance of alternative spirituality's own claim that it is 'doctrine-free' and 'non-institutional' by nature. On the contrary, we suggest that the vernacular

6 See, e.g., Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See also Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 17–27, passim; and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

7 Sutcliffe & Gilhus, *New Age Spirituality*, 13–14.

forms of alternative spirituality, although their common traits are not easily identifiable, entail both a distinct doctrine and social institutions and might, thus, be regarded as an 'official religion' that is perhaps emerging right in front of our eyes.

In the older strata of religious studies, the difference between the 'official' and 'unofficial' façade of religion was tackled in various ways. One of them was to distinguish the 'normative' from the 'everyday' in an attempt to capture the difference between ideals/expectations and actual reality. Another was the duality of 'elite' and 'folk'/'popular' religion, used to refer to different versions of the same religion within different social strata of a given culture. More recently, these two sets of oppositions have been overshadowed by the concept of the 'vernacular,' regarded as radically distinct from 'folk' or 'popular' and based, in its current form, on a seminal article published by Leonard Norman Primiano in 1995.[8]

Primiano argues that from the folklorist's point of view, the difference between 'official' and 'folk' religion not only fails to capture how religion is actually lived but denigrates the 'folk' side of the duality. In other words, such a perspective presents the 'official' as the default version while the 'folk' variant is seen as decadent and less valuable. The same goes for 'popular': the term suggests something lower and less important, as opposed to the term 'elite' as the more important component on which the theorist should be focusing. Primiano suggests folklorists should abandon both of these terms in the academic discourse and instead use the term 'vernacular' to refer to "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it."[9] At its core, his argument is that when a researcher empirically studies the worldviews of individuals, there is no detectable 'official' religion: every individual instance of religion is vernacular, including that of the top representatives of religious institutions. In Primiano's own words, "it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular."[10]

The article sparked an enthusiastic response, and the term 'vernacular religion' spread like wildfire through folkloristics, ethnology, anthropology, and neighboring disciplines. In religious studies, the focus on the lived, individual,

8 Leonard Norman Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54/1 (1995), 37–56. For the application of the concept in the study of alternative spirituality, see Steven J. Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (eds.): *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

9 Ibid., 44.

10 Ibid.

and vernacular complemented the 'cultural turn.' In the sociology of religion, it deepened the ongoing criticism of the almost exclusive focus of the discipline on official religious institutions. In the realm of alternative spirituality studies, the result was obvious. While older generations of scholars, led by Catherine L. Albanese, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, or Paul Heelas, tried to pinpoint the main characteristics of New Age ideas and practices, the next generation started to emphasize the lived, individual, and vernacular.[11] This approach was further contextualized by the coining of the term 'theological (in)correctness,' which highlighted the varying degrees to which people adhere to the official doctrines of their own religion.[12] When these two approaches were combined, New Age practice started to be regarded as 'vernacular' and 'theologically incorrect,' devoid of institutions and normativity, and fully open to individual bricolage.

This type of interpretation is especially attractive to those who study alternative spirituality by means of ethnographic fieldwork, which often sets 'high,' 'elite,' and 'official' culture aside and focuses instead on religiosity as shaped through countless everyday practices in the context of the lives of particular people. The phenomenon of alternative spirituality then appears to be nothing more than an example of 'vernacular' religion.[13] Sometimes, it is even linked to 'folk' as opposed to orthodox religion, such as in the case of Christianity.[14] The problem with this interpretation is well reflected on by Primiano himself in another text.[15] There, he tries to sum up the effect of the concept of 'vernacular religion' in anthropology and folkloristics, emphasizing that his original concept of the 'vernacular' was not meant to be a "dichotomous or dialectical partner of 'institutional' religious forms" but was only meant to be a shift in the

11 See, e.g., Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1–18; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 1996), 113–364; and Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralisation of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 15–40.

12 D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

13 Katri Ratia, "Rainbow Gatherings: Global Pilgrimage of the Children of the Earth." Paper presented at CRAFT–CESNUR Annual Conference, Turin, Italy, 5–7 September 2019. https://www.cesnur.org/2019/turin-program.htm (accessed 22 April 2021).

14 Dorota Hall, "The Holistic Milieu in Context: Between Traditional Christianity and Folk Religiosity," in: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild Sælid Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 146–159.

15 Leonard Norman Primiano, "Afterword: Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular. Ambiguity, Power, and Creativity," in: Marion Bowman & Ülo Valk (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 382–394.

focus of study away from "'religion' and 'belief' as abstractions" to "people." As for religious institutions, their existence presupposes vernacular religion as a foundation.[16] In other words, working with the concept of the 'vernacular' (at least in Primiano's own original rendering) does not mean criticizing, marginalizing, or negating 'official' religion: instead, it is just a matter of emphasis. This is not an either/or situation, since every religion, without exception, is vernacular, as long as we study it from the perspective of its individual, lived, and everyday aspects.

In this sense, to equate alternative spirituality with 'vernacular religion' amounts to answering a rather less interesting question. Of course, alternative spirituality is 'vernacular,' but, as Primiano shows, all religions, including the most organized and institutionalized ones, have a vernacular facet. What's more, this vernacular aspect naturally tends to precede the official one, since established normative doctrines as well as complex and institutionally embedded power relations may take hundreds of years to develop. And of course, alternative spirituality is 'folk': we are all familiar with its popular dimension and the bottom-up way in which it emerged.

The term 'milieu,' so famously employed by Colin Campbell, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, among others, is yet another way to deal with the situation; New Age did not emerge as a new discrete and institutionalized religious movement but rather as a vague and amorphous set of collective behavioral phenomena.[17] Not surprisingly, many scholars focused on the looseness of alternative spirituality, its seemingly infinite bricolage, its individual, highly eclectic streak, its 'seeking' (as opposed to 'dwelling') character, and its doctrine-free and non-institutionalized nature.[18] Recent empirical research on alternative spirituality, often insufficiently reflexive, has greatly added to this image. While this is certainly a viable and useful way to conceptualize the phenomenon, such understanding is, at the same time, clearly incomplete and fragmentary. The more this view is emphasized, the more the vernacular is just the 'folk' without the 'official,' the 'popular' without the 'elite,' the individualistic 'invisible religion' without its institutional counterpart. The question remains whether this is really the case.

16 Ibid., 384.

17 Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," in: M. Hill (ed.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain 5* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 119–136; and Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

18 For 'dwelling' and 'seeking,' see Wade Clark Roof, "Religion and Spirituality: Toward an Integrated Analysis," in: Michele Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137–148.

2 'Spirituality' and 'Religion' as a Discursive Strategy

In fact, the 'non-institutionalized' and 'non-dogmatic' character of alternative spirituality is less a verifiable reality than a discursive strategy. A growing number of scholars argue that alternative spirituality's self-professed absence of organizational structures and freedom from doctrine are far from neutral.[19] In fact, this claim is directed against (typically Catholic) Christianity as the prototype of an institutional and hierarchical religion with a developed and complex doctrine.[20] In this discursive strategy, institutions are interpreted as oppressive mechanisms severely damaging human freedom, hierarchies as systems of power steeped with inequality, and official doctrines as blind dogmas. 'Spirituality,' in contrast, is seen as a universal human ability and need, which may or may not coexist with a specific 'religion.' When it does, it generally finds itself in danger of being unduly restricted by the respective religion's requirements and prohibitions. The discourse of alternative spirituality tends to see such clipping of the wings as, at best, a constraint and, at worst, oppression. Instead, it stresses the need for individuals to develop their soul without any formal restrictions. Following Wade Clark Roof, Sutcliffe describes the individual eclectic ideal present in the discourse of alternative spirituality with the concept of 'seekers,' the religious virtuosi that embark on a long (and sometimes never-ending) quest for personal authenticity.[21] Conversely, within

19 See, e.g., Boaz Huss, "The Sacred Is the Profane, Spirituality Is Not Religion: The Decline of the Religion/Secular Divide and the Emergence of the Critical Discourse on Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27/2 (2015), 97–103; Ulrike Popp-Baier, "From Religion to Spirituality: Megatrend in Contemporary Society or Methodological Artefact? A Contribution to the Secularization Debate from Psychology of Religion," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3/1 (2010), 34–67; and Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Boston & Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 69–70.

20 For exceptions, which are to be found particularly in Catholic Southern Europe, where 'alternative spirituality' may not be as sharply contrasted with 'traditional religion,' see e.g. Mónica Cornejo, "Individual Spirituality and Religious Membership among Soka Gakkai Buddhist in Spain," in: Anna Fedele & Kim E. Knibbe (eds.), *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 62–77; Stefania Palmisano & Nicola Pannofino, "So Far and yet So Close: Emergent Spirituality and the Cultural Influence of Traditional Religion among Italian Youth," *Social Compass* 64/1 (2017), 130–146; and Alfredo Teixeira, Helena Vilaça, & Steffen Dix, "Believers without Religion: Trends and Paradoxes in Portuguese Society," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 12/4 (2019), 415–443.

21 Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); and Steven J. Sutcliffe, "'Wandering Stars': Seekers and Gurus in the Modern World," in: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 17–36.

such discourse, 'dwellers' are seen as the equivalents of moss-covered boulders or, at worst, as dangerous fanatics.

Nevertheless, as Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman argue in their seminal paper, this 'personal spirituality and authenticity' is actually a socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced doctrine into which its proponents are effectively socialized and enculturated.[22] This doctrine is, thus, better seen as a "self-image of the spiritual milieu" and "emic rhetoric" than as something actually sociologically existent.[23] Similarly, Boaz Huss suggests that 'spirituality,' far from being something universal, is first and foremost a "novel cultural category" and "new discursive construct."[24] As Zuzana M. Kostićová concludes, the concept of 'spirituality-as-opposed-to-religion' should be avoided as an analytic tool of the social sciences and religious studies, at least as long as its emic baggage has not been carefully identified and understood.[25]

If we transcend the dualist discursive construct of spiritual/experiential and religious/institutional, it will help us to critically rethink the term 'spirituality' and to approach alternative spirituality as any other 'official religion.' What we are facing here is the question of redefining the 'official' to make it better suited for the changes in the very foundations of contemporary society. We cannot keep implicitly defining the 'official' as prescribed by a church or a similar type of religious organization since the very character of what constitutes a 'religious organization' can be easily questioned. In this sense, we may benefit from understanding religious organizations through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of apparatus or *dispositif*—that is, as very diverse types of institutions that uphold and promote a specific discourse. At the same time, we need to forget the strict separation of 'religious' and 'secular' so typical of late Christianity: in fact, these two domains are blurred in most religions and, very often, their institutions. Finally, we should recall Ninian Smart's model, according to which official religion is not confined only to its institutional dimension (structures, organizations, and authorities) but very much present in all of its seven dimensions.[26] Yes, the institutional dimension does represent the most

22 Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman, "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21/2 (2006), 201–222.

23 Ibid., 219.

24 Boaz Huss, "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and Its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29/1 (2014), 47–60, at 52.

25 Zuzana Marie Kostićová, "Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses: Revisiting the Term 'Spirituality' as Opposed to 'Religion,'" *Central European Journal of Contemporary Religion* 4/2 (2018), 81–97, at 94–95.

26 Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

'official' aspect of religion while the experiential dimension represents its most 'vernacular' aspect. However, religious institutions, too, are shaped by human beings (who provide a touch of the individual, specific, and vernacular), and religious experience also tends to be interpreted in relation to the prevailing official doctrine. We might therefore wish to look at relevant institutions and doctrines and explore official religion on that basis.

3 'Official Religion': Institutions and Doctrine

In their ground-breaking article, Anne Taves and Michael Kinsella examine the institutions and organizations of alternative spirituality.[27] They distinguish two basic organizational forms—the 'church–sect–cult/new religious movement' form and the 'networked religion' form—and propose a hybrid third one that, in their view, is the most relevant for alternative spirituality.

The first form is intimately linked to the concept of power, basically modelled on Max Weber's typology of authority as traditional, legal, and charismatic. While the power of churches is mostly traditional, with some overlap with the legal type in which the roles of religion and the state are more conflated, the authority of new religious movements is largely or even exclusively charismatic in its nature. Although new religious movements are essentially unstable, they may—in the process of the institutionalization of charisma—slowly lose their radical character and begin to rely on other types of authority.[28] However, in all such cases, the boundaries between the relevant religious group and the rest of society are delineated more or less clearly, and the group is easily identifiable. As for power, it is held by a concrete person (or concrete persons), and its execution is observable and relevant: while churches may resort to excommunication, new religious movements may deprive a non-complying person of the favor of the charismatic leader and expel him or her from the movement.

In the contemporary world, traditional religious authority (and, consequently, any institution based on it) is being actively eroded by the new media and the new reality that they create, and this is precisely where the concepts of

27 Ann Taves & Michael Kinsella, "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Organizational Forms of 'Unorganized Religion,'" in: Steven J. Sutcliffe & Ingvild Sælid Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 84–98.

28 See, e.g., Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (Lanham: Unipub, 1989); Lorne L. Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," in: Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113–132; and Roy Wallis, "The Social Construction of Charisma," *Social Compass* 29/1 (1982), 25–39.

'digital' and 'networked' religions emerge. For the scholars of 'digital religion,' the effects of the Internet on religious authority are of crucial importance. Pauline Hope Cheong, for instance, identifies three layers of traditional religious authority: structure (that is, communities and organizations); hierarchy (the persons in power); and texts (comprising the texts themselves as well as the doctrines they convey).[29] When a new communication medium emerges, it tends to erode and transform all the layers of traditional religious authority. For example, the Reformation in the sixteenth century was preceded by the invention of the printing press, which facilitated access to the Bible (and other religious texts) and led to the challenging of the clergy's authority as well as to the reexamination of the Church's official doctrine. Something similar is happening today: the invention of the Internet has brought about free access to almost every source (including the most esoteric), resulting in a crisis of religious authority and the emergence of what Heidi A. Campbell calls 'networked religion.'[30] Focusing on shifts in authority (along with other characteristics such as networked community, storied identities, convergent practice, and multisite reality), she emphasizes the serious challenges and threats to established religious roles and the ease with which a new authority (even one lacking any links to traditional structures) can emerge on the Internet.

Now, Taves and Kinsella suggest a 'third way' (besides the 'church–sect–cult/new religious movement' triad and the 'networked religion'), which they regard as historically typical of the Western esoteric tradition with its arcane organizations and private lodges:

> While attitudes toward 'organized religions' varied among these groups and among the individuals within them, most of the organizations were esoteric and/or universalist in their theology and, thus, generally viewed their organizations as compatible with membership in 'organized religions.' They, thus, constituted an organizational 'third way' that with some exceptions did not adopt a formal 'church' structure, did not view themselves as 'organized religions,' and for the most part were not viewed that way by others. Characterizing themselves variously as nonsectarian, spiritual, metaphysical or occult, they viewed themselves neither as '[organized] religions' (the first way) nor completely 'non-religious' (the

29 Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in: Heidi A. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 72–87.

30 Heidi A. Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/1 (2012), 64–93.

> second way). Preoccupation with the church–sect–cult typology has hidden them from sociological view, obscuring the extent to which organizations of this sort not only provide the deep structure of the amorphous collectivity we call 'new age spirituality' but also prefigure many of the features of the 'networked religion' of the Internet era.[31]

While Taves and Kinsella are certainly right on target, we believe the discussion of the organizational nature of alternative spirituality should be elaborated and moved much further. Simply put, historical comparisons are not enough: the contemporary situation is in many ways unique, and, unsurprisingly, it is engendering a unique form of religious organization. Though esoteric lodges are undoubtedly the historical predecessors of alternative spirituality, we can hardly expect to be able to understand the emerging official religion of the 'spiritual but not religious' kind without considering the changes in the global system and all its political and socioeconomic dimensions. Indeed, the organizational and economic structures of the esoteric societies existing within early modern guilds were very different from today's Internet and capitalist networks.

It is obvious that traditional forms of religious organization (such as churches), which developed, in large part, within the feudal system of medieval Europe, are now endangered by (as Zygmunt Bauman puts it) increasingly 'liquid' social life.[32] Unlike these traditional organizations that will have to undergo a tough negotiation of their position within the new reality, alternative spirituality has been born into it. In other words, it does not have to replicate the specific institutions that developed in a very different set of historical and social circumstances. Alternative spirituality, however, does tend to give rise to a great number of new religious movements underpinned by the charismatic authority of their leaders: from large communities (such as Findhorn) through groups gathered around gurus and channelers to spiritual schools and companies. From the Weberian point of view, this is nothing but a shift of emphasis from traditional authority to charisma independent of traditional structures.

The changes within the global system seem to be even more relevant if we consider the new socioeconomic order: neoliberal capitalism. Again, while Christianity's traditional religious organizations (most notably the Catholic Church) have difficulty coping with the new situation, alternative spirituality has developed within this environment and is, thus, naturally adapted to it. Unsurprisingly, its core organizational forms are not churches but corporations.

31 Taves & Kinsella, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 87.

32 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

Several authors have drawn attention to the economic side of alternative spirituality—with some of them being critical and some rather neutral toward it.[33] Despite its original countercultural character, alternative spirituality's penetration of the corporate environment has been massive. There are also many well-established companies that fulfill the role of religious institutions in that they provide different types of spiritual services; organize festivals, workshops, seminars, and retreats; rent out lecture halls or dance studios to various teachers and instructors; and sell different kinds of products—books, clothes, food, or typical spiritual merchandise such as dream catchers, semi-precious stones, candles, tarot cards, etc.

Compared to the 'church–sect–cult/new religious movement' typology, alternative spirituality is, thus, as liquid and flexible in its organizational form as any contemporary corporation. While it certainly exhibits many traits of 'networked religion,' it also creates specific offline environments in which religion is manifested in face-to-face, personal, and even physical contact between the participating persons. Finally, it actively produces what could easily become new traditional authorities: while charisma still plays a key role in alternative spirituality, it is the association with influential companies that gives the authorities their power. In this context, it is worth noting that traditional structures and hierarchies (as opposed to charismatic authority) need quite a lot of time to emerge. In the Catholic Church, which is usually cited as the most prominent example of organized religion, the original authority of the first centuries was also chiefly charismatic, and the institutions took several hundred years to develop.

What's more, the loop between companies and their clients reinforces the emergent official doctrine, shapes the expectations in terms of specific religious behavior, and promotes an appropriate ethics. Contrary to general belief, contemporary spirituality is a far cry from the chaotic realm of infinite eclecticism, in which consumers shop for their personal packages of meaning based on individual tastes and preferences.[34] As Aupers and Houtman have

33 For the critical view, see, e.g., Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 303–306 and passim; Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-real Testament* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2005), 42–49. For a more neutral view, see, e.g., Paul Heelas, "Challenging Secularization Theory: The Growth of 'New Age' Spiritualities of Life," *The Hedgehog Revue* 8/1–2 (2006), 46–59; Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 54; and David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

34 See Véronique Altglas, "'Bricolage': Reclaiming a Conceptual Tool," *Culture and Religion* 15/4 (2014), 474–493.

demonstrated following in Hanegraaff and Heelas' footsteps, New Age belief is embedded in a relatively unified and coherent worldview, including perennialism and the idea of a socialized ego and an authentic Self.[35] Indeed, we can already see some of the aspects of the doctrine that is emerging here and now. While the concept of (spiritual) energy is the first and foremost, many other elements are also visible, including holism, harmony, and personal transformation; spiritual experiences and mystical techniques, such as altered states of consciousness or shamanic travelling/channeling; and millennialism, reincarnation, and non-violence.

As regards behavior, there are many expectations directed towards seekers, most importantly meditation and self-discovery but also attendance of various ceremonies, therapies, and workshops; changes in diet (such as vegetarianism or veganism); and/or a positive, loving, and forgiving attitude, refraining from harmful, aggressive, and unsustainable behavior (often in accordance with the belief in reincarnation and karmic law). Currently such expectations take the form of, at most, strong recommendations. However, the strictness of these requirements may increase in specific contexts, such as in particular communities or new religious movements that originated within the general alternative spirituality milieu as well as at different spiritual retreats.[36] Moreover, occasional periods of heightened millennialism tend to put stronger emphasis on these behaviors. In this sense, the new morality of sustainability, equality, and respect is probably the most visible part of the official side of alternative spirituality.

What does all this say about alternative spirituality as a 'vernacular' and/or 'official' religion? We have argued that the emerging academic study of alternative spirituality is stuck in a self-reproductive process. Many scholars stress the non-institutional and doctrine-free character of alternative spirituality, (a) repeating what actual spiritual enthusiasts say about themselves and (b) comparing this emic discourse with the results of insufficiently reflexive empirical research. The apparent incongruences between the fluid spiritualities of different individuals and groups and the lack of reflection in empirical research then make alternative spirituality appear as a vernacular religion *par excellence*. However, this may lead us to jump to very one-sided conclusions

35 Aupers & Houtman, "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket."

36 In fact, Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 150–173, also describes such an environment in his study of the Findhorn community: he observes both these specific types of behavior that meet these expectations and relatively complex organizational structures that institutionalize these expectations.

and to overlook the institutions and doctrine that are emerging right in front of our eyes.

4 Spirituality as a Transforming Discourse of Transformation

Most papers collected in this issue are an outcome of the "Spirituality: A Transforming Discourse of Transformation" panel held at the fourteenth International Society for Ethnology and Folklore Congress in Santiago de Compostela in 2019. The title of the panel referred to alternative spirituality's key narrative of personal transformation, growth, and development but also to the transforming, changing, and ever-emerging nature of the narrative as such. Indeed, 'spirituality' is a transforming discourse that is inherently embedded in the particular historical and sociocultural environments of our contemporary world.

Reet Hiiemäe's paper "A Hundred Forms of Spirituality in the Least Religious Country in the World" is a very useful introduction to contemporary spiritualities not only in Estonia but in Europe in general. Using interviews, participant observations, and media analyses, Hiiemäe warns us against applying 'either/or' categories and fixed opposites (mainstream/alternative, permanent/situational, transcendent/consumerist, and serious/banal) to the study of religiosity. She urges academia to adopt more sensitive, nuanced, and open-ended approaches instead. In her call for blurring rigid boundaries, she questions the very dichotomy of institutional and canonical 'religion,' on the one hand, and individual and open-minded 'spirituality,' on the other. Indeed, both of them can serve as tools for overcoming certain practical problems as well as for pursuing meaning and transcendence. Importantly, Hiiemäe emphasizes the interplay of contemporary spiritualities and the media that both represent and shape the spiritual milieu. She also pays attention to children's socialization into alternative spirituality, including their own agency in the very process.

Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson, drawing on her extensive fieldwork in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia, focuses on the vocabularies used by members of two nature-based spirituality movements: Vissarionites and Anastasians. While Vissarionites are a post-Christian new religious movement and Anastasians a New Age environmental movement, they share an aversion to our 'technocratic and money-based society' and to institutionalized Christianity. Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson situates these movements between Eastern and Western ideological influences. She carefully analyzes how Asian ideas, symbols, and values related to concepts such as energy, reincarnation, karma, non-violence, and vegetarianism are Westernized and adapted to

post-communist Baltic and Russian environments. She also shows that in spite of religious diversification and individualization, there are substantial similarities in the movements' worldviews, suggesting that broader sociocultural processes are at work in alternative spirituality as a whole. Thus, despite the peculiarities of Vissarionite and Anastasian individual and collective practices as well as the specificities of the states and societies she has examined, the observed vocabularies seem to be inspired by a more or less globalized New Age discourse.

In his fascinating study, László Koppány Csáji maps the way in which 'energy' as a guiding principle within a changing world has been introduced into the angel discourse of the Lights, a charismatic Christian fundamentalist group. During his long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the group's members in Hungary, Romania, and Serbia, he had the chance to observe the entire step-by-step process of construction of the concept of 'angel as the shape of energy.' This concept appeared both abstract and concrete enough to provide a perfect explanation for questions that emerged in instances of angelic visions, healing, and mediation of divine power. Csáji also compares the transformation of the angel discourse with the construction of meaning within other concepts, especially that of 'resonance.' Last but not least, he analyzes the discourse's role in delineating the group itself, describing in detail how access to increasingly esoteric information depends on one's position in the group's hierarchy. The applicant's journey through particular threshold narratives is crowned by initiation into an inner discourse, receiving the Holy Spirit and becoming a Light.

Yael Dansac's paper offers phenomenological insight into specific activities taking place in Carnac, France and calls our attention to one of the key topics of alternative spirituality: bodily experience. Drawing on her embodied and sensory ethnography conducted among six groups performing 'energy healing,' Dansac demonstrates the importance of the body as a privileged ground for experiencing and testing particular spiritual practices. She identifies somatic experience as instrumental for engagement with the 'spirits of places' and 'megalithic energies' as well as for attaining the 'true Self' and 'personal growth.' Dansac shows how individual sensations are intertwined with the bodily techniques as prescribed by specialists and imparted to practitioners. She also emphasizes how somatic imagery is reproduced among participants when they share and discuss their experiences. Unsurprisingly, there are few differences between the ideas and practices of various groups as they rely on the same sources: local folklore from the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries that is re-signified and reinterpreted within New Age and Neo-Pagan discourses.

Laura Vollmer examines the terminological development within the discourse of spirituality as such. She explores how the idea of 'secular spirituality,' which seems to be a contradiction at first glance, has become thinkable in our contemporary world. She tracks the etymological evolution on the example of yoga in Britain, which is now understood as 'secular' and 'spiritual' but not 'religious.' Vollmer, thus, documents a more general discursive transformation: 'spirituality,' at first intimately connected with religion (i.e., 'not secular'), begins to be associated with 'inner feelings' or 'subjective experiences' and is, as a concept, gradually being distinguished from religion and relocated into the secular (i.e., 'not religious') sphere. While the position of spirituality as a concept has changed, the very assumption of mutual exclusivity of the categories 'religious' and 'secular' has largely remained untouched. Importantly, Vollmer argues that this discursive shift also affects scholarly debates and shows that popular and academic thinking are closely related and embedded in shared implicit knowledge. In her structural discourse analysis, the historically and socially determined meanings of the words 'secular,' 'religious,' and 'spiritual' reveal themselves primarily in relation to each other.

The tour of Europe finishes in Finland with Elisa Mikkola's paper "Angel Spirituality in the World's Happiest Country." Mikkola takes us into the core of the problem of what the purpose of alternative spirituality (or, for that matter, any other religion) is. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research on the events of the internationally well-known Irish mystic Lorna Byrne, Mikkola discusses how Finnish women incorporate the traditional figures of angels into their modern lives. Interestingly, Byrne's attractiveness and success seem to fly in the face of the 'existential insecurity thesis': the typical attendees of Helsinki's events are middle-aged, middle-class, and well-educated women with high levels of existential security. Mikkola convincingly argues that this new form of religiosity offers an environment that satisfies the need for help, advice, and support in difficult situations. The therapeutic aspects of angelic imagination and practice are supplemented by an experience of enchantment that includes all the emotional colors of life: the playful and the serious, the surprising and the scary, the pleasant and the uncanny. Pure existential security and well-being do not seem to be the answers to the questions about choice and meaning asked by women in today's Finland.

5 The Nature of Alternative Spirituality

The articles presented here are broad in their scope in many ways. They cover different geographical locations: from Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia

through Hungary, Romania, and Serbia to France, Britain, and Finland. They also examine different types of communities: from post-Christian new religious movements through Neo-Pagan and nature-based groups to relatively amorphous, indeterminate, and vague spiritual milieus. As much as these forms of religiosity are geographically and socially diverse, they still have something in common: namely, 'alternative spirituality.' Having said this, we need to make two clarifications. First, the word 'alternative' is not to be understood here as the opposite of 'mainstream' but rather as the opposite of 'traditional' (in the sense of 'traditional' religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).[37] As Hiiemäe points out, even in Estonia, the 'least religious country in the world,' alternative spirituality has already become the norm involving, in one way or another, the majority of the population. Second, by preferring the singular 'spirituality' instead of the plural 'spiritualities,' we do not wish to deny in any way the existence of an immense plurality of religious expressions (which is more than evident in light of the papers collected in this issue) but rather to focus on their common features. Here, we would like to name some and describe them in greater detail.

First, *alternative spirituality, though glocal and inventive, is pregnant with a distinguishable doctrine*. The papers collected here demonstrate the great variety of inspirations that the particular groups draw on in creating their worlds. We are invited to observe in detail how specific ideas—originating in Eastern religions, Western esotericism, European folklore, or Christianity—are traveling and changing within alternative spirituality. We can see how the groups adopt different cultural material and adapt it to new contexts; how they rearrange, reorganize, and reinterpret it in favor of current interests and wishes. In the vein of this "sacred creativity," as Stefania Palmisano and Nicola Pannofino have recently called it, religions appear to be 'inventive' rather than 'invented.'[38] Indeed, alternative spirituality is constantly modifying, selectively rediscovering, and innovatively remodeling preexistent material to remain relevant and credible in the face of present needs. It combines local and global knowledge, and even though global New Age discourse usually prevails without difficulty, it still needs to consider many specific social and cultural constraints existing on

37 This distinction is a scholarly abstraction, just as any distinction in the realm of religion inevitably is. Of course, alternative spirituality and traditional religions (Christianity in particular) share a common history and have been affecting each other through transfers of ideas and practices as well as discursive wars, in which they actively work towards separation on the conceptual, symbolical, political, and other levels.

38 Stefania Palmisano & Nicola Pannofino (eds.), *Invention of Tradition and Syncretism in Contemporary Religions: Sacred Creativity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

the ground. The global is, thus, always developed in local circumstances, with both universalizing and particularizing tendencies present in the process.[39]

In exploring this glocal process of transformation, the theoretical outcomes of Csáji's ethnography might be helpful. He suggests five principles relevant for constructing meaning that determine the acceptance or rejection of new elements: (a) *relevance*, which refers to the attractiveness of the innovative idea for most people and its suitability for answering acute questions faced by a given group; (b) *compatibility*, which refers to the required accordance with the layers of meaning existing within the group's common knowledge; (c) *creativity*, which refers to the role of the individual, as it is always concrete people who use and transform meanings; (d) *vagueness*, which refers to the fact that there is both convergence and divergence in the construction of meanings and that the process is always in flux; and (e) *relativity*, which refers to the fact that any new semantic domain is nothing but a section of the participants' broader lifeworlds that is activated situationally, primarily within the given group.

Although Hiiemäe correctly argues that any spiritual environment effectively resists a stable classification, some doctrinal similarities should nonetheless be highlighted here. In fact, all the papers show that the examined ideas and practices depend not only on historically, socially, and culturally very heterogeneous material but also on a more or less unified spiritual discourse. Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson demonstrates how, in pursuit of the unity of humankind, nature, and the cosmos, both Vissarionites and Anastasians translate originally Eastern ideas into globalized New Age concepts, such as energy, harmony, spiritual perfection, and ecological lifestyle. There can be little doubt that the metamorphosis of Christian angels into positive energies, documented by Csáji, perfectly exemplifies the advent of a new global narrative. In Carnac, despite the richness of local folklore and the diversity of spiritual paths, all the practitioners described by Dansac resort to similar techniques and discourses, primarily inspired by Neo-Pagan and New Age vocabularies: beneficial energy and healing powers associated with megaliths or desirability of self-development and personal growth. Yoga in Britain has been legitimized, as Vollmer carefully evidences, by Western concepts of religion, spirituality, and science: it was first understood as a part of the Hindu religion and, then, once religion and spirituality were discursively distinguished, moved within the sphere of secular spirituality as a practice supported by official medicine.

39 See Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in: Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, & Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995); and Manuel A. Vásquez & Marie F. Marquardt, *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion across the Americas* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

Finally, Mikkola in her study on angels shows how traditional Christian imagery yields to in-demand personal spirituality expressed in the fashionable ideas of self-help, empowerment, and balance.

Second, *alternative spirituality is profoundly social and effectively socialized*. One of the most striking characteristics of the spiritual environment to emerge from the papers is its sociality. The strongly communal life of Vissarionites and Anastasians; the social training and gradual enculturation into the hidden knowledge required to become one of the Lights; Carnac's socialization through special bodily practices and verbal exchanges of somatic experiences within the groups; the sense of community and joint enchantment as the key moments of the angelic events in Helsinki: all this demonstrates that collectivity, communality and sharing are an integral part, and not a random appendage, of alternative spirituality.

In this respect, our findings are reminiscent of the ground-breaking article by Aupers and Houtman, who argued that it was sociologically naïve to accept the emic rhetoric of individual spirituality and personal authenticity. In fact, the unifying and coherent doctrine of 'self-spirituality' is socially constructed, transmitted, and reinforced. As a result, it is imbued with social significance, and it plays a public role.[40] The papers collected in this issue contribute in a substantial way to our understanding of how alternative spirituality's doctrine is socially produced and reproduced and how its adherents are socialized and encultured into it.[41] They document not only the apparent shift from traditional to charismatic authority but also the distinctive ways in which these authorities invoke and strengthen the doctrine through social training, experience sharing, and mutual communication. In summary, it is certainly true that alternative spirituality is a vernacular, lived, and everyday religion (which, for that matter, is true of any religiosity), but it would be very short-sighted to forget its common and unifying aspects. A collectively comprehensible doctrine, recognized set of behaviors, and recommended ethics—the typical hallmarks of any official religion—are probably emerging here and now, yet it is difficult to see a single big picture behind the multitude of vernacular forms.

One point needs to be added here, though. As we have argued, alternative spirituality has been born into and successfully adapted to the era of capitalism and the Internet. However, this does not imply that it should be treated as a mere instance of a 'spiritual supermarket' or 'networked religion.' All the papers included in this issue seem to distance themselves from the view of

40 Aupers & Houtman, "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket."

41 See also Véronique Altglas & Matthew Wood (eds.), *Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion: Critical Approaches* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

alternative spirituality as a form of cherry-picking and superficial consumerism that maximizes therapeutic efficacy, entertainment, and pleasure. Similarly, all the papers clearly demonstrate the importance of offline communal life, sometimes centered around a guru (such as the prophet Dénes), sometimes centered around a place (such as the Carnac hub in France). All in all, we argue that just as it may contest commercialization, alternative spirituality may also actively resist full 'onlinealization.' We, thus, venture beyond cultural appropriation, commoditization, and other neo-Marxist scholarship as well as an excessive emphasis on the networked, digital religion concept.[42]

Third, *alternative spirituality is going to be visibly socially organized and institutionalized*. It has been stressed many times in the literature that the spiritual environment is characterized by blurring the boundaries between the institutional/non-institutional or the public/private spheres.[43] Interactions between religious/secular and sacred/profane social formations have also been analyzed; in this respect, alternative spirituality seems to be blended with other cultural elements and embedded within broader social processes.[44] The work by Courtney Bender is one of the most detailed studies on how alternative spirituality is not only lived but produced within religious as well as non-religious sectors, that is, within numerous institutional fields, including those frequently considered secular.[45] Moreover, as Hiiemäe points out, there are many degrees of involvement and participation in the spiritual environment, as secularization/sacralization or disenchantment/re-enchantment coexist in a liquid manner. Vollmer, in turn, shows that spirituality and secularity can go hand in hand under specific historical circumstances. The case of yoga is illustrative here: conceptualized as 'spiritual but not religious,' it was allowed to enter the secular space of medicine, health, and wellbeing. The practice has been institutionalized in many

42 For the neo-Marxist view, see, e.g., Adam Possamai, "Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *Culture and Religion* 4/1 (2003), 31–45; and Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*. We also distance ourselves from the position represented by Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). While he rightly criticizes the 'rhetoric of individualism' in spirituality, he tends to see it as a mere 'capitalist ideology' that masks the real nature of the oppressive system and as an 'opiate' that helps get people accustomed to late capitalism. For the concepts of 'networked religion' and 'digital religion,' see, e.g., Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship"; and Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

43 See Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman (eds.), *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010), 1–30.

44 See Sutcliffe & Gilhus, *New Age Spirituality*, 1–16.

45 Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

environments, entering state as well as private organizations, including schools, spiritual as well as scientific centers, and firms and companies working towards professionalization and effectiveness of their employees.

In fact, a form of organization and institutionalization is not absent in any of the communities presented in the papers included here. Some of them are organized and institutionalized in a 'traditional' fashion, but there are also groups and agencies that are at work when arranging gatherings and workshops or renting lecture and performance halls. We are not only talking about settings such as cafés, bookstores, or businesses, where people meet, shop, and participate in spiritual events. Rather, we are confronted with the fluid corporate environment of our capitalist and Internet era that gives rise to new forms of religious organization. We can only speculate whether the agencies involved will eventually develop established organizational structures and produce sociologically visible 'traditional' authorities. For now, suffice it to say that they create a secure environment capable of supporting teachers and performers as well as institutionalizing their charisma and power.

In summary, the papers collected in this issue point out concrete ways in which alternative spirituality is—despite the emic rhetoric of non-organization, non-institutionalization, and the perennial 'spiritual but not religious' adage—socially shaped and constituted. Although religion certainly cannot be equated with religious institutions, it is becoming increasingly clear that organizational and institutional dimensions are not absent in many forms of today's alternative spirituality.

Fourth, *alternative spirituality, as with any other religion, addresses and redresses the key existential issues of human life*. In one way or another, all the papers included here touch upon how people experience uncertainty and how they make sense of things when facing the liquid fears and existential dilemmas of our globalized world. But it is Mikkola's article in particular that puts this topic in the foreground by recalling the influential theory of 'existential security' put forward by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart. These theorists argue that while factors such as desire for human contact and solidarity or probing into the meaning and purpose of life have always been important, what actually reduces the importance of religion in people's lives is high levels of existential security in post-industrial societies.[46] This revised version of the secularization theory is naturally very much at odds with contemporary trends in alternative spirituality across Europe. Although the authors strive to include it in their general model, assuming that the motivations behind 'transcendent

46 Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 245–246.

religiosity' and 'post-Christian forms of spirituality' might be similar, they are unsure and unconvincing in their argumentation and leave the answer open.[47]

The problem, we would argue, consists in the definition of 'existential.' For Norris and Inglehart, existential insecurity basically means *physical* insecurity. This is quite different from an existentialist approach to questions related to the ambivalence of life and indeterminacy of freedom. Adopting the latter perspective, we suggest that religion tends to address and redress existential issues, such as wellbeing and anxiety, happiness and suffering, health and illness, life and death, certainty and uncertainty, and meaning and meaninglessness. Like Michael Jackson, we also find religious life first and foremost in existential situations in which personal wishes and outside determinants interact and in which the existential imperative—'to strike a balance between being an actor and being acted upon'—comes into play.[48] In this sense, we cannot simply say that religion is a *reaction to* existential insecurity. Borrowing from Tim Ingold's conceptualization of 'correspondence,' we would argue that it is more accurate to say that religious life *corresponds with* the world and the existential challenges it brings about.[49] In short, the notion of the mechanical determination embedded in Western linear-causal and subject-object logic is very different from the view that the world and human beings—who are an inseparable part of it—are mutually attentive to each other.

It seems that religious life—in spite of past and present secularization theories—flourishes even in Europe and its 'most atheist' and 'happiest' countries. Although alternative spirituality has been labeled 'simple,' 'decadent,' and 'ridiculous' by some observers, from an existential point of view, it is just as relevant, valid, and valuable as other religions. Even though some religious forms may be extremely sophisticated and rationalized while others are rather simple and naïve, they all deal with similar existential issues, rooted in the human condition and situatedness in the world. What else, after all, would concepts like personal development, energy, harmony, and millennialism be other than an expression of hope of being a meaningful part of the world and ways of coping with it and, perhaps, making a difference?

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47 Ibid., 250–251.

48 Michael Jackson, *As Wide as the World Is Wise: Reinventing Philosophical Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

49 Tim Ingold, "On Human Correspondence," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23/1 (2017), 9–27.

6 Conclusion

We have embarked on the quest for outlining an official dimension of alternative spirituality by taking a closer look at the buzzword 'vernacular religion.' We naturally do not wish to deny the everyday, lived, and vernacular aspect of alternative spirituality, present—as Primiano himself has argued—in every religion. In our view, a truly thought-provoking question would be asking the exact opposite: whether alternative spirituality, in some sense, is also conceivable as an 'official religion,' characterized by a shared doctrine, specific forms of authority, and emerging institutions.

In this sense, we have argued that the celebrated quality of being 'spiritual but not religious' is less a sociological reality than alternative spirituality's own emic rhetoric and discursive strategy. We have, therefore, called for more reflexive and theoretically grounded research into how alternative spirituality is socially formed and constituted. The papers collected in this issue point to some common characteristics, which, when taken together, offer a more general picture of alternative spirituality. These characteristics include beliefs and convictions that are remarkably recurrent and may be understood as the rudiments of a collectively comprehensible doctrine; ethical norms and ideals that tend to lead to socially recommended, prescribed, and sanctioned behaviors (including rituals); and striking similarities in the ways in which this religiosity becomes organized and institutionalized.

We have suggested that neither the traditional 'church–sect–cult/new religious movement' trinity nor the organizational 'third way' typical of Western esotericism can fully capture the institutional form of today's alternative spirituality. The late twentieth century saw the dawn of digital technology, which gave birth to what has been termed 'networked religion.' Alternative spirituality has also been increasingly characterized by a convergence of religious institutions and markets, creation and recreation of new forms of social organization and institutionalization of charismatic authority. With the countercultural ethos inherited from the New Age of the 1960s still very much alive, this process remains ambivalent, but the increasing presence of alternative spirituality in mainstream culture actively reinforces its commercial aspects. Alternative spirituality, thus, has to adapt to the era of the Internet and capitalism as well as to the existential precariousness of our complex and dynamic world in general.

In the 1960s, Luckmann famously criticized sociology's disproportional focus on religious institutions, arguing that this very methodology created an illusion of equivalence between religion and religious institutions. Perhaps now, sixty years after the publication of his masterpiece *The Invisible Religion*,

we are facing a mirror image of the problem. The overwhelming focus on empirical particularities of the insiders' experiences and interpretations has influenced our approach so much that we are inclined to abandon a more general and reflexive perspective from which we could see an emerging religious institutionalization. In other words, we became so mesmerized by the trees that we tend to forget that, after all, we are standing in a wood.

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