Religion

BEYOND A CONCEPT

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Salvation by Electricity

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Whether looking at matters of invention and design, of distribution and ownership, or of reception and use, histories of technology are typically framed within one of two metanarratives: the optimistic or the dystopian. In the former, technologies are seen as benign instruments that fulfill the needs, intentions, and desires of their human users. An extreme form of such technophilia can be found in the pages of the American magazine *Wired* and among techno-gurus such as Nicholas Negroponte, who wax poetic about an imminent world populated by therapeutic Barbie dolls, self-cleaning shirts, driverless cars, and a range of devices enabling immediate access to inexhaustible supplies of media and information. This optimism has a considerable progeny, one root of which might be traced back to early modern European conceptions of the mechanical order of nature and its susceptibility to ever-advancing human powers of inspection and rational design. In this tradition, technology is a pliable handmaiden to the forward march of history, taking such forms as the Haussmannized city, the Macadamized countryside, the prosthetically enhanced body, or the digitized archive. By contrast, there is a tradition of thinking about technology, as in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger or Jacques Ellul, that is both dystopian and technophobic. Here one is presented with a vision of technology as an autonomous, self-directed realm, indifferent and impervious to our feeble calls for restraint, democratic control, or humane purpose. In this scheme, modern technologies resemble juggernauts running loose in the world, devouring the natural environment and even human bodies, and transforming them into raw materials for their own mechanical processes.

The aim of this essay is not to resolve the ongoing dispute between optimistic and dystopian accounts of technology, nor to offer a "better" theoretical construction of what technology is and how it relates to the

making of history.[1] It will be concerned with a somewhat different set of questions, based on the observation that both the optimistic and the dystopian narratives of technological modernization share a common location in a deeper—and thus more insidious—history of secularist thinking about the relationship between humans and things, between the lived body and the realm of imagination, and between the known and the unknown.[2] From a secular perspective, technology refers to the order of things that are "supposed to work," and the failure of any given technology to do so is usually attributed to problems of misapplication or errors of design. Religion, by contrast, is often defined as precisely that which is *not* supposed to work, at least in the sense that actions and perceptions falling under the rubric of religion are assumed not to produce any objectively measurable effects within the order of the real. In the anticlerical tradition of the Enlightened *philosophes*, this distinction further serves as the basis for understanding the "true" origin of religious phenomena, such as miracles or divine retributions, as products of wholly human thoughts and actions. Attempts to define what is religion (and in the same breath to demarcate the realm of the secular) thus end up working to delegitimate and deauthenticate religious practices and modes of discourse by presenting them as infantile delusions, or as tricks of mystification designed to exploit the credulities of the innocent. In these terms, secularist critiques of religion have long been tied to broader political projects to foster new, "reasonable" forms of religious discourse and practice: religions that "know their place" by remaining safely segregated from the performative, epistemological, and instrumental prerogatives of—among other things—modern techno-scientific practice.[3]

The more carefully one looks, however, the more difficult it becomes to determine where, or even how, to draw the line separating "religious" and "technological" dimensions of social life. The action systems of modern technologies (especially advanced, complex systems that require considerable operational expertise and institutional infrastructure) are typically distinguished by their inability to be fully captured by the instrumental intentions of their users. To that extent, they reference a transcendent realm not unlike actions normally associated with "religion," such as prayer or ritual performance. Technologically mediated actions are also often governed by principles of automaticity, reproducibility, and extension through virtual space, making them phenomenologically comparable to "religious" experiences of the numinous, the miraculous, the providential, or the mysterious. Numerous historical and ethnographic studies have likewise shown how the skilled techniques and representational systems of modern techno-scientific practice—in laboratories and workshops, at conferences, and in other public and institutional spaces—resemble systems of magic or religious action: as pragmatic engagements with the world through skilled techniques, disciplined perceptions, and autotelic mechanical devices; or through the institutional organization of "faith" regarding the true workings of an imperceptible natural order.[4] All of this suggests that religion and technology are far more tightly woven together than secularist discourse might have us believe. Denials of this mutual contamination of religion and technology

can thus be understood as part of a larger strategy for securing secularist certainties about the division between real and unreal worlds, and the forms of political authority and legitimacy that rest upon their segregation.

This essay contributes to a growing scholarly suspicion about secularism, and in particular secularist conceptions of technology, by considering a parochial but I think quite exemplary story: the story of the Spiritual Telegraph.[5] The term *Spiritual Telegraph* refers to the deep and inextricable relationship between, on the one hand, the circulation of ideas and practices of spirit communication embodied in the nineteenth-century religious movement known as Spiritualism and, on the other hand, the institution and spread of the telegraph: a technology that can be singled out as the first significant industrial application of electricity in the nineteenth century and an important harbinger of the networks of global communication that define our contemporary "digital age." As we shall see, the relationship between Spiritualism and telegraphy is not simply fortuitous. By recounting their conjoined history, I hope not only to demonstrate the importance of both Spiritualism and telegraphy for the constitution of modernity but also to slip out of the secularist grip on the very notions of religion and technology, in order to imagine them differently.

It is not coincidental that the story I have chosen takes place in the nineteenth century, since this was a period of intense technological transformation and also of the dramatic growth of religious movements. Especially during the latter half of the century, the industrializing societies of the North Atlantic witnessed a succession of technological inventions that radically expanded the terms of human contact, labor, knowledge, and imagination along the axes of transmission and recording: new technologies for erasing distance (such as telegraphy, telephony, and radio) and new forms of mechanized inscription and reproduction (such as photography, phonography, radiography, and cinema). These revolutions in mediated communication had deep and globally extensive repercussions, animating such diverse phenomena as the setting of new standards for measuring world time and space, an increasingly bureaucratic mode of capital accumulation, the ideal of "objectivity" in journalism and other professions, the enforcement of new, gendered distinctions between private and public, or the success of new popular cultural forms.[6] At the same time, the nineteenth century set the stage for a dramatic restructuring and flourishing of religious activity, coincident with North Atlantic projects of nation-state formation, the consolidation of powers of colonial domination, and the adoption of new organizational formats designed to exert influence "among the masses." One might even characterize this period as a golden age for the flourishing of religious movements, as evident from the creation of missionary societies, religious publishers, or international congresses devoted to the expansion and deepening of religious sentiments and commitments across an increasingly interconnected global space.[7] The Spiritual Telegraph is emblematic of this global shift in institutional, epistemological, representational, and

performative dimensions of both religious and technological spheres of life, whose consequences continue to be felt.

Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

According to its creation myth, Spiritualism was born in 1848, outside Rochester, New York, with the discovery by sisters Kate and Margaretta Fox of a means of communication with the dead. This discovery launched the young women onto the path of international stardom, while unleashing a new era of learned attention to and popular fascination with the "other world" and its secrets. One thing that makes the story of the Fox sisters so interesting is its location at the fertile intersection of a popular religiosity—more properly stated, a predominantly feminine religiosity—that proliferated across the nineteenth-century Atlantic world and an expanding public culture made possible through new communications media. Here we find, on the one hand, a growing number of spirit mediums attempting to renegotiate existing lines of (cultural, scientific, ecclesiastical, and political) authority and sources of legitimate knowledge, and to link such efforts on a world-wide scale. On the other hand, it is equally striking that such efforts were bound up with the power of the new technology of the telegraph, which provided both the metaphorical language and the material infrastructure for sustaining contact with various worlds lying "beyond" the local everyday life situations of relatively powerless people.

This conjunction of popular religion and new communications technology was present not only in the very idea of contact with the dead (through the medium of intangible wires) but also in the ways such technologies enabled Spiritualists to embrace new organizational forms and techniques within the religious field. Indeed, the spread of Spiritualism did not depend on the establishment of a circle of virtuosi (such as priests or hierocrats) who monopolized religious knowledge, guarded the portals of access to ritual practice, or derived their authority from routinized exchanges of money, gifts, and services with "ordinary" folk. Instead, this was very much a grassroots, "do-it-yourself" movement, consisting in loose networks of like-minded actors who established their own local circles largely on the basis of information acquired from an emergent news industry and a rapidly growing market for popular print (whose dynamism, not coincidentally, was closely connected to the advent of electrical telegraphy). These were the terms with which the nineteenth century bore witness to a startling multiplication of Spiritualist séance circles, periodical publications, national and international conferences, scientific committees of investigation, and no small number of fraudulent opportunists, skeptical critics, and curious onlookers.

In the wake of the Rochester Rappings, as they came to be known, Spiritualism developed into a major international movement and cultural trend, centered on the practice of communication with the dead (typically, through the dramaturgy of possessed bodies,

mysterious appearances of disincarnate voices, images, and other sensations), and with the various benefits accrued from such communications, including personal solace, health, prestige, and even the authority to undertake moral or political campaigns. Understood in its broadest sense, the term encompasses a family of movements—Victorian (i.e., American, British, and Canadian) Spiritualism; Theosophy; French, Brazilian, and Cuban Spiritism (i.e., Kardecism); and Christian Science, to name the most obvious—which crystallized in the mid to late nineteenth century and have survived in myriad forms into the present. These groupings spread around the Atlantic and eventually found their way into every region of the world, from Russia to the Philippines, India, and Australia, among other places. As a globally resonant cultural force, Spiritualism provided a canopy for a wide range of adherents, drawing in literally millions of working-class women and men,[8] as well as social elites, including doctors, artists, scientists, politicians, and engineers, who lent an aura of respectability and authority to the cause.[9]

Spiritualism was the product of a multiplicity of overlapping philosophical legacies, having varying degrees of accommodation with established Christian doctrines and drawing upon mystical traditions from both within and outside Europe and the North Atlantic world.[10] As many have also noted, Spiritualism was predominantly a women's movement, not unlike many other forms of popular religious activity in the nineteenth century, such as the multiplying sightings of the Virgin Mary, to cite an obvious example. In fact, Spirit mediums—the indispensable technicians in the control of access to the supernatural world—were overwhelmingly women, and mediumship in general was culturally coded as a "female gift."[11] Especially (but not exclusively) in the context of the antebellum United States, Spiritualism is understood to have provided women with opportunities for social advancement and public legitimacy through their participation in séance practice and, more broadly, in the social networks such associations opened up for them. Making artful use of widespread nineteenth-century tropes of moral purity and assumptions about the sensitive nature of "the weaker sex," Spiritualist women were able to speak out while avoiding the responsibilities of authorship, proclaiming merely to convey the judgments of the world of spirit upon the world of the living. This placed the authority of dead voices in alliance with the desires of Spiritualist women to make themselves heard and, indeed, to remake the world, not least through their involvement in political movements advocating the abolition of slavery, temperance, or women's suffrage.[12]

Because Spiritualists were concerned above all to cultivate a direct union with the world of the dead, spirit mediumship has also been treated as a variant of a much larger family of religious practices concerned with possession, spiritual healing, and supernatural communication, known to societies around the world.[13] Any comparison of Spiritualism with "non-Western" rituals of possession, however, is complicated by the former's intense engagement with a range of Western sciences and para-sciences, from physics to phrenology, and also with the theoretical and practical frameworks of emerging professions, such as electrical engineering and psychology. The seemingly omnivorous character of the

movement suggests, in fact, that Spiritualism cannot readily be contained within the tidy binarisms of religious/secular, modern/primitive, erudite/popular, or scientific/magical. Precisely because of this indeterminacy, Spiritualism also provides an instructive vantage point from which to survey the dramatic cultural changes that accompanied broader processes of industrialization, colonial encounter, and the formation of new national and international public spheres over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century. As we shall see, Spiritualism developed a vocabulary for making sense of the ascendant technologies of nineteenth-century industry and communication, and a repertoire of ritual activities designed specifically to accommodate the performative demands such technologies elicited in various contexts of private and public life. To those extents, the movement casts light not only on evolving conceptions of the world of spirit but also on the deep entanglement of such ideas with the history of technological development, in particular with the world-transforming technologies of communication that made their appearance in the latter half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the telegraph.

Wired Modernity

The telegraph was the most revolutionary media technology of the nineteenth century.[14] This is because, as James Carey proposes in his widely cited work on the topic, with the advent of Samuel Morse's electrical telegraph in 1844, communication was for the first time "freed from the constraints of geography."[15] Thanks to telegraphy, information transmission could now proceed much faster than physical transportation, and on this basis could redefine longstanding spatiotemporal relations of center and periphery, the global and the local, or the proximate and the distant. Of course, no technology is created *ex nihilo*, and in this respect it is important to recall that electrical telegraphy was preceded by a variety of techniques and instruments for what we might call "deterritorialized" communication, such as semaphores and optical telegraph systems,[16] to say nothing of the quite ancient practices of sending signals by smoke or mirrors. But the electric telegraph involved a far more radical separation of signifying systems from the physical movement of objects, engendering entirely new possibilities for social relations based on the "economy of the signal."[17] These were relations predicated on (relative) simultaneity, impersonal contact, and increasingly centralized administrative control, as was quickly made evident in a variety of economic, technical, and social arenas: the coordination of capital investments and strategic transactions in international commodity markets;[18] the standardization of news reportage;[19] shifts in modes of international diplomacy;[20] and even new possibilities for romance, fantasy, or criminal enterprise.[21]

Being the first successful application of electrical energy outside the realms of scientific experiment and medical therapy, telegraphy constituted what we might even be tempted to call the world's first truly globalizing telecommunications infrastructure, not

least because of the systemic nature of its technical application. Telegraphic communication was characterized by its capacity for rapid, unidirectional, and asynchronous transmissions of information across potentially limitless distances, thanks to its innovative use of integrated electrical circuitry and its ability to compress complex language through the use of a binary system of signs (Morse code). The electric telegraph was also distinguished by the restrictive interface between the medium and its end-users, materialized in the institutional space of the telegraph office, its bureaucratized labor force, and its hierarchical ordering of communication processes according to criteria of efficient time management and priorities of commercial and governmental interest.[22] In all these respects, this technology represented a significant harbinger of the contemporary global communications environment, with its proliferating networks of computers and satellites, and the institutional architecture governing transnational flows of digital information.[23] Even the legal instruments designed specifically for telegraphy foreshadowed our contemporary era of global media flows. So, for instance, the most important prototype for modern international telecommunications policy and interstate co-ordination emerged with the founding of the International Telegraph Union in 1865.[24] Telegraphy not only demanded new forms of cooperation among states, it also contributed to a dramatic transformation in the exercise of political power within and across state structures, such as drawing peripheral regions of the world into ever more intimate contact with capital cities, especially the great imperial metropoles of Europe and the United States.[25] In short, through the networking of regional, national, and international telegraph systems, the design of the human-machine interface, and the organization of institutional environments for these communicative practices, telegraphy stood at the forefront of a radical revolution in mediated communication, with global consequences.

The story of the telegraph's rapid extension is well known. In 1848, only four years after Morse successfully introduced the technology, there were already 2,000 miles of wire in existence; by the early 1870s, over 650,000 miles of wire linked together a sprawling network of telegraph offices, submarine cables, international connection treaties, ancillary technologies (such as pneumatic tubes), and messenger boys (who hand-delivered messages wherever cables did not exist), in their conjunction servicing over 20,000 towns and villages in a vast area of the world from Europe to America, India, Japan, Australia, and South America.[26] By the dawn of the twentieth century, the technology had enveloped even the most remote hinterlands of the world.[27] This relentless expansion was dominated by British-owned cabling companies, which benefited from British hegemony in related fields, including marine traffic, and control of the trade in copper and in gutta percha (an early form of rubber crucial for submarine cable construction), facilitating the formation of vast international telecommunications concerns.[28] As these networks of telegraph cables encompassed the globe, drawing all regions into their orbit—although, we should concede, with quite uneven levels of access and control—telegraphy contributed decisively to the formation of a new, supraterritorial social space, existing everywhere and nowhere.

This new geography was defined by the logic of "the grid," which did not respect long-standing temporal frontiers of day and night, or work-week and Sabbath, or other ways of marking time locally, and worked instead to impose upon the entire planet a single, temporally homogeneous map of world space, reflected in the development of standardized time zones,[29] or in the drive to produce detailed representations of hitherto unknown (and largely unconsidered) world spaces, such as the ocean floor.[30] Although its potential remained only partially realized, forever plagued by financial and technical impediments, telegraphy thus promised a new alignment of knowledge, representation, and communicative practice, encompassing the entire planet, from the most temporally remote locales of human habitation to the darkest corners of the natural order.

The infrastructural project of telegraphic modernization not only accelerated and expanded communication on a global scale, it radically altered its conditions of possibility. Advances in electrical engineering allowed for new technological capacities not simply for relatively instantaneous but, more specifically, for *disembodied* communication and contact. In other words, beginning with the telegraph, the new media technologies of the nineteenth century occasioned new opportunities, and also new expectations, for sustaining one's presence in an autonomous, ethereal world of electrical currents and flows. This was a universe into which human bodies—covered in flesh, impaired by weak sensory organs, prone to fatigue, and slow to move—could never fully enter. To the extent that electrical media were capable of duplicating and distributing human presences in this ethereal world of information exchange, the very terms of human communication had been forever changed. To interact with others now meant to read the traces of their virtual presence.[31]

At the heart of this nexus of virtual presence stood the enigma of electricity itself. Like all things that flow, seemingly autonomously and autotelically—water, money, or even the stream of poetically inspired thought—electricity provided both the metaphorical and the practical groundwork for the key scientific orthodoxies and technocratic instrumentalities, and much popular thinking, that shaped the industrializing modernity of the Atlantic world in this period, and it was through the medium of electricity that the nineteenth century produced a supra-territorial form of global connection. As a master trope, electricity facilitated the articulation of new modes of industrial and political power with new scenes of scientific inquiry and new regimes of cultural production. The power of electricity thus offered a particularly vivid language for charting the imagined world of disembodied presence that had been brought into being by new communications technologies, beginning with the telegraph. In its terms, new homologies could be forged between the representation of social life, even of the human body itself, and the geography of industrial modernity, whereby, for instance, the electrical flow of a telegraph network could be likened to the arterial architecture of the human nervous system or, for that matter, the nervous twitches and flows of city traffic.[32] The model of the electrical flow

thus served both metaphorically to represent and materially to enable "human intelligence" to be extended and duplicated in new ways, such as by passing through the networked circuitry of a telegraph system.

It is, of course, too simple to suggest that the representational power of electricity was a direct product of the invention of the telegraph, since the cultural and scientific contexts in which electrical flow was formed as an object of knowledge have a long history.[33] In the European context, it is possible to trace at least two millennia of competing accounts of the nature of magnetic attraction, electrical excitation, sympathetic vibration, and other forms of action at a distance. At times, these were explained by the Aristotelian notions of a universal ether pervading the universe, or as emanations of an imponderable substance, destitute of weight, or as invisible effluvia that communicated through the percussion of material bodies.[34] By the eighteenth century, these debates about how to represent electrical flow were registered in the study of a wide variety of phenomena, including gravitational attraction, the body's nervous functions, acoustical and optical effects, and, most importantly, electricity. Eighteenth-century natural philosophers were widely convinced that electricity, weather, and life were intimately connected, as Benjamin Franklin's experiments with lightning,[35] or later the work of the Italian anatomist Luigi Galvani, famous for his elaborate theory of animal electricity, seemed to confirm.[36] With the invention of the telegraph, these longstanding conjunctures of scientific knowledge and cosmological speculation were simultaneously confirmed and reworked. Telegraphic applications of electrical energy now enabled diverse commentators to consider anew how the idea of electrical flow related to the mysteries of human intercourse and the natural order, and above all, the possibility of communication with "a world beyond" the spatially and temporally localized situations of everyday life experience.

These, then, are the terms in which telegraphy encompassed important elective affinities with religious movements and with the work of the religious imagination in the nineteenth century, especially with regard to circulating ideas about progress, transcendence, social and ecological harmony, health and vitality, death, and the afterlife. If the actual experience of sending and receiving telegraphic communications was somewhat more arduous (and, for most people in the nineteenth century, prohibitively expensive), the rhetoric of telegraphic entrepreneurs and supporters characterized the technology in terms of an instantaneous disembodiment of human consciousness and the transmutation of information from its physical repositories of voice and ear, paper and ink, into the nebulous world of electricity. Indeed, telegraphic communication was frequently described in the nineteenth century in terms of miracles and sacramental power. Even among ardent secularists, the language of miracle resonated with a technological utopianism that exerted considerable appeal: a popular faith in the progressive powers of technology—and in particular, of electricity—to deliver long-awaited promises of freedom, ecological harmony, and democratic community, all of which James Carey (paraphrasing Leo Marx) has aptly described as "the rhetoric of the electrical sublime."[37] For others, telegraphy was not so much the token of a new utopia as the sign of a pervasive dehumanization of social relations, against which images of a prelapsarian pastoral life were presented as a final refuge from the foreboding world of industrial machines.[38] More often than not, at the level of popular culture, such debates concerning the moral implications of electrical technologies such as the telegraph were absorbed into a largely animistic understanding of the universe, where the lines dividing science, spectacle, and magic were exceedingly difficult to draw. It therefore behooves us to attend carefully to the existence of a range of responses to, and accounts of, the sacramental powers inhering in such remarkable, world-transforming instruments as the telegraph. A striking case in point is the Spiritualist involvement with this technology, to which I shall now turn.

Out of the Ether, into the Body

Spiritualist engagements with telegraphy have already been noted by several scholars. Werner Sollors, for instance, has drawn attention to the striking historical and geographic coincidences between the birth of American Spiritualism and the advent of the telegraph, when "the most intensive years of telegraph expansion coincided with the years of the rise and rapid proliferation of its spiritual counterpart."[39] The telegraph thus proved itself, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, a productive "thing to think with," not only for the technological literati, whose experience with electrical instruments afforded them symbolic power as "experts,"[40] but also for those engaged in the business of occultism. As shown by the Fox sisters, communication with the dead could be achieved by opening and manipulating a channel, not unlike a telegraph circuit. Apparently, the Fox family home served as an ideal site because the dwelling "was charged with the aura requisite to make it a battery for the working of the [spiritual] telegraph."[41] Spiritualists even argued that the very idea of electromagnetic telegraphy was originally an inspiration coming from the spirit world: a gift presented to humankind in order to facilitate communication among the living and the dead. And, just like the terrestrial telegraph, the technology of the Spiritual Telegraph was the object of evolving ideas about application and design. In 1854, the American Universalist minister John Murray Spear was a recipient of detailed plans, provided by the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, for the construction of a "soul-blending telegraph":[42] an intercontinental telepathic transmitter to be powered by a corps of sensitized mediums installed in male/female pairs in high towers, which would compete with the existing telegraph service and would succeed where much-vaunted attempts to lay transatlantic cable had yet to prove their worth.[43]

In the context of an expanding reading public conversant in scientific discovery and the marvels of modern engineering, many Spiritualists seized upon the example of telegraphy in order to elaborate a grand theory of supernatural presence, grounded in the power of electromagnetism. Andrew Jackson Davis, a leading American Spiritualist, proposed

that "the conditions and principles upon which spirits answer to the inquiries of man . . . are no more complicated or wonderful than the principles upon which the magnetic telegraph is daily operating along our great commercial avenues."[44] Allan Kardec (the *nom de plume* of Léon Dénizarth Hippolyte Rivail), the Mesmerist, educational theorist, and chief architect of the Spiritualist movement in France, similarly described spirit mediumship in telegraphic terms. The work of the medium, Kardec reported in his 1861 manual *The Book on Mediums*:

> is that of an electrical machine, which transmits telegraphic despatches from one point of the earth to another far distant. So, when we wish to dictate a communication, we act on the medium as the telegraph operator on his instruments; that is, as the *tac-tac* of the telegraph writes thousands of miles away, on a slip of paper, the reproduced letters of the despatch, the visible from the invisible world, the immaterial from the incarnated world, communicate what we [spirits] wish to teach you [living people] by means of the medianimic instrument.[45]

The invisibility and intangibility of electric current, and its capacity to collapse time and space into a single, continuous plane of reference, provided the perfect analogy for the existence of the human soul beyond the body. After all, if telegraphic technologies could harness electromagnetic forces in order to communicate intentional messages, why should it not also be possible to develop comparable techniques in order to communicate with the dead? From this perspective, Spiritualists proposed merely to enlarge the range of possible interlocutors within the new social environment created by the telegraph, accounting for a semiotic space in which, strictly speaking, communication with the distant and communication with phantasmic traces of the dead are phenomenologically indistinguishable.[46] In other words, what Spiritualists presented was a technically plausible explanation for occult knowledge, aligned with the authority of nineteenth-century science and engineering, and the tantalizing promises that lay beyond as yet unexplored avenues for the mingling of spiritual forces and electrical fluids. As Kardec reasoned:

> A hundred years ago, a person who should have proposed to transmit a despatch five hundred leagues and receive an answer in a few minutes, would have been called a fool: had he done it, it would have been thought that he had the devil under his orders; for at that time the devil alone was capable of travelling so rapidly. Why, then, should not an unknown fluid have the property, under given circumstances, to counterbalance the effect of weight, as hydrogen counterbalances the weight of the balloon?[47]

The analogy of spirit mediumship and telegraphy worked because it referenced a deeper cosmological claim about electricity as a form of "universal fluid," permeating all

forms of animate and inanimate being, and enabling their intercourse with one another. For some, such as John Dods, a New England Universalist Church minister, amateur scientist, and prominent trance speaker of the 1850s,[48] electricity was part of a natural theology in which electromagnetic energy was interchangeable with the grace of God and the holy sacrament (or, for that matter, the experience of falling into a trance state) was defined as a mechanism for aligning oneself with God's transcendent energy. "All motion and power originate in the mind," Dods argued, "and just as the human spirit, through an electromagnetic medium, comes into contact with matter, so the infinite Spirit does the same, and through this medium he governs the universe."[49] Not unlike a Christian receiving divine communion, or a cable receiving an electric charge, or a sensation passing through the nervous system of the body, spirit mediumship was a means of receiving and further transmitting fluid energies that emanated from somewhere beyond. In each case, reception requires the host's capacity for proper attunement. For the spirit medium, this meant being endowed with the correct "electro-medianimic machinery," as Kardec called it. In order to receive a spirit, Kardec explains:

> there must exist between the spirit and the medium influenced a certain affinity, a certain analogy, in a word, a certain resemblance, which permits the . . . fluid of the incarnated to be mingled, united, combined with that of the spirit who desires to produce the effect. This fusion should be such that the resulting force becomes, so to say, *one*; as the electric current acting on the coal produces one flame, one single brightness.[50]

Claims about the receptivity of spirit communication were thus inextricably tied to claims about the body of the spirit medium herself, constituted as a complex of nervous pathways and "cerebral batteries" enabling the immaterial and the material to communicate properly.[51] More than simply a metaphor, the Spiritual Telegraph was a *model* for the working of the body, and also a model for the practice of communication itself, worked out through the electrical principles of current and charge, capacity and resistance, circuit and field. As a model, the Spiritual Telegraph provided a context for both representing and animating the body in ways appropriate to the conditions of life routinized through the spread of electrical technologies.

I stress the notion of the Spiritual Telegraph as a model for action if for no other reason than to dispel any lingering assumptions that Spiritualism was just another "religious" response to the electrical industrialization of the Atlantic world of the nineteenth century.[52] The history of Spiritualism must not be reduced to an exotic episode of initial contact with the disorienting effects of modern technologies: an experience, one might further presume, that was eventually displaced by more sober, disenchanted apprehensions of their "true" functions, as revealed in routine practices of labor, business, statecraft, and science. This is a common interpretation of the movement's popular appeal

and of its eventual demise (especially with regard to the industrialized North Atlantic world). From that perspective, Spiritualism resembled a "primitive" possession cult, whose performances could be read as symptoms of trauma, or an infantile retreat into a world of fantasy.[53] A complementary interpretation of Spiritualism as nothing more than a palliative practice might emerge from the observation that Spiritualist performances were typically staged in the darkened parlor of the bourgeois home. The parlor, after all, provided a richly auratic environment that contrasted dramatically with the harsh lights and fast movements of the modern city. Surrounded therein by the tactile signs of domesticity and intimacy—of hands linked together and hushed voices—séance clients seemed insulated from the disenchanting and enervating effects of industrial labor and the cold calculus of capitalist exchange. In this reading, Spiritualism was so popular because it offered a return to the maternal womb, a reenactment of the scene of primary narcissism.

But that line of interpretation should not distract us from noting that the feminine-coded interiority of the bourgeois parlor was hardly a static place. On the contrary, its boundaries were continually being renegotiated, as Spiritualist activities extended out from local sites into national and international arenas of public visibility.[54] The séance chamber was often proclaimed to be hermetically sealed from the world of the mundane and open only to the universe of spirit. But in their actual activities, séance practitioners almost invariably opened themselves to the penetrative powers of the capitalist market, the machinery of advertising, and the logics of spectacle, rationalized labor, and scientific induction that by the late nineteenth century were converging to create the new cultural spaces of transatlantic modernity. And were there any agents more capable of effecting such penetrations than emergent technologies of electrically mediated communication?

This question, I think, sheds considerable light on Spiritualism's deep entanglement with the embodied sensations and imaginative powers elicited by new technologies such as the telegraph. Enveloped in promises of bringing together the visible and the invisible, the public and the private, and the global and the local, the telegraph provided more than a convenient analogy for Spiritualist séance practice. It pointed toward a new type of human subject. This agent was now located in a cosmic order that mirrored the developing logic of communication technologies in the nineteenth century and their performative goals of erasing distance, freezing time, or circumventing what seemed otherwise to be an inevitable route toward inertia and decay of bodies and things.

Sensuousness, Credibility, and Faith in the Age of Electrical Automation

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the conception of the séance chamber as a place of "primitive sensation" comes from the ways Spiritualists deployed innovative techniques and technologies for unraveling the mystery of spirit communication. In fact, at séances

it was hardly uncommon to find an array of mechanical devices, such as cameras, magnets, metal cables, speaking trumpets, clocks, scales, pressure gauges, radiometers, planchettes, or ouija boards, among other things. Such devices enabled Spiritualists to register, measure, transmit, and reproduce "wondrous signs" emanating from the afterworld, including rappings, mysterious musical sounds, flying objects, or instances of automatic speech and writing. By helping to locate the presence of spirits directly within the natural order, modern technologies also allowed Spiritualists to demonstrate to their competitors and critics their deep commitment to the language of investigation, exhibition, exposure, and evidence. Thus one might treat the introduction of evolving media technologies into the séance chamber as an index of the growing subordination of feminine domestic power to the powers of inspection and protocols of male-dominated science.[55]

In the struggles among Spiritualists and their detractors, the séance chamber was transformed into a sort of laboratory: a stage for investigating the spirit world, for obtaining its secrets, and also for surveilling the body of the spirit medium as a source of certain knowledge or, as the case may be, a site of misinterpreted evidence, indeterminacy, or even duplicity, imposture, and fraud.[56] For their part, Spiritualist testimonials concerning supernatural communication were buttressed by the authorizing presence of a remarkable lineage of scientists and engineers. This is well illustrated in the case of Cromwell Fleetwood Varley, the chief consulting electrician of the Atlantic Telegraph Company and of the Electric and International Company, one of the great engineers of transatlantic telegraphy in the 1860s and also a committed Spiritualist. Varley used his engineering expertise with submarine telegraphy in order to contribute to the establishment of a credible "science of Spiritualism" and also to develop new séance protocols that would incorporate the skills and resources of the telegraph testing room. These included the application of instruments such as a magnetized helix, resistance coils, and a mirror-galvanometer, all of which Varley had originally designed in order to test signal retardation on possible Atlantic cable designs and to teach novice clerks the art of efficient deep-sea cable signaling. In the séance chamber, the same devices were utilized in order to measure "circuit effects" upon the medium's body during moments of spirit communication.[57] In a similar vein, the chemist William Crookes, renowned among other things for the discovery of thallium, applied his knowledge of radiation effects under conditions of high vacuum by bringing a radiometer to the séances he regularly attended during the mid 1870s—including those held by the celebrated mediums Kate Fox, Florence Cook, and Daniel Douglas Home—where he conducted extended tests to disprove natural explanations for their extraordinary powers.[58]

Figures such as Varley and Crookes were joined by a large number of respected advocates of the Spiritualist cause, including Oliver Joseph Lodge, a pioneer in the development of wireless telegraphy, and the eminent biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, a tireless defender of the plausibility of spirit rapping, table-turning, spirit photography, and related phenomena through his published letters, articles, books, and courtroom testimony,

beginning with his first séance experience in 1865.[59] In Victorian Britain, these efforts to establish a credible scientific account of spirit communication culminated in 1882 with the formation of the Society for Psychical Research, having as its first president the distinguished moral philosopher Sir Henry Sidgwick. The society was charged with the mission of investigating the large body of "debatable" phenomena designated by the terms *mesmeric*, *psychical*, and *spiritualistic*, without prejudice or prepossession, and through the application of protocols for scientific research that had been developed in other fields, such as physics and biology.[60]

On the other side of the fence stood a long line of skeptics, such as the physicist Michael Faraday, who conducted widely publicized experiments disproving the supernatural source of table-turning in the 1850s,[61] or William Benjamin Carpenter, the prominent physiologist and president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Carpenter penned a series of vitriolic diatribes against Crookes in particular, and more generally against the credibility of all forms of spirit communication, as little more than the work of talented frauds and the wishful thinking of their gullible clients. More precisely, Carpenter identified the true source of the entranced states so commonly found among Spiritual mediums and their audiences in terms of the principles of "ideomotor activity" (involuntary muscular actions produced during mental states of expectant attention and anticipation), and "unconscious cerebration" (a reflex action based on the anatomical relation of the cerebrum to the sensorium, enabling the seemingly spontaneous formation of ideas).[62] In his widely celebrated *Principles of Mental Physiology*, first published in 1874, Carpenter characterized spirit mediums, not as the delicate and finely tuned electrical machines Kardec had described, but rather as hosts of an abnormal nervous system. This aetiology allowed him to bring the "gift" of spirit mediumship into close alignment with "morbid states" he found elsewhere, such as in cases of epilepsy and hysteria.[63]

Critiques of Spiritualism thus relied upon the expert knowledge of physiologists, but also of psychologists and anthropologists, united in their commitment to principles of induction and controlled observation.[64] But in their public life, the accounts of Spiritualism produced by scientific experts were almost invariably jumbled together with a heteroglossia of theological denunciations of "enthusiasm," journalistic sensationalism, gossip, and the exemplary performances of stage magicians.[65] In the latter half of the nineteenth century, these diverse registers of speech and practice gave shape to a pervasive philosophical naturalism that imputed invisible, yet entirely explicable, forces as the source of explanation for observable effects. At the same time, this concern with invisibility was framed by a deeper anxiety about the human sensory faculties—especially the faculty of vision—as sources of knowledge and of normative subjectivity: a growing distrust of the unseen that was being fed by gathering physiological knowledge about the sensory organs, and at the same time by an expanding popular culture of mediated images.[66]

The language of demand for visibility and exposure allows us to compare, on the one hand, the procedures by which a figure like James Braid, the "father" of modern hypnotism, exposed the mysteries of Mesmerism and animal magnetism, having rooted them in the "observable" phenomena of unconscious expectation and involuntary muscular action; and on the other hand, the work of a stage magician like Harry Houdini (*né* Ehrich Weiss), who brazenly offered cash prizes to any medium who could prove to his satisfaction the existence of spiritual forces without the use of trickery.[67] In fact, it is not surprising that the two sorts of experts to whom the credibility of Spiritualist claims were most frequently referred were scientists and stage magicians. Both groups had vested interests in denouncing Spiritualist claims, and both possessed a well-developed discourse and performative repertoire to provide "natural" explanations of the ostensibly supernatural occurrences within séance practice, in particular, to demonstrate the likely techniques of sensory misdirection employed by spirit mediums in their acts of subterfuge. According to the maxim of the philosopher George Henry Lewes, a hardened skeptic of Spiritualism, "nothing is more inexplicable than a good conjuring trick; nothing is more intelligible than when the trick is explained."[68]

Despite the opposing conclusions they reached, both the advocates and the detractors of the Spiritualist enterprise adhered to protocols of precise measurement, controlled observation, and the reproducibility of experimental conditions and results that had been accredited in other scientific domains. For both groups, therefore, questions of faith in spirit communication were properly and legitimately addressed through the discovery of tangible, sensuous evidence. This contributed to a dissolution of the enigmas of the spirit world and the mobilization of new operating principles for dealing with invisible things. Michel de Certeau has described precisely such a set of principles in his account of the "dogma of the real," a modernist narrative that "first arose out of a methodic effort of observation and accuracy that struggled against credulity and based itself on a contract between the seen and the real . . . and [that now] offers to *sight* precisely what must be believed."[69] Spiritualism was likewise organized by a dogma about the indisputability of the senses. It presented, in the words of the historian Laurence Moore, "a religious faith which depended upon seeing and touching."[70] Even skeptics such as G. H. Lewes were forced to concede how central was the idea of the "irresistible evidence of the senses" for the constitution of Spiritualist faith.[71] In an apposite description of the process of conversion to the movement, Lewes noted how:

> There is probably not a single convert who does not assure his listeners that he began by being incredulous of the facts narrated by spiritualists. Like other people he thought "the whole thing a transparent humbug." He derided the credulity of believers; but, skeptical though he was, he had enough candour to admit the facts if they could be proved. He went as a scoffer, and returned a convert: facts vanquished him; he could not distrust the evidence of his senses.[72]

Lewes's description of conversion to Spiritualism as a process of acquiring conviction through the senses brings us to the very heart of nineteenth-century struggles to define, defend, or even to denounce séance practice. As I have suggested, the appeal to sensory evidence certainly was at work in competing efforts, on the one hand, to establish a credible science of Spiritualism, and on the other, to demarcate experiences of spirit communication, at best as matters of false inference and pseudo-scientific theorizing, and at worst as the mark of feminine pathology, infantilism, and primitivism. But whatever credence was given to Spiritualist testimonies, the intense focus on and concern with "sensations" also indexed a much deeper (and culturally more pervasive) set of questions about how to construe faithful relationships between the receptive body and the immateriality of messages "from beyond." As we have seen, starting in the mid nineteenth century, this "beyond" was being radically reconfigured through a succession of revolutions in mediated communication, defined by new interfaces of humans and machines. In this rapidly changing context, Spiritualism was not haphazardly constituted as a religious faith of the senses. It would be more precise to say that "faith" emerged here as the product of a continual process of renegotiation between the agency invested in emerging technologies of inscription and transmission, and the agency of the human sensorium as it navigated this strange new world governed by invisible electrical flows. By the same token, the credibility of spirit communication did not rest simply on the observable condition of the spirit medium's body. It also rested upon her talent for translating the invisibility and intangibility of the spirit world into recognizable gestural codes, in other words, for performing the act of possession in ways that would sustain the bonds of trust with her audience. And in the context of the rapid technological shifts that defined the late nineteenth century, one of the most important ways that spirit mediumship could be secured as a trustworthy source of knowledge was through its conformity with what I shall call a "syntax of automatism," which was modeled on (dare one say mimicked?) the work of electrically powered machines.

Lisa Gitelman has offered an insightful account of how advancing media technologies and spirit mediums shared this common syntax. Her analysis focuses on the notion of "automatic writing" and its applicability to a broad range of nineteenth-century practices and technologies of inscription. According to one definition, automatic writing referred to the Spiritualist practice of writing "mediumistically": that is, the enactment of the authorial agency of the dead through the receptacle of a living body and the production during trance states of elaborate texts, memoirs, lists, maps, or even entire works of literature or music.[73] At the same time, in the context of late-nineteenth-century bureaucracy, the term *automatic writing* referred to the work performed by autonomous technologies of inscription and transcription, such as telegraph machines, stock tickers, and the related business machinery of phonographs, mimeographs, telephones, and typewriters.

As Gitelman points out, the impetus for the technical development of these machines was rooted in their capacities for speedier transmission of information (duplex, and later

quadruplex telegraph receivers, for instance, could work ten, twenty, or even fifty times faster than human telegraph operators) and thereby the lowering of overhead costs, precipitating a deskilling and simultaneously a marked feminization of office labor.[74] Such inventions also bore the traces of concern about authority and authorship, witnessing and evidence, and the reliability of existing modes of transcription, interpretation, and reportage embodied in such figures as the court stenographer or the office clerk (which until the late nineteenth century, not coincidentally, had been largely the preserve of skilled male workers). What was hailed as the precision and selfless operation of modern machinery, and more generally the "superiority" of electrical automation, thus allowed for a renewed examination of how much intelligence was required for accurate inscription and how reliable were human eyes, ears, and fingers for "effective work" in modern offices and related scenes of labor. With the introduction of so-called automatic-writing machines, the concerted attention that skilled operators needed for controlling instruments, such as the telegraph, was steadily displaced onto the concerted attention that employers and technical experts could now devote to the smooth operating of the communicative apparatuses themselves and the firm management of an increasingly female office workforce.[75] In this context, automaticity referred to the kind of work performed by partially conscious and distracted subjects, whose bodies were increasingly being encased in the prosthetic shell of modern office technologies.[76] Here once again, the trope of feminine passivity dovetailed neatly with the demand for an undistorted mediation of information. The pliability of the female body to the pressures of mechanical equipment was conceived here as a privileged source of "'mechanical objectivity,' a presumed freedom from human subjectivity, and consequently from error."[77]

The performance of the Spiritualist séance and of modern office work thus shared a strikingly common preoccupation with the sensory and an ambivalence about where to locate authoritative agency in the interface between humans and machines. Like a spirit medium and her séance clients locked in the darkness of the séance chamber, modern business workers were consumed by the power of invisible technologies of inscription and the presence of mysterious utterances increasingly divorced from the graphical accoutrements of authorship and the textures and particularities of handwriting.[78] And much like modern office labor, Spiritualist performances exhibited principles of automatization and dematerialization that had been given new impetus by a range of instruments and institutional arrangements, beginning with the space of the telegraph office. The act of being possessed by a spirit was thus phenomenologically comparable with the autotelic labor of telegraphic machinery (telegraphy, of course, serving as a metonym for the range of electrical communications media that came to the fore in the nineteenth century).

These electrical analogies further invite us to describe the work of Spiritualists *within* the séance chamber in terms of the cultivation of forms of psychological attentiveness, motor readiness, and kinesthetic adaptation that were also emerging *outside* the séance chamber, in the broader, media-rich culture of nineteenth-century metropolitan life.

Indeed, spirit possession and its related states of bodily and psychological heteronomy—such as magnetized healing, somnambulism, clairvoyance, or hypnotic trance—provided a model for participation in diverse scenes of action, including the increasingly rationalized and mechanized factory system, the new forms of travel that typified the nineteenth-century cityscape (such as on trains or in subways), or the thrills and distractions of circuses, fairs, arcades, and related industries of leisure and consumption. In all such cases, what was brought into existence was a system for the circulation of sensory perceptions and actions freed from the "normal" conditions of individual human subjectivity, where one is supposed to enjoy mastery over one's conscious intentions and one's own body. In its place, we find a congeries of dissociated perceptions, involuntary reflexes, and absorbed states, operating more or less independently of the synthetic powers attributed to the normative ideal of the unified and sovereign personality.[79] What scientists such as Michael Faraday or W. B. Carpenter had earlier defined as the "true source" of séance practice—involuntary muscular action or improperly attuned powers of attention—can now be counted among the central organizing motifs of the laboring body and the distracted subject in the age of electrical automation.[80]

In these terms, I propose that the history of the Spiritual Telegraph offers crucial insight into a much larger set of cultural, scientific, and technical projects to accommodate human agents to the temporalities and rhythms of transatlantic modernity. By embracing technologies and performative principles that existed both within and beyond the séance chamber, Spiritualism gathered under its penumbra what could only superficially be understood as disconnected activities of religious faith, scientific experimentation, medical intervention, entertainment, or rationalized labor. And the telegraph, for its part, possessed an elective affinity with Spiritualism because, perhaps more than any other technology, it signaled the coming of a new global order of instantaneous virtual presence and a new way of dreaming about the liberation of the soul from the mortal body. There is, of course, much more that can and should be said about the formation of the Spiritual Telegraph and its legacy. Among other things, it should not escape attention that the version of history narrated here has largely been contained within the parochial framework of the North Atlantic world—and especially the metropolitan urban centers of the United States, France, and England—in the late nineteenth century. This should lead to the acknowledgment that technological developments occurred elsewhere at different rates and intensities, and according to varying particularities of cultural reception. Simply put, there exist numerous histories of the Spiritual Telegraph, and many of these have yet to be written. For the time being, suffice it to propose that few (if any) of those stories can feasibly be written from within the dominant secularist narratives about technology with which this paper began. On the contrary, through their intense engagements with modern technologies of communication—beginning with the telegraph, as the emblem of a new age of electrical salvation—Spiritualists challenge us to define religion as something located within, not beyond, the indeterminate spaces of exchange between humans and their machines.

Cybergnosis

Technology, Religion, and the Secular

Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman, and Peter Pels

> Recite to yourself some of the traditional attributes of the word "spiritual": mythic, magical, ethereal, incorporeal, intangible, nonmaterial, disembodied, ideal, platonic. Is that not a definition of the electronic-digital? . . . These "spiritual" realms, over centuries imagined, may, perhaps, now be realized!
>
> —Timothy Leary, *Chaos and Cyberculture*[1]

Thus spoke Timothy Leary, one of the most prominent spokesmen of the spiritual counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, who converted from "psychedelia" to "cyberdelia" in the 1990s.[2] Together with computer scientist Eric Gullichsen, Leary considered the emerging realm of cyberspace—first imagined by William Gibson in his 1984 *Neuromancer* and popularized by the personal computer and the Internet—an "experience" of a "quantum universe" of digital information. Since the world is held hostage by "white, menopausal men," the young "cyberpunks," "electro-shamans," and "modern alchemists" have a duty to turn this experience into personal transmutation by means of "the ecstasy of the 'ultimate hack'" or the "satori of harmonious human-computer communication" and thus "start [their] own religion"—which is Evolutionism.[3] Leary was but the *eminence grise* of a movement that, especially in the early 1990s, gathered together gurus, hackers, and ravers hoping for a new technological salvation in the quest for "Cyberia."[4]

Is this religion? Is this science or technology? In this essay, we want to argue that these questions may fail to do justice to such phenomena. We suggest that Leary's mode of reasoning epitomizes a discursive phenomenon characterized by epistemological, ontological, and social features that cannot be reduced to religion or technoscience (or faith and reason) and that is embedded in social relationships that distinguish it

from the relations we commonly expect to typify either science or religion. We call this phenomenon "cybergnosis," a new manifestation of the "modern gnosis" that emerged as a discursive practice together with the discursive practices of "religion" and "science" (as we now understand them) in the nineteenth century. Inspired by Wouter Hanegraaff,[5] we think of modern gnosis as comprising a personal experience of revelation that can be conveyed neither through discourse (which would be "reason") nor through higher authority (which would make it "faith"). This personal revelation demonstrates the existence of a radically other world of salvation and transforms and liberates the knower in, socially speaking, an antinomian and democratic fashion, via knowledge of this other world. Its most well-known manifestations are the movements that, from Theosophy and modern occultism in the nineteenth century to New Age today, dominate the field of "post-traditional religion." Leary's cybergnosis is its most recent manifestation—though one that may already be redefining some of its antinomian characteristics. Since the economic bubble that carried cybergnosis in the 1990s has meanwhile burst, an examination of this "countercultural" refusal of the material world seems timely.

As Leary's hyperbolic language indicates, cybergnosis is characterized by a "fast-forward" recycling of religious and technoscientific repertoires, mostly outside the social circumstances in which scholars traditionally expect to find religion and science. Cybergnosis must, therefore, be understood against the background of the specific discursive and social place of gnosis in modernity. In the following section, we will locate modern gnosis in a world dominated by print capitalism and the institutions it favors. This will raise a number of questions about the theoretical status of "religion" and "science" in modernity, especially since it runs counter to a common view of secularization as the spread of rationality through technology.[6] We will then, therefore, discuss the relative positions of religion, the secular, and technology in modernity, attempting both to criticize the ideological effect of a "modern constitution" that suspends current societies between religion and science (or the secular),[7] and to do justice to the empirical reality of some of the secularization processes that—paradoxically—give religion a new future in our present. Finally, then, this will allow us to set out the manifestations of cybergnosis and draw some conclusions about its possible future enchantments.

Modern Gnosis and Print Capitalism

Modern gnosis is a typical product of the nineteenth century, and it arose together with the concepts of "religion" and "science," at least in the way we understand them now. "Religion" and "science"—as well as the related, more epistemological notions of "reason" and "faith"—attained their meaning simultaneously, as the opposite and mutually exclusive pairs of an indivisible modern dichotomy. The notion of science as the study of "nature"—in which the latter concept was understood to refer to the material world of matter and force regulated by universal laws—"hardened," in Raymond Williams's words, only in the early and mid nineteenth century.[8] The process by which religion was increasingly understood as referring to morality and the supernatural provided the opposite to this conception of science, and although this is by no means the whole story about religion in modernity, it determined most of our understanding of religion and science until recently.

This crystallization of usage partly arose from a process in which, at least from David Hume's work onward, both religion and science became increasingly understood in a *propositional* sense, as making statements about the world and/or nature, and faith came to be understood as assent to the truth of these religious propositions.[9] In this comparison, when religion came to be understood as "an alternative account of the natural world," it increasingly came to be seen as a false one in comparison, for example, to Newton's laws.[10] But it was also seen to produce propositions of a moral or metaphysical kind, whose truth could not be ascertained by recourse to nature or the material world.[11] Hence the rise of the sciences of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*, the history of religion, and the anthropology, sociology, and psychology of religion), whose main office was to demonstrate, by comparing religions from all over the world, their shared superstitious nature or their formulation of universal morality and original (metaphysical) revelation.[12] By assuming this dichotomous understanding of religion and science, modern scholarship often disregarded or dismissed developments of the religious heritage that had little to do with its understanding in propositional terms—religious nationalism, the increasing emphasis on religious feeling, the rise of "spirituality," to name just a few. Modern gnosis was one of these developments.

Modern gnosis did not arise with a similarly recognizable label, even though terms such as *Theosophy* (since the 1780s)[13] and *occultism* (starting around 1880)[14] indicate its presence. It descended from Western esotericism and emerged within movements of Romantic thinkers who, starting in the late eighteenth century, also drew inspiration from non-Christian religions (Jewish Kabbalah, the Egyptian cult of Isis, Hinduism, Buddhism) and from more or less marginal sciences such as Mesmerism, physiognomy, ethnology, and phrenology. Including scholars, activists, and artists such as Richard Payne Knight, Count Volney, Sir William Jones, William Blake, Robert Owen, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, these movements culminated, most famously, in the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky, founded in 1875.[15]

The concept of gnosis refers back, of course, to the creeds and sects that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian calendar and that—combining elements of Christianity with Platonism and Eastern (especially Manichean) religious inspirations—considered the physical world to be a prison and an illusion, created by a false god (the Demiurg) and guarded by evil demons (the Archons), and aspired to release the "inner man" from these bonds, returning him to his native divine realm.[16] Epistemologically, gnostic knowledge does not arise from a reality "out there": it can neither be found by

rationally and systematically scrutinizing the external world, nor revealed by a transcendent God. It instead relies on an "inner source"—on personal experience, imagination, or intuition.[17] Moreover, unlike the propositional knowledge based on faith or reason, gnostic knowledge is of a transformational nature: "being concerned with the secrets of salvation, 'knowledge' is not just theoretical information about things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation."[18] Hence the role of *imaginatio* as "the main instrument for attaining *gnosis*,"[19] for the imagination is creative and therefore changes one's self and the world around one.

Modernized in the Romantic imagination of the creative artist (who himself embodied a secularization and democratization of divine creative power), by the end of the nineteenth century this transformative power became psychologized and was increasingly understood in terms of mental evolution.[20] Thus, modern gnosis counters and aims to overcome the propositional statements of faith and reason with the implicit argument that the scientific conception of evolution boils down, in the end, to the transformative experience of a transcendental "mind" (or will, or consciousness, or intelligence) by one's personal imagination. Gnostic epistemology, in short, presupposes a dualistic ontology by juxtaposing two radically different worlds, one evil and alienating and the other offering salvation from suffering, defining the movement from the former to the latter by means of a transformative experience of a transcendental mind. This is crucial for understanding the holism characteristic of modern occultism and New Age: the primacy of a dualistic ontology for gnostics indicates that their holism is not (yet) realized: it is an ideal, a cure for the disease diagnosed as dualism.

Because gnostics think that the alienation imposed by the world can only be overcome through transformational knowledge based on personal experience, they radically question mainstream institutions, dogmas, and authorities. This emic sociology marginalizes gnostics, who blame the establishment for clinging to power, for its passive inability or active refusal to admit that the world is evil, and for not taking personal experience, as distinct from institutionalized roles and routines, seriously. Nineteenth-century gnostic movements actively opposed the established church and academy, not only because their participants felt alienated from these institutions but also because they were sometimes excluded for reasons of religion or class. Indeed, the modernity of modern gnosis is determined precisely by its antinomian attempt to counter and overcome the propositional knowledge of faith and reason that seemed to dominate established institutions: modern gnosis redefines established churches, universities, laboratories, governments, and big corporations as the Archons of modernity—the guards of the alienating prison that the world has become under their influence.

Antinomian spiritualities typically adhere to a kind of spiritual democracy, which manifested itself during the nineteenth century in feminism, socialism, or anticolonialism but which could also ally itself with virulent forms of racism, especially as the century drew to its imperialist close.[21] Modern gnosis tends toward individualism and anarchism in its organization—a tendency continually displayed by the nineteenth-century proliferation of spiritualistic associations and offshoots of the Theosophical Society,[22] as well as the fissionary tendencies of twentieth-century human potential movements (such as Scientology, est, Landmark, or Essence), wiccan covens, and coteries of high magicians. Few religious movements seem to offer similar scope for individual authority, with perhaps the exception of the Pentecostal forms of Christendom, which feature strongly in the genealogy of modern gnosis.[23] From the start, then, antinomian spiritualities could not be easily grouped under a single label. Outside the domestic sphere, they were rarely permanently institutionalized and took root instead in temporary voluntary associations, in commercial religious spectacle, in the latter's spillover into entertainment, and in the rising publishing industry (including the world of the mystery novel), thus adopting the forms of "selling God" associated with popular Christianity.[24]

The antinomian character of modern gnosis does not, however, necessarily justify the claim that "the traditions based on *gnosis* can be seen as a sort of traditional Western counter-culture."[25] The leading Gnostics of antiquity did, indeed, display "pronounced intellectual individualism," and the personalized nature of gnostic knowledge made nonconformism "almost a principle of the gnostic mind."[26] But modern gnosis is distinct from its ancient predecessor in that its antinomian attitude is embedded in a "Romantic ethic" that is fed by and feeds into consumerism, that is part of a systematic pattern of conflict and symbiosis with the more puritan ethics of modernity, and that is therefore a significant part of the "core" of modern culture.[27] Historians of religion and occultism have generally neglected this paradoxical fusion of antinomian attitudes and mainstream consumerism because they have focused exclusively on religious phenomena per se. Occultism, by contrast, was disseminated by popular, commercial books and thus by the market for books.[28]

Occultism, therefore, resembles nationalism in being a specifically modern cultural form spread by "print capitalism."[29] Benedict Anderson's analysis of ties between nationalism and print culture, however, reproduces modernist ideology by portraying secular nationalism as replacing religion. He fails to consider that print capitalism includes "the simultaneous growth of serialized novels published in periodicals and the enormous expansion in the market for imaginative 'literature.'"[30] Starting in the mid nineteenth century, simultaneously with and parallel to the quiet commodification of the Bible,[31] the market for mystery and imaginative literature became a core institution for spreading modern religious repertoires. While the sales of, for example, *The Celestine Prophecy* justify the assumption that a majority of Euroamerican households possesses a copy of this New Age best seller, the common scholarly failure to recognize these sociocultural carriers of modern religion has resulted in the fact that much of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century print capitalism's contribution to the dissemination of modern gnosis still remains to be written. It nevertheless seems clear that one of its central storylines

would focus on the emergence of the mystery novel and its crucial role in the rise of the best-seller industry. The early mystery novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton, who was a Rosicrucian and whose narratives were filled with sorcery and magic from Egypt and India, inspired Madame Blavatsky's invention of the Theosophical Masters.[32] Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and various theosophical inspirations found their diverse ways into the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, and H. G. Wells, as well as a host of lesser writers.[33] Best-selling anthropologists—experts in the exotic and religious—also spread the occult word, whether they liked it (like Andrew Lang) or not (like James Frazer).[34] The commercial world of mystery was fed by modern gnosis just as much as occult bestsellers fed back into the development and spread of what came to be known as science fiction, fantasy, adventure, and horror—a dialectic between occultism and print capitalism that, from the New Age adoption of J. R. R. Tolkien and Marion Zimmer Bradley in the 1960s to recent blockbusters like *Harry Potter*, is still increasing in importance. This dialectic indicates how modern gnosis was embedded in institutions that work through consumer choice. Mail-order magic, commercial courses at centers for self-realization, occult bookshops, television shows by New Age high priestesses like Oprah Winfrey, and (not least) the Internet institutionalize modern gnosis in public consumerism, public domesticity, and leisure.[35]

This is why we insist on studying modern gnosis as a discursive practice rather than a movement or a collection of cults. "New Age" is, indeed, a *lingua franca* more than a movement.[36] One cannot become a member of a discourse: using a modern gnostic discourse does not immediately make one a member of a modern gnostic movement. One can adopt the use of gnostic discourse just as one chooses to buy a commodity in the marketplace: it may or may not identify you, it may or may not make you a member of an identifiable group, you may use it only to forget it again at some later moment. A modern gnostic, therefore, is not like a member of a church and cannot be counted as such. Whether she is inspired by a gnostic book in her leisure time, adopts a New Age vocabulary in her Christian ritual, or realizes her true self during a management-training course, there is nothing in all those activities that prevents her from identifying herself by means of church attendance when she is counted by the kind of statistical devices developed to measure the latter. This explains why the membership of adherents to "spiritual" movements in Western societies never seems to rise much above 20 percent, while the sales of certain New Age titles such as *The Celestine Prophecy* indicate that tens of millions of people in Western countries must possess a copy. Modern gnosis, even if we (partly) need to study it as religion, does not gain its impact through religious institutional membership.

Religion, the Secular, and Communications Technology

Because "religion" or "faith" and "reason" or "science" have, as mutually exclusive categories, dominated Western intellectual traditions, the importance of modern gnosis for

these traditions has been consistently underestimated. This may be because modern gnosis is part of the networks and mediations that are obscured by the purified dichotomies of the "modern constitution,"[37] or because the dichotomy of religion and science imposes a pure system on otherwise chaotic or dangerous experiences.[38] We hesitate, however, to subsume modern gnosis under terms like "hybrid" or "translation,"[39] or to call its experience "inherently untidy."[40] Syncretisms and hybrids of religion and science do, of course, exist: Auguste Comte's nineteenth-century religion of science and twentieth-century creationism are examples that come to mind. The epistemological, ontological, and sociological features of modern gnostic discourse and its modern institutionalizations, however, suggest that we should treat it as a phenomenon sui generis, if only to be able to outline the extent to which cybergnosis differs from its nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessor.

Modern gnosis is neither purely religious or scientific nor simply a combination of the two. As a phenomenon sui generis, it disturbs classical theories of secularization, which were largely predicated on the replacement of religion by science in the most important social realms. As Leary's example suggests, cybergnosis confuses the dichotomy between religion and science, allowing religious and technoscientific contents (such as hacking, evolution, satori, and shamanism) to cohabit in the same discursive realm. But if modern gnosis allows for futures of the religious past outside of religious contexts strictly speaking, we must try to understand such co-existence and intertwining of both secularizing and sacralizing processes in the modern world. It makes little sense to use modern gnosis to support or debunk the secularization thesis unless this leads to better insight into how it deals with the secular.[41] Conversely, one cannot comprehend cybergnosis without understanding how gnosis is related to the sacralization of technology.

To understand modern gnosis, it is crucial to realize that "the secular . . . is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)."[42] This means that the hegemony of secularism in modern states should not be allowed to obscure the large variety of trajectories that combine the secular with the religious. We can roughly trace the genealogy of the secular to three intellectual realms: the Renaissance doctrine of humanism, the Enlightenment concept of nature, and the nineteenth-century conception of history.[43] And we might say of modern gnosis that its specific understanding of the secular replaces man-made history with mental evolution by sacralizing the humanistic self. The Romantic humanism of self-realization through the creative imagination, combined with the comparative and largely secular project of finding the true core in every religion, led to a conception of evolution whose end point lay in the realization of human spiritual powers—the power of mind over matter, of "creating one's own reality."[44] This definition of evolution—and thus of secular "nature"—in mental or spiritual terms determines the extent to which gnostic salvation can be achieved by technological progress and may explain why modern gnosis appears to have a specific relationship with certain *communications* technologies in particular.

Salvation by technology—the liberation of humanity from toil and want in order to indulge in the development of its "higher nature"—has, of course, long been a feature of European thought. David Noble argues that the "religion of technology" of the Western world finds its roots in the monastic environment of the medieval period and its attempts to approximate Eden via human inventiveness, and that, since then, it has been marked by a recurrence of forms of technological millenarianism.[45] Freemasonry and Comteism came close to turning the engineer into a latter-day priest,[46] while especially in North America, the development of a "rhetoric of the technological sublime" in the mid nineteenth century mass-produced images of a secular, mechanistic Eden, a "machine in the garden."[47] Late-nineteenth-century Gnostics (the spiritualists, in particular) seem to have derived a kind of optimistic reassurance about the scientific and secular basis of their mystical visions from electricity, magnetism, the technology of the telegraph and telephone, and photography.[48]

Every communications technology generates its own balance between the real and the imaginary, and thus its own secularity and sacredness. Print, for example, has relied to a large extent on the private imagination of the consumer of books and journals. The telegraph and telephone may have been especially attractive to spiritualists because they work via a bilateral exchange between individual minds (or spirits). Print, telegraph, and telephone all seem, in the imaginative possibilities they support, rather different from the much bleaker and alienated mystical "presence" of the broadcast media that characterized the larger part of the twentieth century. While radio and television give their consumers an impression of connectedness, they also limit consumers' participation to the passive role of listeners and viewers of messages, eventuating in a sense of individual isolation in an ether encompassing global and outer space.[49] This "alien ether" seems less hospitable to some of modern gnosis's core features—especially its antinomian desire for salvation through personal experience—than either print or the "spiritual telegraph," since the "other world" of broadcasting quickly turned into a centralized network, "quite literally a net covering and ensnaring its audience."[50] Jeffrey Sconce argues that it promoted fantasies of extraterrestrial invasion rather than personal salvation.[51] Yet twentieth-century communications technologies could also help to transform the possibilities of salvation: the camera allowed the cinema audience to have virtual experiences of love, adventure, or violence without risking their bodies, by providing a "magical double" on the screen.[52] Thus, the screens of film and television can compress the time and space that separate everyday from imaginary lives and promise an immediate experience of transportation into another world—an experience that may have increasingly come to replace the classical humanist and secular ideal of *Bildung* with a desire for more magical and instant forms of salvation.[53]

We need a much more detailed cultural history of twentieth-century transformations of popular culture to flesh out these relationships between communications technology and modern gnostic movements, including the conceptions of the secularity and salvation they entail. It is evident, however, that our current form of modern gnosis—"New Age"—arose against the background of the "alien ether" of broadcast media, especially through the UFO-craze of the 1950s.[54] New Age has, for the most part, been interpreted in terms of a "return" to (human) nature, in which talk of technology was focused on "small is beautiful" and an "appropriate technology" modeled on the human body.[55] Explicitly or implicitly opposed to the alienating technologies of "materialist" society, the 1960s counterculture and 1970s New Age seemed to interpret technology as "anti-nature,"[56] and in retrospect one can say that this holds true for a large number of manifestations of modern gnosis since the 1870s—one can think of the "bio-dynamic" agriculture of anthroposophy or Jungian "archetypes" of human psychic nature as particularly illustrative examples. Thus, secular nature—understood in terms of the "appropriate technology" of biological growth—became for many New Agers an important source of salvation.

It is far too simple, however, to conclude from the above that New Age discourse is inhospitable to the rhetoric of the technological sublime or the religion of technology. It is more complicated than that: films like the first *Star Wars* trilogy, for example, which is saturated with New Age discourse, are made up of a "struggle between anti-technological narrative and hyper-technological aesthetic."[57] As we shall see, the relationships between New Age, the counterculture, and computer technology, in particular, are much more intimate than the dominant image of New Age as an antitechnological discourse suggests.

This most recent convergence of religion and technology seems to be taking place on the basis of a novel transformation in our conceptions of the secular in terms of "information." Starting in the 1950s, "cybernetics" redefined the conception of material "nature," the humanist concept of the person, and our common understanding of the machine (and thus, of history).[58] Subsequently, the "Information Revolution" seemed to take off in the late 1970s and early 1980s, giving the British Tory government, *Time* magazine, and an assorted crowd of cyber-gurus (among others) opportunity to herald the coming of an "Athens without slaves"—a new version of the religion of technology.[59] This slow emergence of the "digital sublime"[60] from post-1945 information theory crystallized only in the 1980s, in a paradigm that radically separated a universal informational code from its material carriers and that came to be dominated by the notion of virtuality.[61] Imagining the humanistic, secular person in terms of information implies continuing yet radicalizing the liberal humanist tradition of reducing persons to their minds.[62] Imagining nature in terms of information produces "cybernature," viewed as a universal informational code that constitutes the structure of everything that exists, on which technology draws to become "second nature."[63] By juxtaposing the world of mind and information to that of the material body and the Newtonian billiard-ball universe, this conception of virtuality divides the secular against itself, not least by opposing physical space to cyberspace.[64] This complicates the dictionary meaning of *secular*—"worldly"—which implies that there is only *one* world from which we take our measure (and, by implication, it also complicates the classical Weberian distinction between "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" concerns

in the sociology and anthropology of religion). Once awe—reserved, in the Enlightenment, for sublime nature,[65] then transferred to technology by nineteenth-century Americans,[66] and regarded as the basic attitude of religion and magic by early-twentieth-century anthropologists[67]—can be attached to nature-as-information, a new fusion of religion and technology in cybergnosis becomes possible.

Cybergnosis

Timothy Leary is just one example of the ways in which, since the 1980s, the emergence of cyberspace has evoked countless religious, mystical, and metaphysical speculations—speculations that have, as we have shown, a long and checkered heritage. Spiritual gurus, cyberpunk writers, virtual reality specialists, and academics began to describe cyberspace and virtual reality in vocabularies derived from religious and metaphysical traditions. Cyberspace became, for instance, "Platonism as a working product,"[68] a "new Jerusalem,"[69] "paradise,"[70] or a "technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven."[71] Others have said it stimulated "another, unheard-of dimension of spirituality."[72] Intellectuals such as Leary were joined by others—psychedelic ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, chaos mathematician Ralph Abraham, mathematician and science fiction writer Rudy Rucker, to name a few—who defined the realization of this spiritual realm as a phase of evolution in which digital technology would allow humans finally to become conscious of the "morphogenetic fields," made up of information patterns, that make up the "global brain"—a later incarnation of J. E. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which was prominent in New Age circles.[73] By digitalizing such New Age views, cybergnostics drew inspiration from the "New Age Science" of people like Rupert Sheldrake ("morphogenetic fields"), David Bohm (the "implicate order" of quantum physics), and Lovelock, on the one hand, and the heritage of High Magic and neo-paganism (on a "technoshamanistic" and cybernetic "astral plane"), on the other.

This awe for Cyberia and belief in its promise of liberation have strong gnostic features. The transformative experience that marks off modern gnosis from faith and reason resides in the common assumption that surfing the datastream (i.e., hacking, but also simply communicating on the Internet without any expertise whatsoever), taking psychedelic drugs, dancing to computer-generated house music, or simply using one's digital imagination gives access to, even creates, the hidden reality of the world—the "implicate order" that is the world of information itself and that forms the perennial truth hiding behind every surface appearance of religious or scientific convention.[74] This cybernetic world of salvation is inherently free and unfettered and realizes humanity's "true" evolutionary destination, as against the "giants of flesh and steel"[75] or the "white, menopausal, mendacious men now ruling the planet earth"[76] that identify today's Archons—still identified with the powers of materiality and convention that inhibit the unfolding of humanity's potential. All this is available to anybody who is willing to seek out that transformative

experience, whether through the "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace, the hallucinogens of rave and house culture, or their combination in the "hallucinogenique" of Leary and Gullichsen's "digital polytheism."[77] What some see, however, as the democratic fact that "anyone can now access the datasphere," others see as a "lure" to "create a globally predictable consumer culture."[78]

These speculations about cyberspace—just a handful from the cornucopia available—indicate a remarkable elective affinity between digital technology and modern gnosis.[79] This affinity results to a considerable extent from the fact that our current computer world emerged from countercultural 1970s California—the world of drugs, rock, revolution, and spirituality. We will zoom in on the epistemological, ontological, and social dimensions of modern gnosis to bring out this relationship with digital technology in more detail.

Cyberspace as Transformative Experience

Gnostic epistemology is at the heart of the popular imagination of cyberspace, both among certain computer hackers and in cyberpunk literature, various science fiction movies, and contemporary online computer games. As one hacker (who is also a fan of the Californian rock band the Grateful Dead) said, real hacking is "tapping into the global brain. Information becomes a texture . . . almost an experience. You don't do it to get knowledge. You just ride the data."[80]

This experience was made mythical by William Gibson's cyberpunk science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, which "brought romance" into hacking by celebrating its hero Case's "bodiless exultation of cyberspace," thus providing the hacker community with an exemplar that, to many, slowly seemed to turn from technological fantasy to engineering fact.[81] The transformative experience of cyberspace was dramatically materialized by movies such as *The Lawnmower Man*, *eXistenZ*, and *The Matrix* trilogy.[82] The world of computer games, where players are invited to "follow a personal path," is also characterized by strong "emotional involvement,"[83] a sense of "authenticity,"[84] and the way it encourages a "kind of spiritual development" through the game experience.[85] In the words of one game designer: "Why should we settle for avatars, when we can be angels? . . . Spiritual experiences are, in fact, our business."[86] As Morpheus tells Neo (in *The Matrix 1*), before his rebirth into freedom: "unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself."[87]

This experience is, indeed, a transformative one: these movies' protagonists usually develop from ordinary humans into posthuman entities with supernatural powers: they walk through walls, bend the laws of gravity, and affirm their omnipotence by saying such things as "I am god here!" (*The Lawnmower Man*). But other cybergnostics and virtual reality specialists also stress that full-fledged "sensory immersion" in virtual reality offers limitless subjective experiences and possibilities of reenchantment.[88] In consequence, the

"real" becomes a personal, subjective experience—if one that gives access to a higher truth that remains hidden to the unenlightened body. In the words of Morpheus (*The Matrix 1*): "What is real? If you're talking about what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain."[89] In fact, the illuminating experience may not even need the mediation of a computer screen or a virtual reality headset: the DJs and VJs of a rave or house party can turn the experience on the dance floor into a collective manifestation of a "fractal" that transports one into the implicate world of the morphogenetic fields of information.[90]

This transformative experience—which Leary referred to as "the ecstasy of the ultimate hack," manifesting a "satori of harmonious human-computer communication"[91]—is often described in terms of an instant evolution, a moment either that one experiences while surfing the datastream or that may result in a collective mutation—usually put, by the followers of Terence McKenna, as occurring in the year 2012—that will release humanity from its current, materialist paradigm and make it "slip out of history" into a cybernetic Eden of fully realized human potential.[92] Thus, the slow organic evolution of the body is being replaced by a notion of teleological mental evolution,[93] in which the end of human development is being realized "cybernaturally" in a man-made, technological time-compression of biological evolution that can now be cultivated as an "inalienable right."[94]

While companies such as Amazon.com, World Online, World Com, and America Online have, since the end of the 1990s, increasingly colonized and commodified the Internet and cyberspace, this process does not seem to have eroded cyberspace's potential for inducing spiritual experiences. To the contrary: commercial providers of chatgroups, virtual communities and online games have further encouraged it. Writing on the "experience economy," Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore argue that "cyberspace is a great place for . . . [escapist] experiences" and maintain—very much like Morpheus in *The Matrix*—that "there is no such thing as an artificial experience. Every experience created within the individual is real, whether the stimuli be natural or simulated."[95]

"The new home of the mind"

The emergence of cyberspace has also reinforced and reinvented modern gnosis's dualistic ontology.[96] William Gibson's hero, "console cowboy" Case, craves the experience of cyberspace after his employers punish him for theft of information by feeding him a Russian neurotoxin that bars him from accessing the heavenly space of information: "For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh."[97] As Heim notes, "Gibson evokes the Gnostic-Platonic-Manichean contempt for earthy, earthly existence."[98] This dualistic conception of the body as "meat" and cyberspace as the "new home of the mind" is probably the most central problematic in the academic literature on cyberspace.[99] But where scholars often question the possibility of attaining a computer-driven "escape velocity" to leave the body behind,[100] cybergnostics celebrate the possibility of the "liberation from human nature" achieved by uploading one's mind into a machine,[101] of a happy determination "by individual whim, style and seasonal choice" of whether one will become a "human-as-program" or a "human-in-program,"[102] and often display a profound contempt for the archaism of "wetware"—that is, organic substance. Such contempt of the body, shared by many more than we can discuss here, reached its ultimate realization when the members of the Heaven's Gate sect collectively killed themselves to "upload" their consciousness from their bodies to the extraterrestrial vehicle of a comet in 1997.

Such fantasies of a man-made, immanent "other world" are, in fact, more than fantasies. Margaret Wertheim discusses the different conceptions of space as described by modern physicists and rejects the applicability of any of those to the realm of cyberspace. She argues: "The electronic gates of the silicon chip have become, in a sense, a metaphysical gateway, for our modems transport us out of the reach of physicists' equations into an entirely 'other' realm. When I 'go' into cyberspace I leave behind both Newton's and Einstein's laws. Here, neither mechanistic, or relativistic, or quantum laws apply."[103] Wertheim makes a strong case for considering cyberspace as an alternative world of human construction. We do not need to determine whose laws apply there to see that all speculations on the ontology of cyberspace that identify it as a man-made yet other-worldly realm effectively pluralize our conception of the secular. This destroys the possibility of an unambiguous determination of what is "this world" and what is an "other world": for some, the engineering of cyberspace creates another world that is just as immanent, and just as natural, as the "this world" that used to be defined by the secular, Enlightenment or Newtonian concept of "nature." (Others, of course, would argue that these beliefs deny the material, political, and economic conditions of their production.[104]) At the very least, this means that the dualistic ontology inherited by the cybergnostics is powerfully supported by the realization that there may be another immanent world, realized by technology and irreducible to the "General-Motors concepts" of the bodies, masses, and forces of the Newtonian universe.[105]

Cyberspace is, indeed, easily seen as a realm beyond linear time and geographical space.[106] Gibson already noted that "there is no there there." When surfing on the Internet, people's locations can no longer be fixed in physical space, while, on a more mundane level, geographical barriers become irrelevant. In a sense, then, the Internet does not simply realize a "global village,"[107] a metaphor still based on a geographical notion, but is in fact a place *beyond* geographical places. The Internet also transforms linear time, to produce a "sense of immediacy that conquers time barriers."[108] Hypertexts, linkages, and the recycling of various historical genres on the Internet also disrupt the sense of linear time: "timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning,

no end, no sequence."[109] It becomes "timeless time." In other words, the technology of cyberspace provides an enormously receptive context and breeding ground for the dualistic ontology of modern gnosis.

Social Context: Fom Counterculture to Experience Economy

The countercultural sociology of modern gnosis regained momentum in the 1990s with the engineering of the World Wide Web. In 1996, John Perry Barlow, former writer for the Grateful Dead, wrote his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* against the "giants of flesh and steel" of the "industrial world," who should not be allowed to bar people's right to access the "new home of the mind."[110] Timothy Leary's cyberdelia resulted in a similar manifesto, declaring the sovereignty of the new young cyberspecies against "all governments controlled by the menopausal" and their "organic duty" to "mutate, to drop out, to initiate a new social structure"[111]—thus conflating natural process and human culture. Together with others who had their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, Leary promoted a "digital remastering of the counterculture."[112] In many ways, the 1990s seemed, in Mark Dery's succinct cyberphrase, "The Counterculture 2.0."[113]

Theodore Roszak has pointed out the real continuities between the militant counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and the cyberdelia of the 1990s.[114] While his own earlier assessment of the counterculture emphasized its rebellion against a traditional morality based on technocratic thinking and its desire to go "back to nature,"[115] the seeds of a countercultural and gnostic celebration of technology, leading to a movement "from satori to Silicon Valley," were already sown in the 1970s: "it is within this same population of rebels and drop-outs [of the 1970s counterculture] that we can find the inventors and entrepreneurs who helped lay the foundations of the California computer industry."[116]

A technophile counterculture in the form of a "hacker ethic" had, in fact, already formed among the hackers working with the TX-O computer at the MIT artificial intelligence lab in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its opposition to the "Priesthood" guarding the giant computers of IBM and other large corporations encouraged hackers to acknowledge that "all information should be free," that one should "mistrust authority" and "promote decentralization," and that when hacking would be trusted on its merits and allowed to unfold its own creative art, computers would "change your life for the better."[117] At the Stanford artificial intelligence lab, the hacker ethic found a new home (in rooms named after J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth locations) and quickly spread into other countercultural movements, such as the People's Computer Company—which, just like Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib* (1974), wanted to bring computing to everybody—and the hardware hackers of the Homebrew Computer Club (founded in 1975), the most important breeding ground of the personal computer. Steve Jobs (Apple) and Bill Gates (Microsoft) were acid-heads and "part-time Buddhists" at the time, while the hacker ethic was also well received in the pages of the countercultural *Whole Earth Catalog* and among the psychedelic fan club of the Grateful Dead—which counted among its members many of those who were to set up one of the first bulletin boards (the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link—WELL) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Here, forms of modern gnosis and digital technology first converged. One of the first personal computers, the IMSAI, was the product of a group of adherents of Werner Erhardt's human potential training.[118] PCs were often described and experienced as "magical"—as places where, in the words of Les Solomon, "every man can be a god."[119] The hacker's expectation that the world would be better if everyone had access to a computer was in itself a fantasy of personal transformation by technology.

It would be wrong, however, to describe this earlier period purely in terms of gnosis: the full blossoming of cybergnosis only became apparent after much of the countercultural movement's political thrust had dissipated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, leading to the "culture of narcissism" of the New Age and to a new trust in technological salvation in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. Popular magazines, such as *Mondo 2000*, *Wired Magazine*, and others, made the countercultural message available for a mass and mainstream audience. *Wired Magazine*, Jedediah Purdy argues, introduced a "new brand of libertarianism" and "the Wired temperament is contemptuous of all limits—of law, community, morality, place, even embodiment. The magazine's ideal is the unbounded individual."[120] *Mondo 2000* was even more radical in its libertarianism, stating, "We're talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. . . . Highjacking technology for personal empowerment, fun and games. Flexing those synapses! . . . Becoming the Bionic Angel."[121] The booming industry of computer games epitomized the commercialization of these countercultural ideals and their translation to huge numbers of European and American households.

This incorporation of a countercultural or antinomian temperament into mainstream technophilia is perhaps best represented by Jody Radzik, one of the foremost gatekeepers of Cyberia in the San Francisco house and rave scene in the early 1990s. For Radzik, cyberdisco was the vehicle for disseminating the awakening of the planet's awareness into "a direct experience of the infinite" and an incorporation into the fractal pattern of metaconsciousness by using marketing "as the perfect transformational tool": "The kids now are not going to turn on, tune in, drop out. They're going to drop *in*."[122] The 1990s reinvention of the counterculture of the 1960s—while retaining, in certain sectors, the political critiques and "hacktivism" of the latter—became largely geared to a modern gnostic rather than political antinomian attitude, one that is fully in line with the culture industry's production of an "experience economy" for an audience of mass consumers, and with the commercialization of the Internet.[123] Especially through the massive investment of both producers and consumers of computer games in the increasingly sophisticated simulations made possible by the computer, a kind of gnostic amnesia of the physical and mechanic supports of cyberspace has been made possible, supported by the inventions of the graphics user interface and the Internet. Thus, the cultural connection

between a Romantic antinomian ethic and the culture of consumerism, which emerged at least from the late nineteenth century onward, is further reinforced by the commercialization of computer technology.

Conclusion

We do not pretend to be able to predict the future of cybergnosis, nor can we say whether it will overwhelm, or give way to, other forms of cyberspace salvation, of connecting the computer to current utopian thinking, or (most likely) finding salvation in another new technological development. Often cybergnosis seems too disembodied and playful to support a viable "posthuman" future.[124] For us, the interest of this phenomenon lies in a different direction, related to a broader understanding of transformations of religion in modern society. Cybergnosis is an indicator of the current "experience economy," yet it seems to speed up these experiences to such an extent that one wonders whether they still deserve the term. Cybergnosis popularizes a countercultural attitude, but in the sense in which advertising, too, admonishes all people to "be their true selves" and oppose convention by buying certain widely available commodities.[125] Cybergnosis does seem to make a difference to our imagination of the religious and the secular—by pluralizing the secular and highlighting the salvation made possible by the "this-worldly other world" of information—yet the cybergnostic choice of the world of information alone, as against the world of "meat," seems to reduce these possibilities at the same time.

We find it more important to emphasize that computer technology has helped make modern gnosis progressively more at home in modern society. Incorporated into the mainstream from society's countercultural fringe, having lost much of its critical political posture in the process, it has moved to the very center of contemporary culture and society.[126] "Contrary to predictions that New Age would go mainstream, now it's as if the mainstream is going New Age."[127] This phenomenon—and this would go for current Western societies in general—cannot be studied in terms of a kind of "science-plus-religion" sum, since it subsumes the this dichotomy in a new discursive formation. This gnostic formation has a tremendous capacity for recycling the "pasts" of faith and reason—in fact, with the coming of computer technology, this recycling has become even more rapid, eclectic, and perennialist, leaving no holy or evil stone unturned.

Put crudely, whereas classical social science expected the world of religion to be increasingly subverted and marginalized by science and technology, we suggest that religion has had to make way in many sectors of Northern European and North American societies for a modern gnosis that is not just privatized, but made massively present in the consumerist public sphere. This contemporary form of enchantment receives a tremendous boost from science and technology, now especially in the guise of the engineering of the immanent, "this-worldly other world" of cyberspace. While this may seem to testify

to a process of modernization, it is not a modernization that can be grasped by opposing science, reason, the secular, and technology to religion and/or faith. Instead, the phenomenon of cybergnosis shows that both the secular and technology have to be dislocated from this binary opposition and relocated in a third term in order to understand how and why modern people use and need *both* the sacred and the secular in order to portray themselves as modern people.

Religious Sensations

Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion

Birgit Meyer

Whether we like it or not, religion appears to be of the utmost importance in the early twenty-first century. The idea that the public relevance of religion would decline with modernization and development, yielding a disenchanted world, has been contradicted by actual developments, from the manifestation of so-called political Islam to the rise of Pentecostal-charismatic movements propagating the Gospel of Prosperity, from wars that mobilize religious convictions to acts of terror in the name of God, from contests over blasphemous representations and sacrilege on the part of Muslims and Christians to the deep entanglement of religion and entertainment, from accusations of witchcraft to the organization of Wicca fairs, from online wonders to magic in advertisements, from public crusades dedicated to defeating the Devil to high-tech evangelical youth conventions, from Internet religiosity to the upsurge in religious tourism. Religion, in a variety of guises, is found to thrive not only in the so-called non-Western world but also in the supposed strongholds of modernity. It is clear that religion has become a matter of concern and a topic of public debate, even for those who strongly defend a secular social order, a rational outlook, or even, as advocated by Slavoj Žižek in a recent issue of *Lettre International*, reappraise atheism.[1]

Public debates and concerns about what is popularly framed as the "return of religion" are often based on rather simplistic ideas about the relationship between religion and modernity, as if more education would entail the demise of belief in God, or progress and democracy would yield a secular, more rational attitude and above all ensure a clear distinction between religion and politics. The study of contemporary religion requires more sophisticated approaches.[2] By now, many scholars state that the notion of secularization is inappropriate as a theoretical point of departure.[3] The proposition made by Jürgen Habermas in

the aftermath of 9/11, that of characterizing our contemporary era as "post-secular," does well to take seriously the relevance of religion as a political and social force.[4] Given the frequent appeal made to secularism in public debates, however, I am hesitant to qualify our contemporary era as post-secular. In order to grasp the relevance of religion, we need what I would like to call a post-secular*ist* approach, post-secularist in the sense that, rather than inscribe into our theoretical frameworks the opposition between secular and religious that has entered our modern social imaginaries, we need to take this opposition as an object of study, as Talal Asad suggests in his *Formations of the Secular*, and investigate the question of religion with open minds.[5] We need to develop alternative theoretical frameworks that do not approach contemporary religion as an anachronism we expect to vanish or to become politically irrelevant with modernization, but instead seek to grasp its appeal, persistence, and power. This essay is meant as a contribution to this larger project.

Given that the substance, role, and place of religion in political and socioeconomic power structures is subject to historical change, I am not in favor of defining religion in universal terms, as if it had an ever-valid essence. Talal Asad has pointed out that the supposedly universal definitions developed since the rise of the study of religion as a scientific discipline in the mid nineteenth century are derived from a specific modern religiosity, which does not necessarily fit in with different cultural contexts and other religious traditions.[6] Rather than working with universal definitions, we need to realize that religion is always situated in history and society. Calling for the study of contemporary religion, then, means situating religious organizations, such as churches, cults, movements, or networks, in relation to the economic, social, and political power structures that shape our contemporary world. In so doing, we need to be alert to both the specificity of *and* the manifest and structural similarities between religious organizations.[7] In this sense, the study of contemporary religion must entail detailed empirical research *and* comparison.[8]

It may appear inconsistent that I reject a universal definition of religion and yet dare to talk about religion. But it is not.[9] I take it that, broadly speaking, religion refers to the ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendental.[10] What interests me as an anthropologist is how people's links with this meta-empirical sphere are shaped by, as well as shape, links among them and organize them into particular social forms, thus sustaining particular modes of being and belonging. In the following, this meta-empirical sphere is referred to as "the transcendental," because this term best captures the sense of going beyond the ordinary that is at the core of religious sensations, the central theme of this essay. To avoid misunderstanding, I would like to stress that, being a social scientist, I do not approach the transcendental from a theological perspective.[11] My key concern is to grasp how experiences of the transcendental are invoked in the here and now and

underpin individual and collective identities. In this sense, my approach to the transcendental is resolutely down to earth.

Having outlined the vantage point from which I propose to study contemporary religion, I will now call attention to my central theme: the question of "religious sensations." Then I will turn to: (1) modern media and mediation, (2) aesthetics and aisthesis, and (3) power. It is my sincere hope that, after moving through this trajectory, I will have made clear why and how media, aesthetics, and power matter in the study of contemporary religion.

Religious Sensations

In research on modern religion, approaches emphasizing religious sensations have existed in the shadow of narratives stressing what Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world." According to Weber, we may recall, Protestantism played the role of midwife for the emergence of modern capitalism, but its spirit, once able to overwhelm believers and generate the pious attitude and work ethic necessary for the rise of capitalism, had died out.[12] Modern people were stuck in what he famously called *ein stahlhartes Gehäuse* (imperfectly translated as an "iron cage"): a disenchanted society in which persons had become subject to the forces of capitalism, its rigid time regime, its devastating consumption of natural resources, and the nervousness of urban life. They might long for a "return of the gods," deep spiritual experiences, and new charismatic leaders—something Weber increasingly felt in his own life—but there was no way back, certainly not for an intellectual like Weber, who felt driven mercilessly to deconstruct such attempts as vain chimeras.[13]

Weber's notion of the disenchantment of the world, and the role Protestantism played therein, had a stronger impact on our thinking about religion and modernity than his rather gloomy reflections on the modern condition, which give a glimpse of his personal feelings and the overall mood of the fin de siècle that ended with the First World War. The former fits in easily with an understanding of modernity in terms of increasing rationalization and the demise of religion.[14] For my purposes—contributing to a post-secularist framework—it is useful at least to acknowledge the desperate, somewhat nostalgic longing for spiritual fulfillment that thrives in the shadow of disenchantment (a fulfillment that would eventually rejoin a person with his or her own nature or *Kreatürlichkeit*). Nineteenth-century orientalist searches for an Eastern spirituality and the emergence of movements such as New Age or the Wicca in our time promise to fulfill as much as nurture such a longing.[15] But this longing also has been found to be at the basis of modern consumerism, or modern people's quest for authenticity.[16]

In the study of religion, no one interested in the question of feelings can bypass the seminal work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James. James

circumscribed religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[17] Although James's attention to religious feelings and experiences is much to the point, it is also problematic for at least two reasons. First, his emphasis on feelings and experiences is predicated upon a strong distinction between the body, as the locus of senses and emotions, and the mind, as the site of intellectual knowledge. This distinction, which has had repercussions in the study of religion up to the present, reaffirms the Cartesian split between body and mind. Paying attention to religious feelings and experiences would then almost by necessity imply a disregard for more intellectual, rational dispositions (as if these would not also generate and sustain particular feelings and experiences). In my view, this is a vain, unproductive opposition, one that I seek to circumvent.[18]

Second, in James's perspective religious feelings and experiences are by definition private, subjective, and primary, whereas religious organizations such as churches and their doctrines and practices are regarded as secondary. Emphasizing the primary experience of God with the pathos typical of his writing and speaking, James did not realize that the disposition of the lonely individual in search of God is part and parcel of a discursive, and hence shared, cultural construction. The fact that he and those working in line with his ideas take the existence of a primary, authentic, and in this sense seemingly unmediated religious experience at face value is misleading. Indeed, as Charles Taylor puts it in his critical discussion of James's approach to religious experience: "Many people are not satisfied with a momentary sense of wow! They want to take it further and they're looking for ways of doing so."[19]

Without the particular social structures, sensory regimes, bodily techniques, doctrines, and practices that make up a religion, the searching individual craving experience of God would not exist. Likewise, religious feelings are not just there, but are made possible and reproducible by certain modes of inducing experiences of the transcendental. While from the insider perspective of religious practitioners religion may seem to originate in initially unmediated, authentic experiences of an entity perceived as transcendental, I propose taking as a starting point of our analysis the religious forms that generate such experiences.

In this context it is important to realize that sensation has a double meaning: feeling[20] *and* the inducement of a particular kind of excitement. This inducement is brought about by what I would like to call *sensational forms*, which make it possible to sense the transcendental. Sensational forms, in my understanding, are relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects. Collective

rituals are prime examples of sensational forms in that they address and involve participants in a specific manner and induce particular feelings. But the notion of sensational form can also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects—such as images, books, or buildings—address and involve beholders. Thus, reciting a holy book such as the Qur'an, praying in front of an icon, or dancing around the manifestation of a spirit are also sensational forms through which religious practitioners are made to experience the presence and power of the transcendental.

The stance I propose has consequences for conceptualizing the transcendental. Religious sensations are about human encounters with phenomena or events that appear as beyond comprehension: a sublime that induces, as we learn from Kant and Burke, a sense of simultaneous beauty and terror.[21] Such encounters invoke sensations of awe vis-à-vis a transcendental entity that by definition resists being fully known and yet makes itself felt in the here and now, in the immanent. In his *Threshold of Religion*, Robert Ranulph Marett introduces the notion of awe as part and parcel of his theory of "religion as a whole," that is, "the organic complex of thought, emotion, and behaviour."[22] What Marett called "the religious sense" is to be sought "in the steadfast groundwork of specific emotion, whereby man is able to feel the supernatural *precisely at the point at which his thought breaks down*."[23]

I find his thoughts about "emotions as awe, wonder, and the like" quite stimulating. By contrast, for instance, to Rudolf Otto, for whom the Numinous (*das Heilige*) exists sui generis, and hence prior to and independent of the emotions that it arouses in the feeling subject,[24] Marett places at the center of attention the person facing the limits of understanding. In his view, feelings of awe *yield* objectifications of "the mysterious or 'supernatural' something felt" as something beyond comprehension. Being a social scientist, I am highly sympathetic to taking as a starting point the feeling subject rather than a transcendental entity. Still, it would be short-sighted to understand objectifications of the transcendental simply in terms of an initial unmediated experience.[25] In the context of religious traditions and in the praxis of religious organizations, objectifications of the transcendental are more or less fixed, rendered reapproachable and repeatable across time (and possibly space), and determined as to be handled in particular ways. Invoking, framing, and rendering accessible the transcendental, such objectifications are what I mean by sensational forms. Linking up with the transcendental via sensational forms that shape or even produce the transcendental in a particular manner, religious practitioners are made to sense a limit of understanding. Indeed, it is the sense of limit that evokes the experience of something beyond and organizes feelings of "awe, wonder, and the like." It is a limit that does not simply limit, but above all *enables* the experience of the sublime in the here and now.[26] In this sense, the sublime features as an, as it were, "impossible representation," which is acknowledged to exceed people's representational capacities and yet can be rendered accessible via a particular sensational form.[27] Thus, a sense of limit is enshrined in the notion of the sublime. The sense of limit, it needs to be stressed again, is

evoked by the particular sensational forms though which religions organize the link between human beings and the transcendental. A sense of awe, wonder, and other forms of amazement, then, are generated in the context of power structures located in the immanent.[28]

Let me start to clarify how religious sensations, in the sense of experiences and feelings, are organized by sensational forms, and hence are subject to social construction and power structures, by turning to my own research. A red thread in my work on Christianity, popular culture, and modern mass media in Ghana concerns the connection between local Africans' conversion to Protestantism and their concomitant incorporation into a modern state and a global capitalist market.[29] This interest has also pushed me to investigate the current appeal of Pentecostal-charismatic churches.[30] By contrast to mainstream Protestantism, Pentecostal religiosity is far more geared to publicly expressing religious feelings.[31] This expressive, public emotionality has pushed me to think about the question of religious sensations.

These churches, to adopt an expression from Bonno Thoden van Velzen, operate as a kind of "pressure cooker—or even microwave—of the emotions"[32] in that they not only generate but also heat up and intensify religious feelings. Pentecostal services are powerful sensational forms that seek to involve believers in such a way that they sense the presence of God in a seemingly *immediate* manner and are amazed by His power. Still, the Holy Spirit does not arrive out of the blue. I have witnessed many such services, in which the pastor and congregation pray for the Holy Spirit to come. After some time, the prayers become louder and louder, and many start speaking in tongues. This is taken as a sign that the Holy Spirit is manifest. At a certain moment the pastor indicates the end of the prayer session and calls upon the Holy Spirit to heal the sick, protect the vulnerable, and expel demonic spirits. The desire for such a seemingly direct link with the power of God via the Holy Spirit is what made, and still makes, many people migrate to Pentecostal churches and to become born again.[33] Though in principle all born-again believers are able and entitled to *embody* the Holy Spirit, charismatic pastors are prime exponents of divine power. Indeed, this is what their charisma depends upon and what draws people into their churches.

The latest brand of Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which started to thrive in Ghana in the early 1990s, are run in a businesslike fashion by flamboyant pastors. Making skillful use of the modern mass media, which have become deregulated and commercialized in the course of Ghana's turn to a democratic constitution, Pentecostal-charismatic churches have become omnipresent in the public sphere.[34] Like American televangelism, many of them make use of the mass media to produce and broadcast spectacular church services to mass audiences. Recorded during church conventions yet edited carefully so as to ensure utmost credibility, such programs claim to offer eye-witness accounts of the power of God to perform miracles via the charismatic pastor and his Prayer Force.[35]

Featured as an embodiment—indeed an objectification—of divine power, the pastor conveys a sense of amazement and wonder. These programs address anonymous viewers, asking them to participate in the televised event with their prayers so as to feel the presence of God. Some people report that they have been truly touched by God when viewing such programs.[36] What emerges is a new sensational form that makes miracles happen on the television screen and seeks to reach out to a mass audience, which is invited to "feel along" with the televised spectacle witnessed on screen.

I find this incorporation of dramatized, mass-mediated performances of divine power and miracles highly intriguing. This phenomenon is not confined to Pentecostal-charismatic churches but is of broader importance. Modern media have become relevant to religious practice in many settings and shape the sensational forms around which links between human beings and the transcendental evolve. Although I will keep returning to my own research throughout this essay, I hope to be able to show that the question of religious sensations far exceeds that particular ethnographic setting. Though sensed individually, religious sensations are socially produced, and their repetition depends on the existence of formalized practices that not only frame individual religious sensations but also enable them to be reproduced. That is, again, why I talk about sensations in the double sense of persons having particular sensations *and* the inducement of these sensations via sensational forms, forms that encompass the objectifications of "the mysterious or 'supernatural' something felt" addressed by Marett, as well as Pentecostalism's televised spectacles and all kinds of less spectacular devices designed to link people with the transcendental and each other.

Modern Media and Mediation

Thinking about the at times spectacular reports in the daily news about the incorporation of television and the Internet into religious traditions, one might be led to think that the presence of media is a distinct characteristic of contemporary religion. Pentecostals' televised performances of miracles, of which I have seen so many in Ghana and elsewhere, are no doubt highly remarkable events. Still, it is important to realize that media are not foreign or new, but intrinsic to religion. As Hent de Vries has argued, religion may well be considered a practice of mediation.[37] Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation to bridge that distance and make it possible to experience—from a more distanced perspective one could say produce—the transcendental. Take, for example, the Catholic icon: though it is carved from wood, painted, and set up—thus obviously manmade—to the believing beholder (and possibly to its maker) it appears as an embodiment of a sacred presence that can be experienced by a contemplative gaze, a prayer, or a kiss. In this perspective, the transcendental is not

a self-revealing entity but, on the contrary, always affected or formed by mediation processes, in that media and practices of mediation invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms. These sensational forms not only mediate the transcendental but often, and in our time increasingly so, depend on modern media such as print and electronic audio-visual devices. In order to avoid confusion, I would like to stress that, in this understanding of religion as mediation, media feature on two levels. Not only do modern media such as print, photography, TV, film, or the Internet shape sensational forms, the latter are themselves media that mediate, and thus produce, the transcendental and make it available to the senses.

For a staunch Protestant, for example, the Bible is never just a mass-produced book but is sacralized as the medium through which God has revealed himself. For Muslims the Qur'an is a holy book. Popular images of Jesus, as David Morgan has shown, are regarded not simply as mass-produced representations but as able to intimate the presence of Christ.[38] In India, as the work of Christopher Pinney has shown, mass-produced chromolithographs of Hindu gods become sites of worship.[39] Similarly, mass-produced portraits of the early-twentieth-century Thai King Chulalongkorn play a central role in popular Buddhist worship practices.[40] In Pentecostal circles, television is regarded as exceptionally well-suited to screening the born-again message for a mass public.[41]

During my research in Ghana, I encountered many people who referred to televised miracle sessions as being true depictions of the power of God. Television (and video) are seen as modern media that can be used to prove the existence and efficiency of divine power and sustain the belief that "your miracle is on the way," as one popular Pentecostal slogan goes. During my stay in Ghana in 2002, I was told about a Nigerian video that depicted a Pentecostal pastor who brings back to life a dead person, taken to church in his coffin. The idea of making audiovisual technologies reveal the reality and power of God and affirm His superiority over the power of the Devil is popularized by local video-filmmakers, among whom I have conducted research on the intersection of Christianity, media, and entertainment. Surfing along with the popularity of Pentecostal Christianity, many of them frame their movies as divine revelations that visualize the operation of the "powers of darkness" with the help of the camera and computer-produced special effects. Although spectators know quite well how these movies are made, many still insist that the audio-visual technologies mobilized for the sake of revelation show "what is there," yet remains invisible to the naked eye. In discussions about witchcraft, those defending the position that witchcraft is real refer to Ghanaian and Nigerian video-films, thus backing up their claims with audio-visual evidence. In this sense, these movies are viewed as offering a kind of divine super-vision that enables viewers to peep into the dark.

What all these examples have in common is a salient fusion of media technologies and the transcendental, which they are made to mediate via particular sensational forms. At the same time, precisely because media are indispensable to, and interwoven with,

religious mediation, religious practitioners may find new media to be entirely inappropriate, or at least very difficult to accommodate. This is so with indigenous cults in Ghana, whose priests are adamant that cameras may not be brought into their shrines.[42] Conversely, processes of religious innovation are often characterized by the adoption of new media, entailing fierce assaults against older media, as in the case of Protestant missionaries' dismissal of Catholicism and indigenous cults as "idol worship" that should urgently be replaced by a thorough focus on the true source of God's Word: the Bible as mother tongue. The sensational form evolving around the icon was to be replaced by a new sensational form evolving around the book.

These examples not only suggest that mediation objectifies a spiritual power that is otherwise invisible to the naked eye and difficult to access, thereby making its appearance via a particular sensational form depend upon currently available media and modes of representation, they also highlight that mediation itself tends to be sacralized by religious practitioners. By the same token, the media intrinsic to such mediations are exempted from the sphere of mere technology and authorized to be suitable harbingers of immediate, authentic experiences.[43] Religious sensations of a presumably immediate encounter with God, or of having direct access to his power, do not happen just "out of the blue"—however much those experiencing these sensations may think so. Such sensations, it needs to be stressed, are prefigured by existing mediation practices, which make it possible for believers to be touched by God in the first place.

Although I have emphasized that religious mediation happens in the immanent and hence depends on human activities, I would be wary of anchoring religious mediation in theoretical approaches that affirm a contrast between "real" and "made-up." Certainly in the study of religion, we need to recognize the phenomenological reality of religious experience as grounded in bodily sensations. Since I am a scholar rooted in the social sciences, it is not my professional task to make statements concerning the true or imagined existence of the transcendental, or the ontological status of reality. Above all, as social scientists we have to come to terms with the *mediated* nature of experiences that are claimed to be *immediate* and *authentic* by their beholders and are authorized as such by the religious traditions of which they form part.[44] It is neither enough to deconstruct and dismiss these experiences as "made up" and "faked" nor to take their authenticity at face value.[45] I will return to this point in the section on aesthetics.

The adoption of new media does not happen in a vacuum, but is bound up with broader social and cultural processes. By instigating the shift to the new medium of the printed book during the Reformation, for example, Protestantism also associated itself with new, modern techniques of the self and modes of perception, that is, with the emerging print capitalism that has been crucial to the genesis of the modern nation-state.[46] The shift to televangelism, which not only occurs in Christianity but also appeals to members of other religious traditions, can be viewed as an attempt to rearticulate religion in what Walter Benjamin called the "era of technical reproducibility."[47] If only what is shown on

TV truly exists, then the power of God has to appear on TV. As belief becomes thus vested in the image, it becomes hard to distinguish between belief and make-believe, miracles and special effects, or truth and illusion.[48] The accommodation of such new media and the new sensational forms that go along with them ensure the up-to-dateness of Christianity and its public presence. We could even say that television is called upon to authorize religious sensations as true, while the body of the spectator brings televised images to life, as in the Venezuelan María Lionza Cult studied by Rafael Sánchez, who shows that cult members are possessed by the spirits of TV personae and personalities.[49] The entanglement of religion, media, and the forces of commercialization, though allowing for the public presence of religion, erodes the possibility of maintaining a clear distinction between religion and entertainment.[50] In this sense, as Jeremy Stolow puts it, media and mediation always constitute "inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices," and thus challenge the maintenance of religious authority.[51]

While the adoption of modern audiovisual media certainly transforms practices of religious mediation and the sensational forms through which the transcendental is rendered accessible, we must be careful not to overestimate the power of media per se to change the world.[52] The adoption of modern media, as we found in the context of the research program Modern Mass Media, Religion, and the Imagination of Communities, which I directed from 2000 to 2006,[53] always involves complicated negotiations, yielding processes of transformation that cannot be attributed either to media alone or to the persistence of a fixed religious message. The adoption of modern media allows for the reformation and reactivation of religion in our time. As Mattijs van de Port shows in his study of Brazilian Candomblé, cult members' practices of "visualizing the sacred"—which is supposed to remain secret—in soap-opera-style videos reveal an "inextricable entanglement of religious and media imaginaries that should guide studies of religion in contemporary societies."[54]

Precisely because media are intrinsic to religion, in the study of contemporary religion we need to pay utmost attention to attitudes toward modern media and their adoption into established practices of religious mediation. Given the strong visual orientation of such modern media, we are well advised to link up with the recent interdisciplinary field of research on visual culture. Important questions for further research are: How does the availability of modern media change religious mediation, and hence the ways in which the transcendental is expressed via particular sensational forms? Are there significant differences between the ways in which different religious traditions, groups, or movements adopt and appropriate different kinds of modern media? What contradictions and clashes arise from the coexistence of the interdiction on making images of God, as found in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and the dynamics of contemporary visual culture, which thrives on visibility? What kind of religious sensations, in the sense of feelings, are generated when religions adopt new sensational forms, such as the spectacle?

Aesthetics and Aisthesis

Understanding religion as a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms requires that the material and sensory dimension of religious mediation become a focal point of attention. For me, this understanding implies the need to pay attention to aesthetics. My understanding of aesthetics exceeds the narrow sense advocated by Baumgarten and Kant, in which aesthetics refers to the beautiful in the sphere of the arts, more or less confined to the disinterested beholder. Instead, I follow a suggestion made by anthropologists Christopher Pinney and Jojada Verrips, namely, that we link up again with Aristotle's notion of *aisthesis*, understood as organizing "our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it."[55] To trace such an understanding of aesthetics in terms of aisthesis or sense experience back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception,[56] or to relate it to the phenomenology of religion as developed by Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade,[57] would be outside my present scope, not to speak of discussing the ins and outs, pros and cons, of phenomenology in general. Let me briefly explain, on the basis of some examples, why I deem it useful to consider the aesthetic dimension of religion.

In order to account for the richness and complexity of religious experience, we need theoretical approaches that can account for its material, bodily, sensational, and sensory[58] dimensions. The problem with, for example, interpretive approaches in the study of religion is that they tend to neglect the experiencing body in order to focus on religious representations that are submitted to a symbolic analysis. While it is of course undeniable that symbols feature in religious mediation, I find a focus on symbolic representations as the key entry point into "the interpretation of religion" quite problematic, for at least two reasons.

First, a symbol is understood, as we have learned from Clifford Geertz and others, to be a "vehicle of meaning" that stands (in the tradition of Saussure's structural linguistics) in an arbitrary relation to its referent in the outside world.[59] Such a view fails to grasp the possible blurring of a representation with what it represents. In other words, it fails to conceptualize the power that a religious artifact—whether an image, a text, or any other objectification—may be perceived to wield over its beholder.[60] During my own research in Ghana, for example, two born-again girls made me understand that a painted image of Mami Water we had bought from a local artist and displayed in our living room was a threatening, demonic presence.[61] They urged me to take away immediately this image of Satan's most seductive demon, who is held to lure even unsuspecting beholders right into her sensual, scandalously immoral consumer paradise at the bottom of the ocean. Their fear that this image might not be just a piece of popular art—and thus not a mere representation—but bring the actual presence of this dangerous spirit right into our lives highlights the point: the visceral power of such images can only be grasped if we do not just

read them as, and reduce them to, mere symbols of something else (such as, in the case of Mami Water, the eroticism of wealth), but see them as an embodiment of a spiritual presence.[62]

Second, a focus on the symbolic usually goes hand in hand with textual modes of analysis that regard cultures as texts, as famously elaborated in Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight.[63] Such approaches fail to appreciate religious objects as constitutive elements of the religious life-worlds of their beholders and hence as key to the possibility of "authentic" experience. In his analysis of the Jewish Orthodox Artscroll publishing house, for example, Jeremy Stolow has shown that copies of sacred texts sold via the Internet are made to embody a sense of gravity that seeks to anchor readers in a tactile rather than merely intellectual relationship with the text.[64] The heaviness and tactility of these books is part and parcel of a religious sensory practice in which religion is less about interpreting than about being in the world.

Thus, my plea to acknowledge the aesthetic dimension of religion is grounded in my realization of the shortcomings of more conventional interpretive or symbolic approaches in the study of religion. Sensational forms, though produced and in a sense "made up," appear as situated beyond mediation exactly because they are—literally—incorporated and embodied by their beholders. These forms evoke and perpetuate shared experiences, emotions, and affects that are anchored in a taken-for-granted sense of self and community, indeed, a *common sense* that is rarely subject to questioning exactly because it is grounded in shared perceptions and sensations. Common sense is what gets under the skin, enveloping us in the assurance "this is what really is."

On the level of theory, there are more and more investigations that no longer privilege the symbolic over other modes of experience. Susan Buck-Morss has argued that the aesthetic way of knowing the world, involving all the senses, has been pushed into the background with the rise of what has been called modern ocularcentrism, which brought about a mode of knowing the world through a distant, objectifying gaze.[65] Ocularcentrism means that the sense of sight is understood to dominate people's perception of the world, which appears as a kind of "picture" to be looked at (as Heidegger suggests), rather than to be experienced in full, with all the senses. The exposure of the faults of modern ocularcentrism and the regimes of surveillance it implies have yielded much important work on the anaesthetizing implications of Western visual regimes, for example, in the colonized world.[66] Currently we find ourselves in the midst of what is being called "the pictorial turn," which calls attention to the visceral impact of images on their beholder.[67] Scholars have developed a keen interest in other senses than, and alternative understandings of, vision. Critical of the capacity of "modern representationalism" (and its twin sister, ocularcentrism) to govern modern modes of thinking completely, they seek to reappraise the relevance of the senses and the body.[68]

My ideas about the aesthetic dimension of religion have been particularly stimulated by the work of David Morgan.[69] On the basis of his highly original investigation of the role

of mass-produced images in popular American Protestantism, he proposes understanding religious images as artifacts that attribute reality to representations of the divine, making it appear as if the picture possesses "its referent within itself."[70] Such religious images are important examples of what I call sensational forms. Being part and parcel of religious mediation, they can best be understood as a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure experiences of the transcendental and hence "ask" to be approached in a particular manner. Far from resembling Kant's disinterested beholder of an aesthetic object, believers (have learned to) expect that images mediate the transcendental in a process that miraculously vests them with divine presence. Believers are led to engage in particular religiously induced "looking acts" so as not only to see the image but to sense the divine power that shines through it. Such "looking acts" are not confined to seeing alone but induce sensations of being touched. In this sense, religious images do not just meet the eye but have a thoroughly carnal dimension.[71] Thus, rather than being persuasive in and of themselves, religious images work in the context of particular grammars and traditions of usage, which evoke religious sensations by teaching particular ways of looking and induce particular dispositions and practices toward them. In other words, such images are part and parcel of a particular religious aesthetic, which governs believers' sensory engagement with the transcendental and with each other.[72]

Morgan's work is not only useful for the study of religious images per se,[73] but can be extended to religious sensational forms in a broader sense, that is, the whole range of religious materials conveying a sense of the sublime, from images to texts, from objects to music. Mediating the transcendental and raising religious sensations, these material sensational forms require our utmost attention. They are the anchor points from which religious aesthetics unfold. At the same time, it is important to realize that significant differences exist between the sets of sensational forms (and the religious aesthetics that go along with these sensational forms) that are at the core of particular religious traditions, groups, or movements at a given time. Different media appeal to the senses in different ways: it makes a big difference whether a religious organization is rich in imagery and foregrounds vision or poor in imagery or even iconoclastic and foregrounds listening.[74]

Of course, the aesthetic that goes along with a particular sensational form does more than just organize vertical encounters of religious subjects with the transcendental. Aesthetics is also key to the making of religious subjects in a broader sense. Religious organizations can be characterized as having distinct sensory regimes. As Talal Asad, Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood have argued, specific bodily and sensory disciplines give rise to particular sensibilities.[75] These sensibilities impart a particular sense of the self and one's being in the world—if you wish, a particular identity.[76] Religious subjects are created (ideally, that is) by a structured process—a religious didactics—in which the senses are called upon and tuned in a way that yields a habitus.[77] This process not only entails a strong emphasis on specific, privileged, sensory and extra-sensory perceptions but also the tuning down or anaesthetization of other senses or sensory perceptions.[78] We are all

familiar with the fact that an overabundance of sensory perceptions may impede our—and our children's—concentration and attention;[79] techniques of meditation, for instance, are called upon to overcome such distracting perceptions and concentrate on what "really matters." Charles Hirschkind has argued that Islamic reform movements incorporate the use of mass-produced cassette sermons into an "ethics of listening," which emphasizes the importance of the ear as the key site for raising a pious Muslim subject.[80] In the midst of the soundscape of the city of Cairo, seated in taxis or in noisy environments, young Muslims create their own soundscape by listening to cassettes. In her work on the Catholic charismatic renewal in Brazil, Zé de Abreu has shown that the priest and pop star Marcello Rossi is able to tune tens of thousands of people into "the aerobics of Jesus," which entails distinct breathing techniques to induce an exhilarating, albeit ephemeral, feeling.[81]

My plea to pay more attention to sensational forms and aesthetics is driven by the wish to better understand the genesis and sustenance of religious experiences and feelings. Of course, religious aesthetics do not operate in an, as it were, automatic manner but are transmitted in concrete social situations. Not all people are prepared to open themselves up in the same way, and there are different degrees of participation, ranging from striving to emulate the ideal religious subject to a more casual and diffuse affiliation. Such differences, and the extent to which religious aesthetics do or do not work, need to be investigated in concrete research settings. We also need to realize that the creation of religious subjects in our contemporary world occurs in a broader context, which is characterized, more often than not, by experiences of fragmentation and distraction. The extent to which religious followers are actually prepared fully to adopt the sensory regimes and bodily disciplines that characterize particular religious organizations varies widely. This also depends on the will and capacity of religious authorities to influence and control believers' behavior, either via external structures of authority or internalized modes of self-control. Religions also differ in the degree to which they advocate sensory regimes that are conducive to generating intense religious sensations and the kind of sensations—from joy and bliss to terror and fear—that predominate.

Still, it seems that religious sensory regimes allow many people to make sense of—and regain their senses in—our increasingly fragmented and distracted world. Conversely, given the plethora of sense impressions ventured via the mass media, religious authorities appear to find it increasingly difficult to tune the senses and to shape and link the bodies of their members in an enduring manner.[82] In our contemporary world, many people seem to crave the kind of existential security that is one of the trademarks of religion, a point that also receives attention in the research program Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World at the Free University of Amsterdam. As I have explained, however, by adopting modern media and new sensational forms, religions themselves become subject to the very forces of fragmentation and distraction that they claim to remedy.

The bodily and sensory disciplines implied in making religious subjects are also key to invoking and affirming links among religious practitioners. In this sense, aesthetics is

central to the making of religious communities. Style is a core aspect of religious aesthetics.[83] Inducing as well as expressing shared moods, a shared religious style—materialized in, for example, collective prayer, a shared corpus of songs, images, symbols, and rituals, but also a similar style of clothing and material culture—makes people feel at home. Thriving on repetition and serialization, style induces a mode of participation via techniques of mimesis and emulation that yields a particular habitus. In a world of constant change, style offers some degree of continuity and stability (though style is at the same time subject to change, as styles come and go). In this sense, style is the sine qua non of identity. Sharing a common aesthetic style via a common religious affiliation not only generates feelings of togetherness and speaks to, as well as mirrors, particular moods and sentiments: such experiences of sharing also modulate people into a particular, common appearance, and thus underpin a collective religious identity.

Attention to the aesthetic dimension of religion enables us above all to grasp the perspective—or should I say perceptions—of insiders. This kind of understanding has of old been one of the central concerns in the anthropology of religion.[84] Paying attention to religious aesthetics and sensory regimes in a comparative manner, of course, highlights the relativity of each of these regimes. And yet, as suggested earlier, I would find it shortsighted to circumscribe these regimes and the religious subjects and communities they create as "mere constructions." Such a qualification has an all too derogatory slant, in that it makes it seem as if what is constructed might not really exist. But, as Bruno Latour has pointed out, there is nothing beyond construction, and thus we had better take constructions seriously.[85] The fact is, religious aesthetics and the sensory regimes entailed by it modulate people of flesh and blood, seeking to inscribe religion into their bones. In the context of their religion, believers are not only subject to bodily disciplines and particular sensory regimes, but their bodies may also be authorized as harbingers of ultimate truth and authenticity.[86] Exactly for this reason, believers are able to perceive and by the same token authorize the *mediated* experiences of their encounter with the transcendental as *immediate* and *authentic*.[87] Conversely, the perceived failure to have certain religious experiences—for instance, the feeling of being in touch with God—may yield skepticism and doubt, and ultimately make a person say farewell to his or her religion.

Interestingly, once implanted in a person, religious aesthetics may endure independently of exterior religious regimes or an active religious affiliation. Anyone having decided to step out of a particular religion may be puzzled about the resilience of particular religiously induced bodily disciplines and sensory practices, which it may be impossible to shed entirely.[88] A good many ex-Protestants are still gripped by a diffuse feeling of awe when they hear the sound of a church organ. In Holland there are many post-Calvinists who regard themselves as secular and yet espouse an aesthetics that is deeply rooted in Calvinism. In situations of religious change, people may feel torn between the sensory modalities of the religion they embrace and that of the religion they have left behind.

African converts to Christianity may still feel touched—or even get possessed—by the sound of "pagan" drums.[89]

Conversely, encounters with a new religion often work through the body, making it difficult for researchers to maintain an outsider's position. Many anthropologists have reported how they have been sucked into the sensory modes of the religion they have studied, without even being aware of it—as in the case of Susan Harding, who found her mind being taken over by the voice of the Baptist pastor who had been preaching to her for more than four hours.[90] Such examples stress the importance of aesthetics in underpinning people's sense of belonging and being in the world. But taking into account the aesthetic dimension of religion may also help us realize why it is that religious people may feel offended, or even hurt, when they are confronted with blasphemous images or sacrilegious acts, from Christians' being shocked by desecrating images of Mary or the crucifixion staged by pop singer Madonna in her 2006 performance, to Muslims' distress over illicit representations of the prophet about which we now hear so much in the news.[91] Precisely because religious mediations objectify the transcendental in sensational forms that call upon the body and tune the senses of religious practitioners so as to invest these forms with ultimate truth, emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of religion is indispensable. Indeed, focusing on mass media and religious mediation calls for attention to the senses and the body. Therefore, in our research we need to explore how modern media and the body, the audio-visual and the material, intersect.[92] Important questions for further research are: What kinds of bodily disciplines and sensory regimes are peculiar to particular religious organizations, including both those that belong to major world religions and new modes of spirituality, as in New Age? What are the differences? Which senses do specific sensational forms, from the Bible to virtual sites of worship in cyberspace, from icons to mass-produced posters, address? What impact do religious aesthetics have on the making and appeal of religious identities, and on the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion of which they are part? How do religious aesthetics relate to other identities, and why and how do they survive, even though a person may leave a particular religion?

Power

The last theme I will address concerns the vast issue of power. In a sense, I have been addressing the question of power throughout this essay, trying to show that religious aesthetics deploy, affirm, and sustain particular sensory perceptions, experiences, and thoughts, even granting them the status of "truth," at the expense of other experiences and thoughts. If closing off other possibilities that may not even have been conceived and vesting particular sensory perceptions, experiences, and thoughts with truth is what power achieves, then religion is power *pur sang*.[93]

Rather than focusing on religion from a perspective from "within," as I have done so far, in this section I wish briefly to situate contemporary religion in society, that is, as embedded in political and economic power structures. Let me begin with political power and the question of the nation-state. In the introduction I intimated that what we mistakenly take for a universal definition of religion actually mirrors the (ideal) role and place of religion in modern times. Many scholars have argued that religion as we know it in the West today arose gradually in the aftermath of the Reformation. With the rise of modern nation-states, a new power balance between religion and the political emerged. Increasingly, religion was held to be placed outside of the domain of power, devoted to the task of assigning to believers symbols that help them make sense of the world and orient themselves within it. The idea that modern religion is subject to secularization and hence confined to the private sphere and the inner self expresses an ideology more than a historical reality. But it is still true that religion's place and role in society became subject to the power of the modern nation-state. In the Netherlands, for example, until the 1960s religion offered the grid for the organization of society in pillars, the remains of which are still with us today.

In the course of colonization, the modern state was introduced all over the world. While the notion of the "imagined community of the nation" could not be implemented in entirely different political contexts as if it were a transportable module, the right to exercise control over religion and the supernatural or transcendental in general, claimed by colonial and later postcolonial states, instigated new relationships between religion and politics.[94] Recently, Oscar Salemink, for instance, has pointed out how the Marxist Vietnamese state carefully orchestrates the coexistence of different religious affiliations in public national rituals.[95] While it seems that the state is still more or less in charge, there are indications that it proves increasingly difficult to hold religion in check.

Ironically, religion thrives in the wake of IMF-instigated policies in favor of "democratization" and plays a major role in current politics of belonging. The balance of power between religions and states seems to be changing. In a host of contexts, politicians make sincere attempts to negotiate and even surf along with the appeal of Fundamentalist or Pentecostal Christianity, Islamic reform movements, or Hindu nationalism. How religious identities, formed as they are by distinct bodily disciplines and sensory regimes and vested with the aura of truth, relate to national and other identities is a question that calls for our utmost attention. Are religious identities, as called into being by, for example, Pentecostalism or Islamic reform movements, so compelling because they entail a religious aesthetics that not only forms subjects in a way that goes beneath the skin but also vests them with the power of God? To what extent can secular identities compete with this strong appeal to the sublime? What does it mean for our understanding of politics that politicians such as George W. Bush, in their post 9/11 speeches, tap into religious language all the time?

The relation of transformation between religion and politics cannot be analyzed without taking into account the global spread of capitalism, which institutes new ways of organizing production and consumption, and brings forth, as much as it requires, a new ethics and aesthetics.[96] We need to investigate how all kinds of practices of religious mediation and the sensational forms produced and sustained by these practices are situated in the broader power structures that characterize neo-liberal capitalism.[97] My point here is, of course, not to launch an outdated view of capitalism in terms of a simplistic (so-called vulgar) Marxist economic determinism. It is entirely inappropriate to regard religion as merely an ideology that reflects and sustains a particular mode of production. This, of course, was the key point made by Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. While Weber stressed the elective affinity between the Protestant work ethic and the rise of capitalism, he neglected the sphere of consumption, as has been pointed out by Collin Campbell.[98] In our time, it is of eminent concern to investigate how religious organizations of all kinds relate to the spheres of both production and consumption.

Let me return to Pentecostalism once again. As David Martin has argued, Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on a "mobile self" and a "portable charismatic identity," is a religion that speaks to experiences of dislocation, fragmentation, and increasing mobility.[99] While one can certainly discern an extraordinary consonance between Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism, the question still is how both are thought to be related. In the study of Pentecostalism, one often comes across the proposition that conversion to this religion helps people cope with the intricacies of modern life. With their emphasis on an individual, born-again religiosity, which severs people from family-based networks of mutual obligations, their strict morality, which rejects alcohol, sexual promiscuity, and other vices, and their overall methodological mode of conduct, Pentecostal churches empower members to improve their socioeconomic position in society. While I would not deny that conversion to Pentecostalism may be of help in solving everyday problems, I still find it problematic to explore the consonance of Pentecostalism and capitalism merely through the prism of coping.

This view of religion as a reactive force fails to consider the extent to which Pentecostalism, or other contemporary religions, may actually be formed by and partake in the culture of neo-liberal capitalism. I have already pointed out that, far from retreating into the sphere of religion, in the sense of a relatively autonomous, semi-private realm, Pentecostals instigate a Christian mass culture that inevitably gets caught up with the forces of entertainment, as well as politics. Pentecostal-charismatic churches are run as global business corporations and feature as icons of ultimate presence and success. Embracing the Gospel of Prosperity, they regard wealth as a divine blessing. All this suggests that Pentecostal-charismatic churches easily adopt and incorporate themselves into the culture of neo-liberal capitalism, so successfully that it becomes impossible to state where religion begins or ends.

I have invoked Pentecostal-charismatic churches because they are part of my own expertise, not because I would like to suggest a specific elective affinity between this religion and neo-liberal capitalism. Examples of the entanglement of other religious organizations with capitalism abound. In the press we read about the seamless articulation of Confucian or Buddhist work ethics into capitalist labor in Southeast Asia.[100] It is of great importance to develop comparative research to investigate how religious groups and movements in different localities not only relate to and help people cope with but are also formed by the culture of neo-liberal capitalism.

But what, then, is capitalism, we may feel pressed to ask? In a fragment that has received attention only quite recently, Walter Benjamin has characterized capitalism as a religion that "essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion."[101] In his view, capitalist consumer culture has developed into a new kind of undogmatic cult that makes people worship the secret God of debt. This is more an intuition than a conclusion based on sound analysis. Benjamin, indeed, found it difficult to "prove capitalism's religious structure," given that "we cannot draw close the net in which we stand."[102] The fragment remained unfinished. The big question he raises is from which standpoint it might be possible to grasp power—as that which underpins everything that is—in our contemporary world. There may be good reason to agree with Fredric Jameson's idea of capitalism as a sublime power that resists representation, yet all the more requires to be understood.[103] Research on religion, conducted along the lines outlined here, may be of some use in helping us unmask this sublime power, without, however, denying its capacity to capture as much as to puzzle us.

Conclusion

Although I am an anthropologist, in my title I have invoked the study of contemporary religion rather than the anthropology of religion. My point is that anthropology has much to offer but can also gain from interdisciplinary exchanges with scholars not only in the broader social sciences but also in religious studies, visual culture, philosophy, and theology. We need to ground our understanding of contemporary religion in thorough ethnographic studies and broader comparisons. It is my sincere hope that in this essay I have been able to make clear why and how media, aesthetics, and power matter in this endeavor. All three are useful points of entry that allow us to explore the making of contemporary religious experience. I do not use the term *matter* by accident. My plea to pay attention to (1) the modern media that play a role in objectifying the transcendental into material, sensational forms, (2) the particular religious aesthetics that modulate the body and tune the senses in a specific way, and (3) power as bringing into being subjects and communities with distinctive religious identities and styles stresses the importance of approaching religion from a material angle. Clearly this is a materiality that is not opposed to, but rather a condition for, spirituality. Indeed, the fact that religion matters so much in our contemporary world is grounded in the very concrete, material dimension of religion that I have tried to outline here. Inducing sensations through sensational forms, contemporary religion is not just about ideas and interpretations but is relevant to our being and belonging in a more basic sense.

Can Television Mediate Religious Experience?

The Theology of *Joan of Arcadia*

Angela Zito

American prime-time television has recently seen a number of programs that deal with spiritual issues from various perspectives.[1] These wildly successful primetime dramas have included the much-older *Highway to Heaven* and its successor *Touched by an Angel* (both featuring angels on earthly missions among ordinary people), *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer,* popular among young people for its heroine who secretly fights against evil spirits, and science-fiction shows like *The X-files,* which had the FBI investigating strange phenomena from alien spaceships to extrasensory perception.[2] These shows raise interesting questions about "theology and its publics" in the U.S. context. What form does religious discourse take in public spaces in a country dedicated to the separation of church and state? Is mass-media entertainment, in fact, an "open space" for such discourse to appear in a politically nonconflictual fashion? Can such entertainments be described as "theological" and if so, what sort of theology is it?

In this essay, I will discuss one of these programs, *Joan of Arcadia,* which aired for two seasons (from fall 2003 to spring 2005) on Friday nights at 8 P.M. on the CBS network. *Joan of Arcadia* takes off from the story of St. Joan of Arc, the young heroine who led the armies of medieval France upon divine command. In the TV version, Joan is an ordinary teenager to whom God—the God of Christianity—appears on a daily basis, giving her tasks to perform that will quietly transform the everyday life of her family and friends. The show did well enough, but due to a ratings drop was cancelled in May 2005. Nonetheless, it provides us with much food for thought.

I will first introduce debates about religion in primetime U.S. television, discuss "mediation" in the deep theoretical sense of the term to understand how it intertwines with religion, and then analyze *Joan of Arcadia* using excerpts from the pilot episode, interviews with its creators, and the writings of critics, bloggers, and fans.[3] I will propose that we might compare "process theology" and New Age conventions in making sense of the theological implications of the show but conclude that these hermeneutic attentions to the text of the show are, in the end, trumped by the performative action of its cancellation.

Religion on TV

Protestant Christians in the United States were very early users of "televangelism," employing the medium of TV for preaching and fundraising on an ever-increasing scale.[4] If at first this programming was marginal, the past fifteen years have seen a startling growth in what one might almost call a parallel universe of media production by fundamentalist evangelical Christians in America. These productions include: radio; pop, rock, and country music; movies; and entire TV broadcasting networks, which produce programming of every sort, from cartoons to news to talk shows to drama.[5] Though surely it has exerted some influence on taste, that is not the world I am discussing: I am talking about mainstream network broadcasting, a realm of television that, until recently, was known for shying away from any sort of overt religious themes, especially in the evening primetime hours. A realm, in short, known as "secular."[6]

When people argue over religion on *that* sort of television, the terms of the debate seem to follow what I consider the three main areas of intersection between religion and media more generally, as we study it at New York University's Center for Religion and Media:[7] religion *in* the media, religious people's *use of* media, and how media can function in ways similar to religion. A conference at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1995 brought together religious leaders, media makers, and scholars to discuss *Religion in Primetime Television*—the title of the proceedings, published in 1997. The religious leaders were mostly interested in how religion appears on TV: Are its images positive? Are there any at all, or is religion ignored? They argued that religion is too profound a part of human life to be left out of such an important medium. But it must also be noted that, as believers, they felt that they, like anyone else who constitutes a community in the United States, were entitled to see themselves on television.

This interested stance by religious leaders provoked anxiety on the part of the attending scholars, who were not particularly in favor of more religious programming. Michael Suman notes that the most vocal critics of a dearth of TV programming on religion are among the Christian right. It is not that they are simply in favor of "religion in general"; rather, he notes, "What is most important to them is not that people are religious in some way, but that they are religious in a particular way, their way."[8]

The third group of participants in the conference, the media makers, noted that introducing religion into TV programs has the potential of alienating great portions of

the possible audience. The networks especially, with their emphasis on wide audience, have historically shied away from the niche marketing left to cable TV. So the mid-nineties answered the question of whether mass-mediated entertainment like TV can or should provide open space for religious discourse very cautiously. Anxiety over content ran high. In ten years, the situation altered radically. As TV critic Gloria Goodale wrote in 2005, "religious-themed programming is here to stay."[9] She notes long- and short-term trends.

First, Hollywood has discovered the evangelical Christian audience, estimated to be 25 to 75 million strong, as a new advertising niche. As the Christian media industry I mentioned above has distributed its novels, music, and films through stores like Wal-Mart, those products become ever more visible. It was the blockbuster success of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, however, that really opened producers' eyes.[10] In fact, Jeff Zucker, head of NBC Universal Television Group, said candidly of religion, "We looked at it as something that was underserved in network television."[11] Second, the baby-boomer generation has matured and is searching for values in life. This search may not lead to institutionalized religion, but it does lead to "spirituality."[12] Third, after September 11, the media chose to play up—following the lead of the U.S. government—a religiously inflected picture of the "War on Terror." And finally, the availability of wonderful special effects calls forth plots of the miraculous.[13] These many reasons why religion appears more often on television address the first two aspects of "religion and media": how the media treat religion and how religious people mediate themselves.

Here I am most interested in exploring a third possibility: whether and how media themselves can function religiously, a possibility that rests upon understanding both religion and media as aspects of "mediation" more generally. What aspects of a show induce audience commitment to combine the fervor of personal, ongoing devotional attention with community building as fans? When a show's content is specifically religious, a powerful possibility for theology in public is produced.[14] That being so, what happens when the interior of a theological plot crashes into the encompassing material circumstances of its production?

Of Mediation

What do I mean by "mediation in the deep theoretical sense of the word"? In a dialectical model of the construction of social reality, people are constantly engaged in producing the material world around them, even as they are, in turn, produced by it.[15] Every social practice moves through and is carried upon a material framework or vehicle. One can follow this line of theorization from the Marxist Bakhtin circle in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, especially in the writing of V. N. Vološinov, who noted that "the existence of the sign is nothing but the materialization of (that) communication" to its later bourgeois

incarnation in Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology.[16] The critical theory of the Frankfort School has contributed consistently to viewing culture as that which "*mediates* the interaction between the material and the mental, the economic and the socio-political."[17] This active sense of world making lies at the heart of the antipositivist mission of critical theory and of the turn toward practice in the social sciences in general, especially in the British cultural studies of the Birmingham School and certain strands of American cultural anthropology. It takes strict empirical account of the world as it exists without assuming that this world is forever given as it is, as an unchanging facticity. As both historian and anthropologist, I find it important to station an analytic between embodied actors and the things of the world, grasping their mutual constitution as a process of mediation, always giving sufficient attention to possibilities of agency.[18]

People are aware of these processes of endless mediation to differing degrees. Take language. All humans are meant to speak it, and for most of us it just appears when we open our mouths. But for poets and ad copywriters, every word is precious and carefully wrought, producing a language resistant with a life of its own. We might, in an older idiom, say "reified." That would imply, however, that someday de-reification would come and we could live in an im-mediate reality, when in fact such a sense of "natural" im-mediacy is itself a mediated effect. The production of social life proceeds so well because most of us do not notice it happening and proceed to devote our energies to the world unhampered by self-reflexivity. It provides us with a ground of "natural" culture, which functions like a bowl of water in which we swim like fish, unaware of the edge or end of our horizon of survival.[19]

Language and the gesturing bodies that speak it may be the most naturalizing media through which human life takes place.[20] At the opposite end of the spectrum are entire industries of media production—print, radio, television, film, video, the Internet—which, in a world of increasing commodification, appear as reified products for consumption.[21] And yet, the complexity of the media industries' productions, which include their own constant publicity, results in many moments of self-conscious disclosure of their processes of signification (e.g., the many "Making of . . ." documentaries, Entertainment News on broadcast and cable TV, tabloid magazines, "Reality TV," etc) Thus the machinations of artifice become more and more obvious to more and more people. People face their mediated representations more forthrightly—noticing that someone might be in charge of them, that they might be experiencing an interruption of the imagined flow of authentic im-mediate experience. We then see efforts to seize the means of mediated production, a phenomenon increasingly found in indigenous and religious communities worldwide.[22] Just as often, however, people rush in the opposite direction, giving vent to longing for im-mediate, authentic experience, relieved of such burdens of knowledge, sure that if only we could turn off the TV, we would all have a better grasp on the truth of our lives.

The practices often named "religion"—as a subset of the processes of the mediation of social life that I have just described—have much in common with the problems of the

media. Religion, like the media and mediations of all sorts, also functions best when no one notices it, when people appropriate it as an always-already present aspect of social life. Yet religious believers also have had prophetic epiphanies and transformations at times of self-reflexive understanding, and certainly the longing for "religious experience," as the definition of "the spiritual," that ever-present default position in modern religious life, reveals a similar wish for im-mediate, unmediated reality.

So, from the point of view of the mediation of social life, "religion" and "media" can be seen to function in surprisingly intimate ways and to form even more potent forms of social practice when deliberately intertwined.[23] They both involve and mobilize epistemological and cosmological matters of the constitution of the real. The stakes could hardly be higher and in their details raise questions of great import for theorizing. As media theorist James Carey notes: "Reality is a scarce resource . . . the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and deploy that resource."[24]

Joan of Arcadia: Casting God?

Joan of Arcadia was the creation of Barbara Hall, an experienced television writer and producer who is now a practicing Catholic. The show first aired on September 29, 2003, was nominated for an Emmy, and received the People's Choice Award for Best New Drama. Despite these successes, it was cancelled in May 2005, to the surprise and dismay of its writers, cast, and fans. The reason given was that its audience had dropped from 10.1 million in the first year to 8 million by the end of the second season. More significant was the demographic of the audience: a mean age of 53.9. CBS, driven by advertising, anxiously pursues the younger audience, aged 18 to 49, and that season replaced a number of successful shows with new ones for the fall. As Les Moonves, president of CBS, said of a new show where a young woman speaks to the dead: "I think talking to ghosts will skew younger than talking to God."[25]

Joan of Arcadia tells the story of a young high-school student to whom God begins to speak in the form of various people she meets in her daily life: first a "cute guy," then a cafeteria worker, a jogger, a little girl playing in a park, a fat construction worker . . . the list is endless, extending during the two seasons to a dog walker, an old woman who manifests as a nurse, a school volunteer, a Goth student, and so on.[26] Neither Joan nor the audience knows when God will pop up. Joan's family has just moved to the town of Arcadia, where her dad has taken over as police chief. Her mother is an artist who has given up painting, and her younger brother is a brilliant young scientist/geek. But it is her older brother who provides a kind of moral engine to the show: he is now paralyzed and in a wheelchair after a car accident—once a powerful athlete bound for college on a scholarship, he is a despairing young man who provides the show's sense of theodical

urgency as the family grapples with the question of why such a terrible thing could happen.

The opening of the show's pilot episode cuts back and forth between a crime scene and Joan asleep in bed. It is very dreamy. Is the crime real or Joan's dream? A voice calls her, she wakes, but rejects it by putting on her headphones to listen to music . . . Was that God? The audience wonders . . . Then we meet the family at breakfast, and we realize that the police chief from the crime scene the night before is her father.

Everyone has agreed that the show's innovation lay in introducing God as an actual character. Bob Gale, writer and producer, pointed out how dangerous this can be to dramatic plotting: he fantasized about what would happen if you had a show where people prayed, hoping God would answer—and decided, based on the theological proposition that God can do anything and might indeed answer, that the result would be profoundly boring.[27] Barbara Hall faces this theological dilemma directly by reversing the action: God takes the initiative, appearing to Joan unexpectedly, speaking through random people she encounters, and assigning her mysterious tasks, whose reasons only become clear as the plot unfolds. Neither Joan nor the audience knows what will happen. God has a plan; Joan has doubts. God is like the writer; Joan is the actor who (along with the audience) must make sense of the script. Clearly, the dramatic possibilities rest upon *how God is written as a character.*

Theological issues arise on two levels. First, how is God imagined by humans? And second, should God be imagined and "cast" this way at all? Various traditional, biblically oriented Christian critics objected to the show precisely because they think God should not be represented. Stephen Keels, a youth minister at Good Shepherd Community Church, disliked seeing God portrayed in human form at all. He maintained that "the series creates a God with limitations that he [Keels] cannot accept."[28] He might have objected, as well, that the show's "God" was not declared to be the Christian God per se, but was resolutely nondenominational, thus skirting the ongoing problem of network TV—that of alienating a portion of audience demographic by too narrowly casting the religious message.

By contrast, most commentators embraced the premise of the show: that God is among us and can take human form. They described him as manifesting in the everyday; as being "the one you talk to in turbulence over the Atlantic Ocean" (Joe Mantegna, who plays Joan's father); as "personal" and not "religious" (Amber Tamblyn, who plays Joan); as a "sort of cosmic super shrink"; as working through nonreligious people; yet, despite this closeness to human reality, as ultimately "mysterious."[29]

Let us look at a few manifestations of God to Joan. Eight minutes into the first episode, Joan meets a cute boy on the bus. He follows her to school, starting up a conversation. He explains that he was standing outside her window that morning after she got dressed for school. She gets very angry and says:

JOAN: What are you talking about? What do you want with me? Because I've got to warn you, my dad's a cop. Not just any cop, he is THE cop . . .

GOD: I know who your father is . . .

J (frightened): Who are you?

G: I've known you since before you were born. I'm God.

J: I'm going to ask you one more time . . .

G: I'm God.

J: You're what?

G: God.

J (long pause): Don't ever talk to me again.

When he tells her he is God, she rejects him as crazy. Joan tries to avoid him, but he finds her again after class. She greets him sarcastically with, "Hey, God, get lost. I mean it." But he perseveres, telling her things about herself no one could possibly know: "You said you'd study hard, stop talking back, clean your room, and even go to church if I let your brother live."

Joan begins to believe him, and listens as the boy as God says:

"Let me explain something: I don't look like this. I don't look like anything you'd recognize. You can't see me. I don't sound like this. I don't sound like anything you'd recognize. You see, I'm beyond your experience. I take this form because you're comfortable with it. It makes sense to you. Do you get it?" Joan then confesses that she is not religious. He answers—in a key point of the show's theology—"It's not about religion, Joan. It's about fulfilling your nature."

In this conversation Joan is slowly convinced because of God's intimate knowledge of her past, especially her prayers when her brother nearly died. He gives her a first, mysterious, task—to get a job in a bookstore. And we learn that God has no fixed form, that he "appears" solely that Joan may "see."

In the final short scene, God contacts Joan again, because she has not gotten that job in the bookstore—and God has changed! Joan is in line in the school cafeteria, getting her lunch. An elderly black woman serving behind the food counter suddenly asks seriously, "How come you didn't get the job?" Joan is completely startled—just as he warned, this time God looks completely different. She is nervous and annoyed and demands, "Could we possibly talk about this somewhere else?" And the old woman as God answers sharply, "Well, just do what I tell you and we won't have to discuss it. Couldn't be easier. Move on now. You're holding up the line."

The rest of the pilot episode shows Joan getting the job, with the surprising result that her older brother in the wheelchair is shamed by his younger sister's initiative while he is complaining about his life and refusing to go out in the world. He tells her she has inspired him to look for a job and move on with his life. Now that we have met "God" as a cast member, let us turn to the theological arguments about his representation in this show.

Douglas Leblanc, founder of *getreligion.org*, an online religious magazine, writes in a story for *Christianity Today* that the show can be theologically misleading. "*Joan* requires that Christians check their credulity at the door. God's instructions to Joan are often mysterious. . . . These revelations are not specific enough to withstand a testing by Scripture, by any historic creed, or even by messages Joan might hear in church. . . . *Joan of Arcadia* is not a source of systematic theology, even at a popular level."[30] He also notes the objections to God's appearance at all as an affront to the rejection of "graven images" but overall approves of the show's ethical value.

Other Christian critics have objected to the absence of Jesus, since it is a tenet of evangelical Christianity that the way to the Father lies only through salvation in the Son—at least since the New Testament. But Catholic priest and author Andrew Greeley writes very positively about the show, saying: "Producer Barbara Hall asks the really important questions about God—who he is, what's he up to, why he sometimes seems to go away, why he permits bad things to happen. God, in the various forms in which he appears to Joan, provides no easy answers to these questions. Rather He or She is usually content with two claims (1) He knows what he is doing even if we can't figure it out, and (2) He loves all of us."[31]

Greeley finds the show squarely in a theological stream he calls the "Hidden God" tradition, dating back at least to Saint Augustine. In this tradition, God is unpredictable, unfathomable, and "ineffable." Though "most Americans don't think this kind of God is fair," Greeley approves of the mysterious power God displays on the show, even as he appears in human form right next to Joan. This power does not take the form of fancy special-effects miracles but rather appears in the show as a kind of conversational reticence. As Greeley says: "He does not explain or apologize, much less give political advice. Any god who is not mysterious is not God. Any god who is willing to play our game is not God. Any god who whispers answers to important questions in our waiting ears is not God." He describes this Hidden God, in the theological tradition of St. Augustine, Kevin Smith (director of the film *Dogma*), and Barbara Hall, as "a mysterious and unpredictable reality, a God of implacable love and constant surprises."[32]

Barbara Hall—the show's creator and producer, and thus, in this case, the creator of God, as it were—obviously does not accept the theological premise that God is unrepresentable. Recall that one of the first things God explains to Joan is that he must take form, mediate himself, so that she can experience him at all. Hall felt that about ten million viewers did not mind seeing God everywhere. She was hyper-aware, however, of the problems of writing him as a character, thus returning us to the first theological issue above. She honed a quite precise vision of how her show's writers should imagine God—even cleverly putting out what she called her "Ten Commandments":

1. God cannot directly intervene.
2. Good and evil exist.
3. God can never identify one religion as being right.
4. The job of every human being is to fulfill his or her true nature.
5. Everyone is allowed to say no to God, including Joan.
6. God is not bound by time—this is a human concept.
7. God is not a person and does not possess a human personality.
8. God talks to everyone all the time in different ways.
9. God's plan is what is good for us, not what is good for Him.
10. God's purpose for talking to Joan, and to everyone, is to get her (us) to recognize the interconnectedness of all things, i.e. you cannot hurt a person without hurting yourself; all of your actions have consequences; God can be found in the smallest actions; God expects us to learn and grow from all our experiences. However, the exact nature of God is a mystery, and the mystery can never be solved.[33]

Hall's theology is close to Andrew Greeley's vision: a loving yet mysterious God who works through human beings, who makes suggestions, leaving plenty of room for choice, free will, and thus human agency.[34] In the show's stories, direct, im-mediate experience of God is avoided. This is not mysticism; God is experienced by Joan socially, through the medium of other speaking and gesturing bodies. She herself serves as God's medium to do his will in the world—when she gets up the nerve and stops doubting. In this sense, God is grasped by humanity only as an immanent presence. We are in a linguistic epistemology: no language, no God. Seen in this way, Hall's theological vision is profoundly anthropocentric, placing the acting person (in this case, literally the "actors") at the hub of a cosmology.

Many people have commented in the press on how much they appreciate this human-centered notion of God, how very comforting they find Him. Jason Ritter, who plays the crippled Kevin on the show, says: "I think a lot of people are liking the God we are portraying. I've had people come up to me and say 'I believe in that God! Find me a religion that has that God—a loving God that's all-inclusive and without punishment!'"[35] Yet there may be other ways to read this representation of divine presence.

New Age or Christian Theology?

The cosmology of the show likewise poses the interpenetration of good and evil. Following Hall's second writers' commandment: "Good and evil exist," the show has built into it the terrible crimes that Joan's father must solve almost every week. This was done to keep things from becoming too simple and sentimental. As Hall puts it in the producer's voiceover on the DVD version of the pilot episode: "The idea that good and evil exist . . . is part of the ten commandments [for writing the show] because I am not interested in talking about God in a benign universe. That's not an interesting entity to deal with. It's trying to deal with God when we have to confront in a world where there are serial killers."

Her production partner, James Hayman, who has directed several episodes, agrees: "Good can't exist without evil . . . without it, we would not be able to explore the good. Those things have to co-exist. They don't have any meaning without each other. If you look at any spiritual path, that's the concept—you have to have one to have the other."

Significantly, Hayman refers to "any spiritual path." In a crucial moment in God's first dialogue with Joan, she says: "I'm not religious, you know." And he replies "It's not about religion, Joan. It's about fulfilling your nature." Indeed, many moments in the show's total of forty-eight episodes reinforce this turn away from organized religious practice toward what Americans call "spirituality." Neither Joan nor her family ever goes to church; the only clergy we meet are a rather ineffectual young Catholic priest, the rabbi father of one of Joan's friends, and a nun who has left her order. Hall said in an interview: "We forget that this is a very spiritual country. . . . People have always been open to questions of spirituality . . . and it's non-denominational. There simply seems to be a large number of people with a spiritual bent."[36]

One online critic of the show named this sort of spirituality "New Age." Elliot B. Gertel not only notes that "the religion it advances is New Age doctrine" but goes on at great length to analyze how this New Ageism leads to anti-Semitic stereotyping of the show's various Jewish characters. Gertel notes that "New Age manifestos depict Jews as unspiritual—earthly, lustful, perpetually insensitive," while "New Age writers" insist that "monotheistic religions like Judaism [or Christianity or Islam] imprison people with ritual and requirements that stifle true spirituality."[37] We should especially note Gertel's point that a number of beliefs associated with New Age religiosity quite deliberately skew a classically monotheistic view of divinity. These ideas include:

1. There are many paths to a single divine source. Thus, all religions are basically versions of one truth, and the truly spiritual can see through their differences to the underlying meaning.
2. There is an emphasis upon personal experience rather than doctrine.
3. The true or deeper self is divine.
4. Our purpose as humans is to cultivate this deep self so as to connect with the divine forces of the cosmos.
5. The universe is in a state of constant becoming, in which we share.[38]

"Spirituality's" emphasis upon the self and its personal creativity has profoundly influenced the arts in the United States.[39] This seems to be to be reflected in Hall's "Ten Commandments," which seize the power to "create God" (as she often has put it) for her

writers, celebrating artistic human creativity in a compelling way as encompassing in its agency the creation of its Creator. However, the turn to "spirituality" has also been critiqued as a symptom of radical possessive individualism, a kind of ultimate privatization of religion made famous by Robert Bellah's description of Sheila Larson, the nurse who described her religion as "her own little voice: Sheilaism."[40] Writer Austin Bunn criticizes the show: "Joan's idea of morality is a clueless stumble toward self-actualization. . . . It's a message perfectly tuned for audiences interested in spirituality."[41]

Yet the undoubted presence of peoples' allegiance to this self-description in America does open the door to public discussion of ethics and values. As Hall herself says:

> [The show] came out of my process of studying world religions. After Sept 11, there was a paradigm shift and people were willing to talk about issues of faith. Lots on TV about 9/11 about how it affected people's faith. I was fascinated by that. The character of Will the dad is based on stories of people who did courageous things in 9/11 but they weren't religious, it wasn't about faith, about God, it was just about the right thing to do. And I love the idea of morality, of people who have an innate sense of right and wrong not based on religion but because they're good people.[42]

Rather than dismiss such popular entertainment as silly distraction, or such folk notions of spirituality as merely diluting and degrading real religion from a golden past, it seems to me to be more useful to investigate actual theological genealogies for such discourses. One place we might turn is to "process theology."

Process theology grew out of an engagement with theories of Darwinian evolution and Einsteinian relativity. These provided models of a dynamic, ever-changing cosmos at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, familiarity with Buddhism was also a factor. William James, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, and especially Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead drew upon these cosmological shifts in their creation of new social theory and theology. American process theology, especially as formulated by Charles Hartshorne, took from Whitehead a sense of God as dynamically and intimately relating with the world, not separated from it, as in traditions after Aquinas.[43]

Whitehead's God is not the unmoved mover of Aristotle, nor is he the imperial ruler of Roman Christianity, not even "the personification of moral energy" of the Jews.[44] God is the dipolar ground of all opposites and contains the world, which operates in a similar and complementary fashion. As Whitehead says: "It is as true to say that God is one and the World many as it is to say the World is One and God is many."[45] God begins in primordial potentiality and requires the world's primordial actuality to complete him. God does not produce the world *de novo*; he arises with it, as it, of it. "He does not create the world; he saves it [in the sense of cherishing and preserving]; or more accurately he is the poet of the world, with tender patience lending it his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness."[46]

Hall's God comes as close to Whitehead's vision of a summarizing, beneficent force as it does to Greeley's loving benefactor. Her God is not personified in a principle that possesses an ontology of separate presence, but only in the flesh of the actors through whom God speaks. Hall's seventh commandment for writers says baldly: "God is not a person and does not possess a human personality." He thus lacks human-style tendencies, such as the wish to intervene (see commandment number one), or have religious preferences (see number three). Instead, his purpose is to foster what I would call a Whiteheadian understanding of the interconnection of all things (see number ten).

The God who manifests on *Joan of Arcadia* is deliberately imagined as both accessible and mysterious, willing to suggest but not impel, limited in his omnipotence by Joan's human senses. In this very embracing of contradictions, s/he also resembles the dipolar God of process theology. The connection between that theology and New Age spirituality is not direct, but they do share a genealogy. Besides influencing process theologians, who are highly philosophical speculators in the scholarly reaches of religious enclaves, post-Einsteinian physics and its cosmology of constant dynamic change has also deeply influenced important threads in New Age spirituality. From the popular (and still in-print) books in the seventies connecting physics with "Eastern Mysticism,"[47] to the independent movie hit *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), this mode of finding the universe itself sacred and responsive to human desire inverts natural science's objectified positivism, bending it to a human-centered agency and forging newly imagined connections that are labeled "spiritual" rather than utilitarian. Ironically, this impulse yields an idealist version of critical theory's rigorously antipositivist critique of science and technology.

To be fair, Hall finds "God" central to her show's power in a way that might seem to challenge this New Age hypothesis. A Beliefnet interviewer said, at the end of the show's first season in May 2004, "Yet on TV these days God seems more acceptable than ever." She answered: "But none of those shows identify God. If you want to do the supernatural, that's one thing, and I enjoy that genre, but we're trying to dramatize something that, from my vantage point, could be real. It's not some force, or energy, or the hellmouth—it's God." She then fell right into the close connection between God and science we described above as so central to progressive Christian theology in the twentieth century:

> One thing I want to do is to debunk the notion that science and spirituality are natural enemies. Joseph Campbell said it's impossible to live without a mythology and it always baffled him how we live without one. But we don't. Our mythology is science—actually it's shifting now to celebrity, but we believe deeply in science. We don't realize that science is a very spiritual concept. There are aspects of it that are

completely in line with spirituality. Theoretical physics to me is just the math of God. I didn't make that up—Einstein thought so.[48]

If not New Age, at least worthy of Whitehead.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question of media, mediation, and their connection to the modern concept of religion. The great Mediterranean monotheisms have had a love/hate relationship with the image. Dealing with it today seems inescapable, however, and therein lies a challenge for theologies, like the one underpinning *Joan of Arcadia*, that would taken into account an electronic public. Scholars have pointed to the ritualizing dimensions of our engagement with television watching: it is repetitive, providing us with a sense of continuity in everyday life, and, most importantly, it helps us to understand ourselves in the context of a larger community.[49] In other words, television is a vehicle (along, now, with video and the Internet) that can deliver the words and *images* that socially mediate religion in powerful ways. Television, film, and video games offer the opportunity to reengage notions of the divine in a current media-saturated context. Taking an optimistic and somewhat utilitarian view of the inevitability of mediation, theologian Richard Woods puts it like this:

> Symbol and myth, the concrete elements of spirituality as the story of our life-journey, are themselves constructions of the human spirit, specifically of our *imagination*—the power to represent the world cognitively and aesthetically, especially through visualization. Image is to spirituality what concept is to theology. As images, symbol and myth are *functions of human creativity, a prime instance of our participation in the divine order itself.*[50]

Woods's collapse of human image making into the divinity of universal order reminds me very much of Barbara Hall's willingness to cast God, and thus to cast herself as the creator, producer, and director of the divine. In making a show of God among us, she illustrates the process of creatively harnessing divinity to human ends. This is presented to us as an intimate art: when God appears to Joan, the first indication of presence is usually some stranger calling her name.[51] She is hailed in that most intimate of ways—God always already knows her. As audience we are always already ready for this display of interpellation as she responds to the hailing. We oscillate between identification with the thrill of Joan's being divinely known and knowing ourselves the truth of the origins of the script: it is just a story, a story made from nothing but the human imagination.

This process of back and forth mimicks our engagement with television in a larger sense, as a medium that has increasingly blurred the sense of fiction and fact. Nick Coudry points out that "media claim to connect us with a shared social reality." One needn't even include Reality TV to understand that something about television as a broadcast medium intrinsically accomplishes that sharing:

> Live transmission (of anything whether a real event or a fictional narrative) guarantees that someone in the transmitting institution could interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events. What is special about live transmission is the potential connection it guarantees with real events, rather than an actual portrayal of real events themselves. . . . Liveness guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening. Because of this connection, "liveness" can properly be called a ritual category which contributes to the ritual space of the media.[52]

It is especially television's longstanding claim to bring us our social reality "live" that underlies the power of *Joan of Arcadia*'s representation of the divine and, paradoxically, makes it vulnerable. The show's devotion to the quotidian does double duty: its absolute rejection of special effects to carry divinity to the viewer not only presents a picture of God as available to us daily, our knowingness about Barbara Hall's writerly "theology" embeds the sense of the sacred in everyday *television* reality.

Here we see how television naturalizes itself through its claim to provide "liveness"—returning us to the point made earlier about the relationship between religion and mediation in the deep sense of that term. Mediation that can disappear, allowing the light of the divine to shine through: that is what viewers of *Joan of Arcadia* sought, even as they knew perfectly well the show was brought to them by a team of writers following their own "Ten Commandments." This gratification of the fantasy of im-mediacy was rudely interrupted, however, with the abrupt and surprising cancellation of the show on May 18, 2005.

The cast and production team were stunned; fans were outraged.[53] Ironically, the show had just made the metaphysical leap of including a representative of Satan in the form of the character Ryan Hunter—who also talked to God, he just didn't agree with the divine plan. In boldly casting its plotlines beyond the cozy sense of the divine carefully cultivated in its two successful seasons, the show managed, in an important sense, to refuse to grant immanence the last word. As it did so, this bit of popular culture finally may have had a truly late-modern "religious" moment: after bathing happily in the heart-warming pleasures of an everyday God, its audience and its makers were jolted out of a complacency summed up best by the title of an essay on the Web site failuremag.com addressing the cancellation: "A Plea to the Television Gods: Joan Fans Try to Keep the Faith."[54] These "gods" are, of course, the network executives whose decision processes

are as mysterious as those of the Hidden God. At precisely this crossing of religion and popular culture, we can see how they become the "site for the negotiation of critique, remembrance and emancipatory projections."[55] Fans gathered over 23,000 signatures to bring the show back. Their Web sites hummed for over a year. As Eduardo Mendieta notes, in his discussion of critical theory's approach to religion:

> Religion gives words to non-conceptual experiences. . . . In this way religion harbors a lexicon of transcendence and anti-fetishism . . . both inexhaustible, albeit always succumbing to decay and forgetfulness, and renewable via new experiences of the liminal and numinous, albeit gropingly searching for words beyond the quotidian . . . It is the medium in which that from which it flows is both accessed and hindered from being encountered. The concept becomes the wall between the subject and the non-conceptual . . . thus religion is to be secured by means of the relentless criticism of religion.[56]

In the struggle to make visible and then interpret encounters with the divine in *Joan of Arcadia*, Hall and her audience performed such an effort to immanentize the transcendant and overcome quotidian expectations of institutionalized religion. That they failed because of the demands of the market upon this particular technology only reminds us that the effort was real, "live," and not merely just a "story" after all. That this struggle over the articulation of theological propositions should be adjudicated in the realm of "the market" is precisely why it can occupy public space at all, why its closing off is not understood as involving issues of free speech or politics, since the price of being able to utter "religion" in the space of dramatic primetime television remains silence about the "political."

A "Sense of Possibility"

Robert Musil, Meister Eckhart, and the "Culture of Film"

Niklaus Largier

The—at least slightly—enigmatic title of this essay begs for some preliminary explanation. As is well known, Robert Musil plays in the very title of his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*) on an expression coined by the medieval German mystic and philosopher Eckhart von Hochheim. In many of his sermons, Eckhart speaks of man "without qualities [*âne eigenschaften*],"[1] thus fashioning a term and a concept for a religious ideal that embodies specific aspects of detachment, freedom, and salvation. Musil's references to Eckhart in his great, unfinished novel do not end with the allusion in the title, however. In addition, he inserts into his text a series of quotes and excerpts from Meister Eckhart, whom he had read in a number of anthologies and in the translation published by Hermann Büttner in two volumes between 1903 and 1909.[2]

The so-called Büttner edition of Eckhart's works was remarkably successful and popular during the first decades of the twentieth century. It had been studied by everybody in the intellectual world of the time, including Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and Martin Buber, but also Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and Belá Balázs. In pointing out one of the many reflections of this interest in the "mystical tradition" and in Meister Eckhart, one might mention an intense and heated discussion that erupted after a lecture by Ernst Troeltsch at the First Convention of German Sociologists on the topic of the emergence of modernity.[3] The conversation focused on the relation between mystical traditions and the genesis of the modern world. At another moment, when Karl Mannheim and Georg Lukács met for the first time, they discussed Lukács's plan to write an "essay on mysticism."[4] At this point, Lukács had already translated some of Eckhart's texts, and he wrote shortly thereafter an essay, deeply inspired by his reading of Eckhart,