

Virtual Technologies and the Ancient Roots of Modernism: Mark C. Taylor's alchemical operations upon the terminal body of New Age religion

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1. Preliminaries: stories and slippage

We have barely begun to appreciate the myriad ways in which virtual culture is about religion... The religion that today calls for reflection does not answer questions or provide meanings but abandons us ... Forever turning toward what is always slipping away, we can never be certain what religion is about.¹

Even when we think we have surrounded it, religion eludes us. This strange slipping away is no mere disappearance but a withdrawal that allows appearances to appear.²

... given that interpretation is the work of the study of religion, the subject reality must have a structure that constrains instantiations of theory made upon it ... To hold that all religion is founded on the incomprehensible is to negate the particularity and distinctiveness of religions in any terms other than the diversity of human responses to the unfathomable. This approach mystifies religion beyond reach of academic study.³

When I originally gave this paper, my initial intention was to demonstrate that a relationship existed between New Age religion and technology, specifically 'cyberspace' and its hardware. This continuing and fertile interrelationship undermined, in my mind, substantialist notions of religion which are foundational to any strong secularisation thesis which theorised an eventual end to religion as such. Moreover, it seemed to argue for the dynamic and relational activity of the religions we deal with.

¹ Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture*, Chicago, 1999, p. 6.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Sam Gill, *Storytracking: Texts, Stories & Histories in Central Australia*, Oxford, 1998, p. 200.

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Of the English-language scholarship on the 'New Age', Wouter J. Hanegraaff's publications, through sheer weight of ethnographic detail (albeit of a literary nature) and the interpretative power of his secularisation thesis, have since cast a shadow across any academic discussion of New Age religion.¹

Yet definitive examinations of religions will always need to be re-examined. To echo Mark C. Taylor, the one thing we can say with certainty about religion is that it is always dynamically slipping out of our conceptual grasp. Technology became for me a case in point: although an essential element of secular self-understanding, Hanegraaff does not mention technology directly in his published work. I was puzzled because the relationship had been well substantiated by various observer-participant reports, although of a journalistic cast, notably that of Douglas Rushkoff and Jeff Zaleski.²

Coming across Taylor's article, 'Terminal Faith,' what impressed me was that not only were technology and New Age religion explicitly connected but that the narrative that connected them was historical though speculative.³ Curiously, there was no acknowledgment of Hanegraaff. My attention, then, was ready to spot his most recent collection of essays.⁴ I was surprised to find both that his article was included and that it was largely unchanged. What I did find novel and useful was the deconstructive *language* in which he couched his understanding of the dynamic qualities that seemed to evade conceptualisation, and with which I opened. Equipped now with an angle and without giving my puzzlement a second thought, I combined Hanegraaff and Taylor in order to extend Hanegraaff's thesis, and gave the paper.

While writing, my puzzlement returned and only abated when I stumbled upon a recent biography of Marshall McLuhan which, as luck would have it, is the first to have complete access to his personal archives and chronologically compared this with his

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Esotericism. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden, 1996; for a brief but simplified excursion, see 'The New Age Movement and the Esoteric Tradition', in Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (eds), *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times*, Albany, 1998.

² Douglas Rushkoff, *Cyberia. Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace*, London, 1994; Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace. How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, New York, 1997.

³ Mark C. Taylor, 'Terminal Faith', in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 36-54.

⁴ Taylor 1999, *op. cit.*

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published work.¹ The significance of McLuhan could not escape even a casual reader of Taylor. What I discovered through reading the biography is that not only is Taylor not representative of his overall publications, but that the reality of his biographical history was not represented either.

My strategy changed from that of furious combination to a close reading of texts. The differences that I noticed previously between the two versions of Taylor's article became revelatory, differences that went beyond the use of McLuhan. Taylor's ignorance of Hanegraaff could not be naivety, but a reflection of competition between narratives that were at cross-purposes. They were both sophisticated stories that were only intended to reveal selectively. By no means a comprehensive analysis itself, my aim in writing this paper now is to follow as faithfully as I can the play of texts, coordinating them as best I can with their subject reality. Where the two coincide and diverge, I believe, has significance not only regarding the relationship between New Age religion and technology, but the strong secularisation thesis.

I have taken my inspiration for this 'method', slightly modified, from that used by Sam D. Gill as he followed the threads of the Arrente as subjects of particular ethnographers in the field through to academic reconstructions of 'Aboriginal' religion as such:

This method will produce the story - or as I call it, the storytracking - that interconnects the scholar with the scholar-independent subject. The storytrack will tell the story of the various academic operations conducted to build a bridge connecting subject and scholarly report. An account of these operations will reveal the character of the relationship between the subject and scholar.²

The extent to which Taylor's notion of the incomprehensible is useful to the academic study of religions as a viable interpretive activity can be gauged by storytracking.

¹ W. Terrence Gordon, *Marshall McLuhan. Escape into Understanding. A Biography*, New York, 1997.

² Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

2. A history which leads up to the ‘New Age’: missing the body of evidence?

The comparison helps reveal the motivations and extent to which the text is transformed through its presentation. I simply follow the chain of citations, comparing presentation versions with source versions to approach as closely as possible the independent subject.¹

Paul Heelas, in his introduction to the volume in which Taylor’s article was first published, described it as ‘a history which leads up to the “New Age.”’² This section will examine the concreteness of this statement. I will establish this by juxtaposing the two versions of Taylor’s article (referred to henceforth as Taylor 1998 and Taylor 1999), seeking discontinuities. The citations of subject-realities themselves will be compared to the source versions and their historical contexts, in order to show how the texts have been transformed through their presentation. Finally, some attempt will be made to adequately account for the revealed situation.

2.1. Incarnating McLuhan

Taylor uses three citations of McLuhan; the first two can be found in both, the third is used twice in Taylor 1999:

LSD is a way of mining the invisible; it releases a person from acquiring verbal and visual habits and reactions, and gives the potential of instant and total involvement, both all-at-onceness and all-at-oneness, which are the basic needs of people translated by electrical extensions of their central nervous systems out of the old rational, sequential value system. Their attraction to hallucinogenic drugs is a means of achieving empathy with our penetrating electronic environment, an environment that in itself is a drugless inner trip.³

... in the mechanical age now receding, many actions could be taken without much too much concern. Slow movements insured that the reactions were delayed for considerable periods of time. Today action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² Heelas, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³ Taylor 1998, p. 39; Taylor 1999, pp. 116, 120-1.

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actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age.¹

Today, deep in the electric age, organic myth itself is a simple and automatic response capable of mathematical formulation and expression, without any of the imaginative perception of Blake about it. Had he encountered the electric age, Blake would not have met its challenge with a mere repetition of electric form. For myth is the instant vision of a complex process that ordinarily extends over a long period. Myth is a contraction or implosion of any process, and the instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social action today. We *live* mythically but continue to think fragmentarily on single planes.²

The first quote comes from a 1969 *Playboy* interview, itself selected by Howard Rheingold in his *Virtual Reality*.³ Taylor makes central use of this quote in his narrative, and that it is a very isolated fragment does not leave a very convincing impression.

The other two quotes are from McLuhan's most influential publication, *Understanding Media*. As this is the only work Taylor cites, I will look for similar material in it for a comparison before moving on to McLuhan's personal writings. Two motifs seem obvious in these quotes – that of technology as the 'extensions of man' (*sic*), and that of omnipresence and the return of the mythic as the effect of electric speed. Taylor believes he is faithful to McLuhan when he writes:

McLuhan saw electronic media as prosthetic extensions of the human body. Computers become the brains, engines the legs, video cameras the eyes, telephones the ears, and wires the veins and arteries of the world organism.⁴

While the images can be seen throughout, it is not clear that McLuhan has such a standardised picture of the notion himself.⁵

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, New York, 1964, p. 4; Taylor 1998, p. 45; Taylor 1999, p. 129.

² McLuhan *op. cit.*, p. 25; Taylor 1999, p. 130.

³ Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*, New York, 1991, p. 323.

⁴ Taylor 1998, p. 46; Taylor 1999, p. 130.

⁵ McLuhan *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 64, 73, 67.

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First of all, though prosthetic, the connection between body and media continues, and can never be removed from this interaction:

Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands ratios of new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body.¹

In this way all technology was extension, not just the electronic; moreover, McLuhan thought of the electrical extension of the central nervous system as radically different:

whereas all previous technology ... had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself.²

It could well be that the successive mechanizations of the various physical organs since the invention of printing have been too violent and superstimulated a social experience for the central nervous system to endure.³

The roots of this 'dis[-]ease'⁴ and subjection are made explicit in Gordon's biography of McLuhan: his Catholicism.⁵ As Gordon notes, though difficult to detect in McLuhan's publications, the connection between his faith and his media studies emerges clearly in his correspondence and his private papers.⁶ Simply put: 'Electronic man is discarnate man',⁷ and '[d]iscarnate man is not compatible with an incarnate Church.'⁸ McLuhan was intensely concerned to preserve the reality of the body, for 'immediate analogical awareness,' through which an understanding of media takes place, 'begins in the senses and is derailed by concepts or

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵ Gordon, *op. cit.*: baptised Holy Thursday, 25 March 1937, and never failed to make the anniversary in his diary, p. 74. That is not to say that his religious history began on that day – strong early family Baptist influence, p. 24; faith continuing in university years, Bible study, sincerity of his prayer life, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan to Father Laurence Shook, 20 June 1972, cited in Gordon *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan to Clare Boothe Luce, 5 April 1979, *ibid.*

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ideas.¹ While the dis-ease is apparent in Taylor's use of McLuhan, there is no transparency regarding their Catholic theological origins.

2.2. Materialising Eliade

Utilising 'LSD is a way of mining the invisible electronic world' from McLuhan, Taylor claims that the 'fiber that links these disparate points is forged in the crucible of alchemy.'² In both versions of the article, Taylor's understanding of alchemy is informed throughout by Eliade; it is to this loose, shared narrative that we will now look.³ The parts of the text where Eliade is directly invoked include two direct quotes:

Alchemy is, of course, a magico-religious practice devised to transform base metals into gold, closely related to different strands of medieval Jewish and Christian mysticism, and extremely important for the rise of modern science, originated in ancient rituals associated with mining and metallurgy. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade argues that, throughout history in a broad range of cultures, activities of mining are closely associated to those religions devoted to the earth goddess ... Minerals were believed to be embryos that grow within the womb of earth mother ...⁴

It is indeed remarkable that traditions, as numerous as they are widespread, should bear witness to this belief in the finality of nature. If nothing impedes the process of gestation, all ores will, in time, become gold.⁵

Within this scheme, the labor of the miner assists the labor of the Mother ... The role of the miner-obstetrician-gynecologist is to

¹ Marshall McLuhan to James Taylor, *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, selected and edited by Marie Molinaro, Corrine McLuhan and William Toye, Toronto, 1987, pp. 368-9, cited in *ibid.*, 239. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

² Taylor 1999, p. 121.

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, Chicago, 1978; Taylor 1998, p. 53, n. 1; Taylor 1999, p. 268, n. 9.

⁴ Taylor 1998, p. 39; Taylor 1999, p. 121.

⁵ Eliade *op. cit.*, p. 50; Taylor 1998, p. 39; Taylor 1999, p. 121.

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accelerate the labor process. In other words, the miner's contribution is *speed*, whose agents are *heat* and *fire*. Through heat and fire ... The child ... must be polished and refined by a process of cleansing and purification. This need gave rise to techniques and rituals of metallurgy.¹

Alchemy extends and refines the techniques of metallurgy. No longer satisfied with speeding up nature by generating heat, the alchemist seeks a supplement to the supplement of fire ... [t]he philosopher's stone ... As alchemy is, in Eliade's view, "a spiritual technique and a soteriology"... By refining base metals into gold, the alchemist seeks to purify both self and world. The goal of alchemy was to become as good as gold ...²

Like the good 'philosopher' or mystic that he was, the alchemist was afraid of time. He does not admit himself to be an essentially temporal being, he longed for the beatitude of paradise, aspired to eternity and pursued immortality, the *elixir vitae* ... Above all we must bear in mind that the alchemist became a master of Time, when, with his various apparatus, he symbolically reiterated the primordial cosmos and the cosmogony or when he underwent initiatory 'death and resurrection'. Every initiation was a victory over death, i.e., temporality; the initiated proclaimed himself 'immortal'; he had forged for himself a post-mortem existence that he claimed to be indestructible.³

The strength and weakness of Eliade's 'History of Religion' interpretation of alchemy lies in his authoritative grasp of the multiplicity of religious structures by going beyond them to an ontological 'sacred' which sustains them. Yet, as critics have pointed out, if 'the student of religion is essentially a historian, then there can be no privilege to myth or other religious material ... They must be understood primarily as texts in context ... For there is no *primordium* - it is all history.'⁴ Eliade complicates matters by admitting privately to extra-historical motives: 'I feel that, in initiatory doctrine and rituals, I have discovered the only possibility

¹ Taylor 1998, p. 40; Taylor 1999, pp. 121-2.

² Taylor 1998, pp. 41-2; Taylor 1999, pp. 123-4.

³ Eliade *op. cit.*, pp. 174-5; Taylor 1998, p. 42; Taylor 1999, p. 124.

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religions: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago, 1982, p. xiii.

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of defending myself against the terror of history ...'¹ Dan Merkur reminds us that

the Western alchemists never themselves claimed that transmutation was spiritual rather than metallic or physical. Their texts are literary works designed to be incomprehensible to the uninitiated, and they have done their task well. Their writings abound in allegories, ciphers, uses of common words in secret technical manners, allusions, intimations, and outright misdirections. What the texts were intended to conceal remains a matter of highly variable interpretation.²

Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that Eliade had gained such authority through initiation, although it is circumstantial.³ It would account for how Eliade came to his 'matter-renouncing or anticosmic approach to alchemy,' the common understanding of alchemy in Paris occultism of the 1930s and 1940s, which saved him from the 'terror of history' but it is far from an academic study of religion.⁴ The absence of spirit which imparts structure to both matter and soul which characterises this understanding is not, according to Merkur, 'originally alchemical' for 'only ethereal phenomena is considered benign.'⁵ Merkur dates the origin of alchemical mysticism to the Renaissance as its theoretical background, Aristotle's 'ether', was not even available until the late Middle Ages.⁶ The alchemical mysticism of centuries past was not an 'anticosmic dualism but a distinctive type of visionary experience.'⁷ In this way he develops, unlike Eliade, fundamental discontinuities in the history of alchemy.

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Journal II, 1957-1969*. trans. Fred H. Johnson, Jr., Chicago, 1989, p. 86. Entry for 6 January 1960.

² Dan Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions*, Albany, 1993, p. 55.

³ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion. Gersholm Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton, 1999, pp. 41-47, 212, on his close association with initiatory practice and practitioners and his efforts to camouflage this anxiety of influence.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

⁶ Merkur, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

2.3. Ancient roots of modernism: rival genealogies of esotericism

Despite sharing this common narrative about alchemy, there are several discrepancies between the texts, only two of which can be dealt with in this paper.¹ The first is another quotation from Eliade in Taylor 1999 which is not in the earlier version:

Evidence that human sacrifices were made for metallurgical purposes is to be found in Africa. Among the Achewa of Nyasaland, the man who wishes to construct a furnace applies to a magician (*sing-anga*). The latter prepares ‘medicines,’ places them in a stripped maize cob and instructs a small boy how to throw it at a pregnant woman, causing her to miscarry. The magician then looks for the foetus and burns it, with other medicines, in a hole in the ground. The furnace is then built over the hole. The Atonga have a custom of throwing into the furnace a portion of a placenta to ensure the success of the smelting.²

Immediately afterward, Taylor writes: ‘As we have discovered (chapter 3), traces of the ancient sacrifice can be found in the ashes that remain in twentieth-century ovens constructed for no less sinister rituals of purification.’³

While I am not denying that the earlier version made similar claims, the difference seems to be that the paper is now part of a broader sustained argument about modernity.⁴ To this argument in the third chapter we will now turn.

Taylor thought it significant that such shapers of modernity as Nietzsche, Durkheim, Freud, and Bataille formulated their theories of religion at the same time as artistic modernism. An assumption they held in common is the belief in what both sets of modernists described as ‘the primitive.’ He argues strongly, moreover, that modernism presupposes primitivism:

¹ For example: the millenarian poetry of Paracelsus, cited in Robert Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist: A Study of Alchemical Symbolism in Goethe's Literary and Scientific Works*, Cambridge, 1952, p. 32; Taylor 1998, p. 41; an account of a golem – Gersholm Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York, 1965, p. 159; in Taylor 1999, p. 125.

² Eliade *op. cit.*, pp. 67-8; Taylor 1999, p. 122.

³ Taylor 1999, p. 122; however, according to Titus Burkhardt, in medieval alchemy ‘the real athanor [oven] in which the elixir is prepared ... was none other than the human body’, in *Alchemy. Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, London, 1987 [1960], p. 161.

⁴ Taylor 1998, p. 40.

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indeed, they are two sides of the same coin .. Like the sacred, whose substitute it becomes, the primitive is highly charged ... On the one hand, the primitive represents *illo tempore* in which life is harmonious, whole, unified, and fulfilled; on the other hand, the primitive refers to prehistory in which life is uncivilized, violent, horrifying, and savage.¹

Taylor's treatment of Bataille is particularly instructive.² Bataille associates heterogeneity (of which the sacred is a subset) with 'unproductive expenditure (i.e., waste products of the human body, erotic acts, trash, vermin, etc.)' as well as the 'violence, excess, delirium, madness' of mystics, primitives, dreams, and the unconscious.³ Violence and the sacred are conjoined in the sacrifice but the forces unleashed cannot always be controlled.⁴ In Bataille's reading of the sacred and its relationship to fascism, 'modern ovens appear to rekindle primitive sacrificial fires that once were deemed religious.'⁵ Taylor suggests, through almost identical references to the Shoah, a complicity between violence, alchemy and the sacred.⁶ The sacred, here, is identified with the modernist desire for unity, communal and theoretical, as the most fundamental human desire and of which Taylor is deeply suspicious.⁷ That he describes the alchemist's fire which 'burns away polluting differences and returns the many to the one in which they all originate' implies the same, as his claim of equation of alchemy with 'the ancient source of modernism.'⁸

It is not a coincidence, then, that an essay reflecting on the 'New Age' and/of telecommunications draws on Italian Futurism immediately prior to World War I to illustrate this modernism, in particular the violent rhetoric of Marinetti.⁹ What interests Taylor is that a 'number of modernists [were] drawn to fascism.'¹⁰ Marinetti

¹ Taylor 1999, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Alan Stoekl, Minneapolis, 1985, pp. 142-3; quoted Taylor 1999, p. 74.

⁴ Taylor 1999, pp. 72-73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸ Taylor 1998, p. 39; Taylor 1999, p. 120; Taylor 1998, p. 40; Taylor 1999, p. 122.

⁹ Filippo Marinetti, 'The Founding Manifesto of Futurism', in R. W. Flint (ed.), *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, New York, 1972

¹⁰ Taylor 1999, p. 120.

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praised equally electricity and war for creating the possibility of speed, which promises to break the chains that bind humanity to time and space.¹ Marinetti declared: 'Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.'² In this way 'the alchemist' whose aim was to accelerate the process of gold's gestation through violent and intrusive processes 'anticipates the futurist' and his fascism.³

As it stands, this seems to have little to do with the New Age. It still remains to be seen how Taylor bridges alchemy. In this regard, Taylor writes:

Alchemy's occult forces and Hegel's electrifying spirit become actual in the electronic telecommunications network now encircling the globe. The matrix can be understood as the electric embodiment of something like the Hegelian Logos ...⁴

Hegel's importance lies in Taylor's emphasis on the place of electricity in his speculative vision.⁵ For Hegel, the absolute is an 'occult force that gradually reveals itself in nature and history. In the natural realm, the absolute is nowhere more apparent than in the inextricably interrelated phenomena of electricity and light.'⁶ Not unique to Hegel, this was a notion common to the *Naturphilosophie* of German Romanticism.⁷ Hegel developed his own notion of electricity as a subtle revision of Schelling's philosophy of nature. Schelling, like other Romantics, aimed to discern the concrete expression of the absolute in the domain of nature.⁸ For him, the activity of electricity symbolises an absolute that 'collapses differences in an identity that can bear nothing other than itself.'⁹ Hegel critically insisted that such a return to an original oneness is impossible. If 'the division and fragmentation plaguing modern

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119; See Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, New York, 1991, pp. 37-38.

² Marinetti, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

³ Taylor 1999, p. 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵ Taylor 1998, pp. 43-44; Taylor 1999, pp. 126-7; cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Michael Petry, New York, 1970, p. 174.

⁶ Taylor 1999, p. 126.

⁷ Cf. H. A. M. Snelders, 'Romanticism and Naturphilosophie and the Inorganic Natural Sciences 1797-1840: An Introductory Survey', *Studies in Romanticism*, 9, 1970.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ Taylor 1999, p. 127; cf. F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath, New York, 1988, pp. 99-100.

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experience are to be overcome, it must be through a “progressive” dialectical process in which differences are preserved while opposition is overcome.¹

Surely, this account collapses historical differences engendered by the passage of time. The ‘Hegelian Logos’ culminates in McLuhan whose ‘neoromanticism and neoidealism’ forms ‘a vision of a harmonious New Age in which all is one and one is all’ as if it were identical in essence to German Romanticism.² Again, despite the span of centuries, Taylor maintains that: ‘For Hegel, as for the alchemist, macrocosm and microcosm perfectly mirror each other.’³ Yet, hidden in an endnote to Taylor 1998, he does give a fragile indication of the historicity of antecedents:

The pivotal figure who links alchemy and nineteenth-century romanticism and idealism is Jacob Böhme. Böhme’s complex mystico-speculative vision represents a herological translation and formalization of the central tenets of alchemy. Numerous romantic poets and idealist philosophers were deeply influenced by Böhme’s vision. Böhme’s writings were especially important for Hegel.⁴

Taylor does not provide a reference for this and in the latter version, this note disappears, though the sentence which it referenced is still present: that the ‘importance of alchemy and so-called occult sciences for nineteenth century romanticism and idealism has not been sufficiently acknowledged.’⁵ I suspect that the article’s place in the broader argument regarding modernity, gave it a more polemical thrust in which Taylor’s historical understanding became more selective. Hanegraaff, on the other hand, is explicitly contextual:

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 130; this despite the fact that while McLuhan does equate the ‘new global electronic interdependence’ with the ‘global village’ (Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, Montreal, 1968, p. 67), it was not utopian: ‘It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquillity were the properties of the global village ... I don’t *approve* of the global village. I say we live in it.’ ‘A Dialogue: Q & A,’ in Gerald E. Stearn (ed.), *McLuhan: Hot and Cool. A Primer for the Understanding of and a Critical Symposium with a Rebuttal by McLuhan*, New York, 1967, p. 272.

³ Taylor 1999, p. 126.

⁴ Taylor 1998, p. 53, n. 4.

⁵ Taylor 1998, p. 43; Taylor 1999, p. 126.

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Ideas do not move through history unchanged: what ‘continues’ is never simply ‘the original idea’ but, rather, the original idea as *perceived through the eyes of later generations*. It seems to me that any study of the historical connections between esotericism and New Age should be based on that realization.¹

Understood in this way, New Age religion is a historical product of the impact of the Western process of rationalisation and secularisation, representing ‘the decisive watershed in the history of Western esotericism,’ rather than as a reaction against modernity.² He derives this notion of ‘Western esotericism’ from the scholar of Christian Theosophy, and seventeenth century Illuminism in particular, Antoine Faivre. In a number of recent publications, Faivre has proposed to define Western esotericism as a distinct ‘form of thought’ which first became visible in Western history in the early modern period (end of the fifteenth century), although its various components are far older.³ Jacob Böhme, as the ‘founder’ of Christian Theosophy, is central to Faivre’s work. Indeed, Faivre has also made the same claim about the historical dependence of German Romanticism upon Theosophy.⁴ Faivre does not argue for complete continuity either; only with Paracelsus does Western alchemy become a *Naturphilosophie*, an all-embracing vision and necessary adjunct to a grand philosophical synthesis.⁵ A source which Taylor uses to support his account –

... our intention is not directed towards teaching anyone how to make gold but towards something much higher, namely how Nature may be seen and recognized as coming from God and

¹ Hanegraaff 1998a, p. 376.

² *Ibid.*, p. 405.

³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany, 1994, pp. 10-15; Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, ‘Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions’, *Numen*, 42, 1995, pp. 60-62: Esotericism in this sense is characterised by four intrinsic characteristics, which are more or less inseparable, and two non-intrinsic ones, which may or may not be present. They are (1) Correspondences; (2) Living Nature; (3) Imagination and Mediations; (4) Experience of Transmutation; (5) The Praxis of Concordance; (6) Transmission. A critical discussion can be found in Hanegraaff 1996, pp. 396 - 403.

⁴ Faivre 1994, pp. 61-64, pp. 71-74, pp. 82-86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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God from Nature ... We wish with all our hearts that all men might seek and find not gold but God.¹

– now becomes contextualised as a post-Renaissance alchemical mysticism of a Paracelsian cast. Moreover, Hanegraaff's study of New Age religion has led him to criticise Faivre's definition as essentialist though programmatic.² According to Hanegraaff, this has led Faivre to emphasise the Hermetic-alchemistic *Naturphilosophie* of the Paracelsian tradition and to marginalise the 'spiritualist/mystical' tradition, which became essential to the Pietism of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The 'spiritualist' element is important because of its general relevance to the emergence of characteristically modern types of subjective religious sensitivity and, by implication, New Age religion.³ Alchemy, ultimately, in itself is only peripheral to New Age religion.

Further, Hanegraaff argues that New Age Religion, though sharing in these characteristics of Western esotericism, is rooted in complex post-Enlightenment developments of Western religious consciousness. The survival of esotericism under the new conditions of secularisation produced a new and unprecedented phenomenon, rooted in the eighteenth and flourishing in the nineteenth century. Romanticism was one major strand which forms one of the influences upon New Age religion.⁴ He saw it as a reinterpretation of esoteric cosmology, based on universal correspondences which were a legacy of Renaissance Hermeticism, under the impact of the new evolutionism which changed the nature of esotericism but left it with an internally consistent worldview.⁵

Besides invoking an essentialist 'neoromanticism and neoidealism,' the historical paths whereby Taylor's German Romanticism feeds into McLuhan are absent. In this connection, Hanegraaff builds on the work of M. H. Abrams, who clearly established the influence of esotericism upon Romanticism.⁶ In

¹ George von Welling, 'Opus Mago-Cabbalisticum et Theosophicum', in Robert Gray, *Goethe as Alchemist: A Study of Alchemical Symbolism in Goethe's Literary and Scientific Works*, Cambridge, 1952, p. 19; Taylor 1998, p. 42; Taylor 1999, p. 124.

² Hanegraaff 1996, pp. 401-403.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

⁴ The other being occultism, which was less successful because of an internally inconsistent worldview; on this see Hanegraaff 1996, pp. 421-423.

⁵ Hanegraaff 1996, pp. 406 - 407

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 416-421; M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York, 1971, esp. pp. 146 - 196.

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particular, he utilises the dynamic image of the ‘circuitous journey’ or ‘educational spiral.’¹ Abrams meant that the ‘distinctive Romantic innovation ... the norm of truth, goodness, and beauty is not the *simple* unity of the origin, but the *complex* unity of the terminus of the process of cumulative division and reintegration’² In doing so, ‘the locus and criterion of ultimate value was transferred from the Plotinian other-realm to *this world* of man and nature and human experience’³ Through this schema, esotericism became more pervasive in modern western culture. Even a cursory reading of McLuhan’s personal archives suggests such an influence.

2.4. Fleshing out the New Age: epistemological strategies

Both Taylor and Hanegraaff attempt to delineate the development and trajectory of New Age religion. They are both speaking about the same subject but have arrived at vastly different answers.⁴ At this point, we need to understand what strategies they deployed to interpret their subjects so as to arrive at their divergent answers.

Throughout his publications, Taylor engages in a similar project: the effects of deconstruction on the Judaeo-Christian tradition.⁵ For over a decade, he has been at the forefront of the application of deconstruction within religious studies. At the same time, Taylor also feels the impossibility of remaining continually in such a process of deconstruction and counterbalances with the figure of Hegel:

¹ Abrams *ibid.*, p. 184: ‘distinctive figure of Romantic thought and imagination - *the ascending circle, or spiral*’; Hanegraaff 1996, p. 417; however, Hanegraaff (among others) is critical of Abrams’ piecemeal and selective approach to esotericism, privileging the Neoplatonic over the Hermetic/Theosophic, instead of as an historically intertwined whole; cf. Hanegraaff, ‘Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection’ (1998b), in Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, Albany, 1998, pp. 247-256.

² Abrams *op. cit.*, pp. 184-5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴ For explicit use of the term ‘New Age religion’: Taylor 1998, p. 39; Taylor 1999, p. 120.

⁵ See *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, Chicago, 1986; *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago, 1987; *Alarity*, Chicago, 1987; *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, Chicago, 1992; *Hiding*, Chicago, 1997.

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While the theological and metaphysical presuppositions of Hegel's philosophical project might seem dated, the complexity of his dialectical vision enables us to discern religious dimensions of modernity that less-sophisticated interpreters overlook.¹

Taylor's concern to reveal the religious dimensions of modernity is framed by the debate set in motion last century by Hegel and Kierkegaard which created the parameters of modern theology. Earlier this century, Karl Barth revived Kierkegaard with his stress on human sin and divine transcendence. God is the 'wholly other'. In reaction, Thomas J. J. Altizer, following Hegel, argued that modernity is the historical enactment of the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche.² In the course of the twentieth century, 'the death of God is historically enacted and embodied in society and culture. The telos of this process is postmodernism and its extension in virtual culture.'³

It is important to remember that postmodernism, for Taylor, 'does not represent a decisive break with modernism but effectively realizes its fundamental tenets.'⁴ Again, we should, in light of this, not forget that in modernity 'the full realization of the modern presupposes the return to, or of, the original', the primitive.⁵ Fascism as 'modernity's desire for the primitive' has often been what this return consisted of.⁶ The 'death of God' allowed the transfer of 'spiritual' power from priest to the avant-garde artist/architect immediately prior to World War I; the example that Taylor uses, Marinetti, draws a compromised New Age into this debate.⁷

With the movement 'from mechanical to electronic means of (re)production, ideality becomes reality. In this postmodern culture of images and simulacra, all reality is, in effect, virtual reality.'⁸ In this situation where a foundational signified is absent, 'it's signs all the way down.'⁹ Baudrillard and his notion of the 'procession of

¹ Mark C. Taylor, 'Introduction,' in Mark C. Taylor (ed.) (1998b), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago & London, 1998, p. 4.

² Taylor 1999, p. 39.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ Taylor 1999, p. 21.

⁹ *Loc. cit.*

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simulacra' is crucial to Taylor's reading of New Age religion as an expression of virtual culture:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - PRECESSION OF THE SIMULACRA - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map.¹

It is clear that the idea of God as a transcendent other is as impossible as the idea of an independent self. For Taylor, these are now processes of the immanent, identified with the endless circulation of significance and desire in intratextual reality.² Taylor maintains that McLuhan 'anticipates' Baudrillard with the idea that 'the implosion characteristic of experience in the electronic age is created by *speed*. When speed reaches a certain point, time and space collapse and distance seem to disappear.'³ In McLuhan, Taylor seems to find in this 'a vision of a harmonious New Age in which all are one and one is all.'⁴ That McLuhan believed that 'electronic technology [is] turning ... illusion into the reality of discarnate mankind, at home nowhere'⁵ could support Taylor. The only problem is that Taylor has had to do violence to McLuhan's own understanding, based as it was on the danger of losing the foundational signifier, the body.⁶

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, 1983, p. 2, quoted in Taylor 1999, p. 21.

² Taylor 1984, pp. 199-33, pp. 97-120 in Graham Ward, 'Kenosis and Naming: Beyond Analogy and Towards *Allegoria Amoris*' in Heelas 1998, p. 233.

³ Taylor 1999, p. 130.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁶ Also, it would mean ignoring his own paranoid stance *against* a cultic milieu that Taylor saw him as being complicit with. From his correspondence with Ezra Pound we know of his investigation of secret societies [*Letters*, p. 235] who he believed were conspiring to keep *him* invisible [*Letters*, p. 233; Gordon 1997, p. 158]; McLuhan included gnostics in the cavalcade of cabals, and in this respect implicated his rival Nortrop Frye: 'Frye's *Blake* is [the] best exposition of contemporary gnosticism that I know' [*Letters*, p. 237, cited in Gordon 1997, p. 394]. The basis to Marshall's opposition to this 'gnosticism' lay in its tenet of an 'uncreated divine spark hidden in our corrupt clay' [Marshall McLuhan to Walter J. Ong, *Letters*, p. 244, cited in Gordon

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By asking the question as to ‘whether effacement of divine is the negation of God, or God’s self-realization’, Taylor points to a possible solution to deconstruction.¹ He calls this position ‘a/theology’; for an a/theologian, the ‘first task ... is to reread the theological tradition against the grain in an effort to discern the unsaid in the midst of the said.’² Taylor’s misreading of McLuhan now has a rationale. What he finds is a ‘strange slipping away [that] is no mere disappearance but a withdrawal that allows appearances to appear.’ This he terms the *sacred* and describes it as ‘the other in whose wake all gods emerge and pass away. If understood in a non-Hegelian way, this wake mourns the endless death of God.’³ A/theology is pertinent to religious studies, for in the ‘effort to overcome the privileging of theology in general and Christianity in particular, [it] turned to social sciences... belief and ideology were not left behind but merely changed names.’⁴ When understood in this way, ‘the shift from theology to theory does not, as many contemporary theorists think, escape God but exchanges overt faith for covert belief in the One in and through which all is understood.’⁵ It is interesting that he cites Smith in this connection, to the effect ‘that what unites the fragmented field or nonfield of

1997, p. 394]. McLuhan’s view of electronic man’s discarnate state as ‘sinister’ [NAC, Marshall McLuhan to Larry Henderson, *The Catholic Register* 20 October 1975, cited in Gordon 1997, p. 224], which creates ‘complete angelism ... the pure subjective being’ which is ‘everywhere at the same moment’ [unpublished interview, cited in Gordon 1997, p. 435] shed further light on this. On the problems of this interpretation of ‘gnosticism’, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘A Dynamical Typological Approach to the Problem of Post-gnostic Gnosticism’, *ARIES: Association pour la Recherche et l’Information sur l’esoterisme*, 16, 1992, and Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’. An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* Princeton, 1996. Paradoxically, Jaron Lanier, a key developer of VR (virtual reality) and loose adherent to New Age religiosity, has a positive valuation of the body as the foundational signifier: ‘the sense organs are almost a better defining spot than any other spot in the creature. They’re central to identity and define our mode of being. ... The whole notion of bypassing the senses is sort of like throwing away the treasure’, Rushkoff, *op. cit.*, p. 71; ‘I have always thought that virtual culture is essentially a way of bringing the body into computer culture’, Zaleski *op. cit.*, p. 229.

¹ Taylor 1999, p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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religious studies is a shared interest in theory.¹ Remembering Smith's criticism of Eliade earlier on, who also used the category of the *sacred*, it is significant that Taylor criticises religious studies for falsely freeing 'themselves from the limitations imposed by religious interpretation of religion.'² A/theology is still a religious position, but one 'which values difference without devaluing commonality and pursues unity without repressing differences.'³ For religious studies, 'the task of thinking at the end of theory is to think this endless deferral [of the sacred] repeatedly.'⁴

Hanegraaff may be said to represent the approach of the academic discipline of Western esotericism. It has recently been delineated as a separate discipline within religious studies by such scholars as Faivre⁵ and Hanegraaff himself.⁶ Having such a recent origin, with scholarship beginning now in full consciousness of this fact, the discipline has necessarily become acutely involved in the major methodological controversies of its parent discipline, mainly the debate over reductionism as against religionism.⁷

The position taken by these scholars has become largely empirical in approach, steering clear of both reductionist and religionist theoretical positions through an 'emic/etic' distinction, that is, between the 'metaempirical' assumptions the believer holds and the 'empirical' interpretation of it respectively.⁸ This rests on

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵ Most recently, Faivre 1994; Faivre and Voss 1995, pp. 57 - 70; Antoine Faivre, 'Questions of Terminology proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe', in Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion. Selected Papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City 1995*, Leuven, 1998.

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1995; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Introduction: The Birth of a Discipline' (1998c) and 'On the Construction of "Esoteric Traditions"' (1998d) in Faivre and Hanegraaff, *op. cit.*, 1998.

⁷ For the most recent instalment of this ongoing debate, see Thomas A. Indinopulos and Edward A. Yonan, *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*, Leiden, 1994; for an examination of the debate in terms of the discipline of Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff 1995, pp. 99 - 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 65 - 67; Hanegraaff's notion of empirical research, as distinguished from 'reductionist' and 'religionist' programmes is informed by Jan Platvoet,

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the supposition that scholarship in itself does not have direct access to the 'metaempirical' but only through its historically available expressions and as it cannot therefore either verify or falsify its existence, or any claims made about it, methodological agnosticism is the only proper attitude. This achieved in the 'emic' stage through the phenomenological practice of *epoche*, 'bracketing' one's preconceptions.¹ Building on that problem, Hanegraaff has recently presented a typology of etic constructs of esotericism.² As they are not discovered but 'produced', it is necessary that

criticism ... of constructs of 'esotericism' should begin with considering the subjective *motivations* which inspire scholars to invest so much of their energy in this task. What kinds of *interests*, we should ask, are served by the constructs of 'esotericism' as a tradition?³

Three possible motivations arise, only two of which are relevant to our purpose.⁴ First, the 'strictly historical'; while the main concern is to correct the 'marginalisation' of esotericism in mainstream historiography, such scholarship often succeeds in demonstrating the important contributions 'esoterists' have made to the emergence of modernity.⁵ Hanegraaff would himself belong to that category. The second is the association of esotericism with 'irrationality, superstition, or religious error.'⁶ They usually subscribe to a modern secularist worldview, and see esotericism as a dangerous temptation. Many of these scholars argue that modern culture remains threatened by irruptions of the irrational. It is important to be clear about the several responses this position creates:

some of the scholars 'invent tradition' (a dangerous and subversive counter-tradition, in this case) ... others deny that

'The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 2, 1990.

¹ Hanegraaff 1996, p. 4.

² Hanegraaff 1998d, pp. 13-15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Loc. cit.* The third being the common motivation of 'dissatisfaction with the religious or spiritual situation of contemporary Western society, and a corresponding search for more fulfilling alternatives. To point out that there has been an important but neglected 'esoteric tradition' in Western culture, embodying spiritual perspectives and values which have been ignored or forgotten by modern man, is a powerful way of criticizing the *status quo*.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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'esotericism' is a historical tradition at all, but present it rather as a recurrent disease. Not all these scholars present themselves explicitly as enemies of 'esotericism' (they may instead regard themselves as objective scholars); but they all share a worldview which is incompatible with it, together with an interest in favourably opposing that worldview to the irrational.¹

Taylor's *a/theology* falls into this category. It seeks to counteract the collapsing of differences that theory is still left with after theology has been deconstructed. This concern leads him to see modernity's desire for the primitive, in every sense of the word, as a backdoor for the violence of the irrational: 'the light of reason is always shadowed by primal urges that never disappear.'² Alchemy is implicated in that almost shrill criticism of the modern search for unity. Taylor's *a/theology* is ahistorical; for him esotericism recurs because it is irrational. Though aware that what is culturally relative has a history, he does not apply this to the development of New Age religion.³ Ultimately, by defining modernity against 'the primitive', his analysis is polemical when a 'strictly historical' approach would have been more instructive.⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

² Taylor 1999, p. 76.

³ Taylor 1999, p. 80: 'Nature, in other words, is culturally relative and, as such, has a history.'

⁴ As a religionist, Taylor's Hegelianism could also be interpreted as a motivation. Cf. Hanegraaff 1998, p. 18: 'it would be simplistic to expect all scholars of 'esotericism' perfectly to fit one of the three niches. Some belong to more than one; and others are motivated by far more specific concerns, conditioned by highly personal and contextual circumstances.' The polemical is not essentially inappropriate; Andrew Ross (utilised by Taylor 1999, p. 268, n. 23) by taking this 'cultural studies' approach, recognises the New Age as an extension of the Enlightenment project of development and scientific rationality; however, he acknowledges the disadvantage of this polemical position in that it neglects the more exhaustive 'ethnographic' study of cultural communities. See Andrew Ross, 'New Age Technoculture,' in Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York & London, 1992, p. 537. The other major study in the academy of New Age religion that is neither reductionist nor religionist is that of the contemporary critical 'sociology of religion' represented by the 'Self-ethic' of Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford, 1996. An analysis of esotericism, through not named as such, has been part of 'sociology of religion' since its inception: see Ernst Troeltsch, along with Weber one of the founders of sociology, and his typology of church, sect and cult (mysticism), and Colin Campbell, 'The

3. Toward a critical theory of technology and religion

When a *theorist* of some kind argues about the cultural impact of technology as such, we can be pretty sure that her own use of the term *technology* has a certain amount of theory built into it, and that such theory may well reflect her particular agenda for cultural reform as well as more obscure subjective factors. Indeed, in considering the assertions of such a theorist, it is prudent to watch out for uses of the term *technology* that are biased or manipulative.¹

When Taylor speaks of virtual technology, he uses the same language of irrationality, violence and deviance as with his discussions on alchemy and the modernity/primitivism pairing: 'Our consideration of metallurgical and alchemical myths and rituals suggests that such dreams of unity are far from innocent ... trace the darker aspects of virtual technologies²;' a surprisingly short step from the futurists' apocalypticism to influential versions of the cybertopia many are projecting for the next century.³; 'continuity from the Futurist apocalypticism to the technocratic visions of cyberspace touted by counterculturalists.'⁴

Such language suggests a certain amount of theory has been built into it and that underlying it is an agenda for cultural reform. I am indebted to Jay Newman, with whose words we opened, for his clear thinking regarding our confused and confusing discourses about religion and technology. Newman has usefully recognised that theorists who represent themselves as critics and would-be reformers of contemporary culture in a discourse about religion and technology are usually antitechnologists to some degree.⁵ Taylor seems to fit this description, but more specifically he is best seen as a religious antitechnologist. Newman notes that the religious critic of technology is almost inevitably drawn into the discussion of

Cult, The Cultic Milieu and Secularization', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 5, 1972. Troeltsch, Campbell and Ross have influenced Hanegraaff's position.

¹ Jay Newman, *Religion and Technology. A Study in the Philosophy of Culture* Westport, Connecticut, 1997, p. 40.

² Taylor 1999, p. 134.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ Newman *op. cit.*, p. 52.

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certain technologies and the role they play in *hindering* the realisation of transcultural ideals.¹ Again, Taylor seems to substantiate this. For example, he argues that in 'contemporary culture, the transformer is no longer religion ... but the electronic net in which we are already entangled.'² The religious antitechnologist thinks that technology is notably '*at the expense of religion*. Concern about *competition* is central to almost every major antitechnologist's position.'³ This explains why so much of the religious antitechnologist's argument is secular, at least on the surface, and especially so in its initial stages of development.⁴

Newman argues that religious antitechnologists may talk about certain technologies but rarely in terms of 'the changing relations between particular religious phenomena (beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, institutions, and so forth) and particular technologies.'⁵ Rather, they hold essentialist views of technology that cannot be proved one way or the other; far 'from a specific technology of limited use, virtuality is a cultural condition from which there is no escape.'⁶ Taylor claims that 'the transition from religious, to the chemical, to the electronic prosthesis extends the process of sublimation in which matter becomes increasingly rarefied or idealised and thus appears ever lighter until it becomes nothing but light.'⁷ By providing a continuum with alchemy, virtual technologies are essentialised; as we have seen it is not historically

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

² Taylor 1999, p. 138; however, confusingly, earlier he actually argues for a less determined model of human action, Taylor 1999, p. 110: 'The mind is neither hardwired in a way that inevitably imposes immutable structures nor a tabula rasa passively awaiting impressions. Rather, the structure of the brain is noncentralised, multidimensional, and malleable. Organised performance *emerges* from ostensibly chaotic behaviour through something like a phase shift or a quantum leap. While partly preprogrammed, the matrices of perception and conception are also culturally constituted and thus historically emergent and constantly changing.' This is also inexplicable in terms of his ahistorical understanding of New Age religion.

³ Newman 1997, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75; similarly, 'There is no need to mention Christianity. It is enough that it be known that the operator is a Christian. This job must be conducted on every front ... to educate a huge public, both Catholic and non-Catholic, to resist that swift obliteration of the person which is going on', Marshall McLuhan to Father Clement McNaspy, *Letters*, 180, cited in Gordon *op. cit.*, pp. 132-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ Taylor 1999, p. 133.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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accurate either. His 'history of the twentieth century' as 'the story of the progressive dematerialization of culture' offers further confirmation.¹ Such essentialist views are invariably determinist.

The essentialist position of the antitechnologist is encouraged by the fact that the 'distinctiveness theory' is widely accepted by observers who are not committed to the antitechnologist agenda.² The advocates of the 'distinctiveness theory' hold that a fundamental relationship exists between modern technology and the machine, again a theory that is difficult to prove.³ In this regard, Taylor writes that the 'movement from the industrial to the electronic age repeats the shifts from mechanical to organic metaphors for envisioning reality, which makes the emergence of nineteenth-century romanticism and idealism.'⁴

It is also encouraged by a general confusion as to what technology is, coupled with the assumption that we already know what it is. Even scholars of technology prevaricate. Joseph Aggasi writes that 'technology in general is not definable in any narrow clear-cut definition'⁵ and that it is often 'used loosely in different contexts and it is not at all clear how it would be understood in general.'⁶ Samuel C. Florman complicates the matter by pointing out that technology is 'constantly being defined and redefined'⁷ The main problem seems to be a gap between the generic and ordinary uses of the term.⁸ However, Newman suggests that the problem can be circumvented by 'paradigms of the *historically (and culturally) fundamental* types of technology.'⁹ Newman continues:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

² Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ Taylor 1999, p. 130; Taylor 1998, p. 46.

⁵ Joseph K. Agassi, *Technology: Philosophical and Social Aspects*, Dordrecht, 1985, pp. 23-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ Samuel C. Florman, *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*, New York, 1976, p. x.

⁸ Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44; e.g., working stone, bone, and wood; rotary motion; fire making, fuel, and lighting; textiles, basketry, and mats; building in brick and stone; water supply; irrigation, and agriculture; mining and quarrying; extracting, smelting, and alloying; fine metal-work; land transport without wheels (including roads and bridges); wheeled vehicles; boats and ships; recording and writing; measures and weights; and ancient mathematics and astronomy; cf., Charles Singer, E. J. Holmyard, and A. R. Hall (eds.), *A History of Technology. Volume One: From Early Times to the Fall of Ancient Empires*

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nearly every item on the list would be regarded by almost all ordinary speakers of our language, as well as advanced students of cultural theory, as referring to a type of technology (or a group of types of technology) that corresponds to an exceedingly large class of particular technologies ... almost everyone would grant that all (or virtually all) the items on the list qualify as general paradigms of technology.¹

Newman accords the categorisation of technologies into paradigms of historical types of central importance to a 'proper understanding of the relations between religion and technology.'² Such historical analysis shows that 'religion has survived wave after wave of radically new technology; it has to a great degree inspired many of them, and perhaps to an even greater degree it has been substantially transformed by them.'³

I would tentatively support an approach that looked at 'the changing relations between particular religious phenomena (beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, institutions, and so forth) and particular technologies' in terms of 'paradigms of the *historically (and culturally) fundamental* types of technology.'⁴ I would suggest that this survival *and* transformation is best looked at in terms of a weak secularisation thesis. No such undertaking has been attempted as yet in regard to Western esotericism.⁵ Clearly, while it was Taylor that

Oxford, 1954, pp. 9-10, 16-17, 19-21, 23, 26-31.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44

⁵ An attempt has been made by Erik Davis, *Techgnosis. Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York, 1998. He utilises the presuppositions of Jungian depth psychology and its influential interpretation of Gnosticism to analyse contemporary information technologies and their spiritual roots and reflections: 'I am attempting to understand the often unconscious metaphysics of information culture by looking at it through the archetypal lens of religious and mystic myth ... from the hermetic perspective, which reads images and synchronicities at least as deeply as facts, the mythic structures and psychology of Gnosticism seem strangely resonant with the digital zeitgeist and its paradigm of information,' p. 80. Davis is free to utilise intuitive and mythological cues that at times provide insight through imaginative reconstruction from sources unacknowledged by the others. However, as Richard Noll has made very clear, the Jungian/archetypal approach is itself a religionist approach; that is, Jung and his ideas can be squarely situated within the context of German Romanticism, occultism, *Naturphilosophie* and the trajectory of the western esotericism which it

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made the connection, he cannot be historically valid given his irrationalist and anti-technologist perspective. On the other hand, Hanegraaff, while silent, does have an alibi: 'it was not my intention to write a brief history of Western esotericism, but to highlight only those historical developments which seem to have been crucial factors in creating conditions for the emergence of New Age religion.'¹

Such a history of a specific current of modern European religiosity must include a relationship with specific types of technologies in a limitative fashion. The parameters of this work can be found in the overlap between Hanegraaff and historian David Noble.² Noble's work, taking up a critical stance to technological determinism, aims at dismantling the erroneous stereotype of progress, where religious tendencies would historically be superseded by advance of scientific technology. Viewed from a larger historical perspective, the two tendencies have actually never been far apart. Noble argues that the contemporary situation is 'a continuation of a thousand-year old Western tradition in which the advance of the useful arts was inspired by and grounded upon religious expectation.'³ The useful arts became implicated in the Christian project of redemption - the recovery of mankind's lost divinity.⁴ Over time, technology came to be identified more closely with both lost perfection and the possibility of renewed perfection, and the advance of the arts took on a new significance, not only as evidence of grace, but as a means of preparation for, and a sure sign of, imminent salvation.⁵

Historical continuity was not direct. The monastic and millenarian conceptions of redemption which had ideologically ignited the advance of the arts, themselves the novel development of

proclaims to explain, Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Princeton, 1994 *passim*. The historian of psychology Henri Ellenburger agrees that 'Jung's analytic psychology ... is a late offshoot of Romanticism' which has returned to 'unaltered sources of psychiatric Romanticism and philosophy of nature,' Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, New York, 1970, p. 657. For a recent deconstructive counterpoint to Taylor see Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass.; London, 1999.

¹ Hanegraaff 1996, p. 406.

² David Noble, *The Religion of Technology. The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*, New York, 1998.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

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Erigena and Joachim of Fiore, crystallised as never before during the Reformation.¹ Significantly, major figures of Western esotericism are part of Noble's narrative: Pico, Ficino and 'the Renaissance alchemists and illuminati who followed them';² Agrippa³, Paracelsus⁴, Bruno⁵, Johann Andreae (probable author of the Rosicrucian manifestos and *Fama Fraternitatis*⁶), and Francis Bacon among them. The involvement of Freemasonry with the institutionalisation of science is also examined.⁷ It is surely not a coincidence that these periods of time Noble talks about are those which are crucial for the formation of early modern western esotericism. That Hanegraaff emphasised the 'spiritualist' currents of esotericism highlights the possible relationship such currents had with the development of capitalism, industries, and formation of nation states. Another avenue would be the institutionalisation of culminative science and the entrepreneurial application of scientific knowledge, within the context of the sporadic subjectivisation of western religiosity.

4. An end(note) to religion: implicating culture and technology

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, *his foremost object of study*.⁸

'Cultural competition,' Newman argues, 'is often salutary, and much of it is inevitable; and as beneficial as cooperation can be for all parties concerned, it is not always as beneficial as constructive competition.'⁹ His words, though taken out of context, apply equally well to academic constructs: the coordination of texts is a game seriously intended. The question must be asked how we are to

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-82.

⁸ Smith 1982, p. xi, emphasis in original.

⁹ Newman 1997, p. 165; cf. Jay Newman, *Competition in Religious Life* Waterloo, Ontario, 1989.

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judge texts well played. I have found Gill's 'technique' has given 'weight to the academic enterprise, thus avoiding the lapse into pure simulacra, by grounding interpretation in the stated subject reality', in this case New Age religion.¹ The game that Taylor plays, I find, is a game where you make *all* the rules up as you go along: 'In this postmodern culture of images and simulacra, all reality is, in effect, virtual reality.'² Given Taylor's insistence on 'the sacred' that is 'always slipping away', Gill can show that this a game without the rule of the subject:

To the extent to which the study of religions is understood as being inseparable from apprehending the ineffable, or even the study of patterns of manifestation based on a priori unverifiable assumptions, the field falls short of being academic, though it may serve the beliefs of religious scholars. The difficulty with this understanding of religion is that the study of religion must become, in part, the manufacture of simulacra, bearing only the flavour or terminology of various historical and geographical specificity so as to appear real.³

Still, the relationship between specific currents of Western esotericism and specific historical types of technology, remains, essentially, untouched. A more extensive answer to this question will require another forum and would have been tangential to this exercise.

Disagreements about the precise relations of religion, culture, and the various 'forms' of technology can, I suspect, never be satisfactorily resolved because underlying them are even more fundamental disagreements about the nature of culture itself.⁴ The idea of culture is less a conceptual tool than a bundle of arguments, moral persuasions, in brief, an icon of a certain epistemological position we are persuaded to assume.⁵ In this way, the term *culture* not only began by definitely containing the idea of betterment or improvement but still retains this meaning today in many usages, both popular and intellectual.⁶ Newman's most fertile suggestion

¹ Gill *op. cit.*, p. 43.

² Taylor 1999, p. 21.

³ Gill *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁴ Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁵ Tomoko Masuzawa, 'Culture,' in Taylor 1998b, p. 90.

⁶ A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (with assistance of Wayne Untereiner and appendices by Alfred G. Meyer), *Culture: A Critical review of Concepts and Definitions*, New York, 1963, p. 283.

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helps to bring together religion, technology and culture as 'distinct but compatible ways of understanding the same essential phenomenon – the effort of human beings to ameliorate their condition, and that of fellow human beings, by means of the production or creation of things that they earnestly believe will make people better and better off.'¹

However, his suggestion that every age is necessarily a technological age as well as being 'modern' in relation to earlier ages; and that religion, 'like technology itself ... is ... perpetually "modern" and vital', while it undercuts the argument for the uniqueness of modernity, historically misses much more.² Modernity, at the very least, involves a kind of perpetual critique.³

The basis of 'amelioration' involves this critique; yet, what lies behind this dynamic? Part of the answer, I suspect, lies in claims made by Ernst Benz that millenarianism is 'one of the strongest impulses for man's technological development and realization' and, bearing this in mind, that 'the founders of modern technology have felt that the justification of the most far-reaching aims of their technological effort could be found in this very thought of the destiny of man as *imago dei* and his vocation as the fellow worker with God ... to co-operate with God in the establishment of his Kingdom and ... to share God's dominion over the earth.'⁴ If it is the case that millenarianism has been at the basis of the perpetual critique of modernity since its historical beginnings, then the strong secularisation thesis, culminating as it does with the end of religion as such producing utopian results, is also part of this 'amelioration.' Both Taylor and Hanegraaff realise the importance of millenarianism to New Age religion, which in its own way, looks forward to a similar event: the end of organised religion.⁵

Similarly, if 'the New Age Movement as a whole is based on a pervasive *cultural criticism* directed against the dominant values of the modern West' then so is the strong secularisation thesis.⁶ Finally, it may be true that 'the secularization of esotericism – should be the

¹ Newman *op. cit.*, p. 161.

² Newman *op. cit.*, p. 130; Newman 1997, p. 60.

³ Gustavo Benavides, 'Modernity,' in Taylor 1998b, p. 188.

⁴ Ernst Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope*, New York, 1975, pp. 123-5.

⁵ Taylor 1999, p. 117: 'New Age as a descendant of millenarianism meant the end of time which is, in effect, the collapse of space'; Hanegraaff 1996, p. 366: 'expectations of a coming New Age, the most direct expression of the movements criticism of the worldview's dominant in Western culture, modern Western culture in particular.'

⁶ Hanegraaff 1998a, p. 371.

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top priority of the academic study of esotericism and New Religious Movements' and that it 'is as a result of that hiatus that erroneous theories based on unhistorical presuppositions remain largely unchallenged.'¹ On the other hand, it is also true that the concept of secularisation, if it is not taken as a cultural artefact produced by unique historical developments in Western social thought, may obscure any future research on the ameliorative relationship between religion, culture and technology, and its historical roots in millenarianism.²

¹ Hanegraaff 1996, p. 407.

² For more on the debate about secularisation, see Daniel Bell, 'The Return of the Sacred: The Argument About the Future of Religion,' *Zygon*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1978; Bryan Wilson, 'The Return of the Sacred', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1979; Karel Dobbelaere, 'Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept,' *Current Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1981; Oliver Tschannen, 'The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1991; David Martin, 'Sociology, Religion and Secularization: an Orientation,' *Religion*, 25, 1995.