

Imagining a New Christendom

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The Transformation of all Things in Christ

In the call for this conference, the exhortation of transforming all aspects of life in Christ holds a central place. This vision was put forward by Saint Pope Pius X in his first encyclical *E Supremi* (1903), as the restoration (or renewal) of all things in Christ (*instaurare omnia in Christo*, a reference to Ephesians 1:10).ⁱ The Pope insisted on that we should neither retreat to a religious enclave, walled off from the larger society, nor divide life neatly into private and public, with religion sealed off in the former — but that we should work toward a transformation of the *whole* of society.

At its time, it was a direct challenge to the secularism of a self-confident modernity, while in our time it contradicts the postmodern dogma of the collapse of all metanarratives (which, of course, in itself is a metanarrative).ⁱⁱ If we are to transform everything in Christ, there is no secular sphere, *in sensu stricto*. And, in a radically pluralist society, such a principle will inevitably clash with competing religious and atheist worldviews.

While preparing my talk, I found this vision to be both exciting and challenging.

Exciting, as it inspired me to imagine a Christian civilization in which also, for example, sports and the economy are infused with Christ. In a society like Sweden, this is thrilling in the way of writing a science fiction novel, or creating a counterfactual national history. The empowering question “what if?” opens up vistas for a de-ghettoized Catholic identity. I began to think about what, for example, soccer transformed in Christ could mean. After a first humorous reaction, (I laughed for myself when writing this) following upon joining two such perfectly separated areas of life (at least in Sweden), I experienced an expansion of my religious imagination. After all, there is a soccer stadium in Sweden named Valhalla, the Viking paradise for men slain in battle. Why not “St Erik Arena” instead? Or, the “Stadium of the Holy Cross”? And, what about gardening and interior design; how could these be transformed in Christ? When writing this, I look up from my computer screen and gaze out of the window, imagining my garden filled with saint statues, small shrines, and a large, white sculpture of Our Lady silhouetted against the grey February sky.

At the same time as it is exhilarating to visualize a 21st century Christian society, the awareness of the seeming impossibility of such a grand venture is never far away, at least for me. As the call for the

conference mentions “an honest assessment of present realities,” we have to look more carefully at the resistance and challenges that a Christian transformation of both individual and social life faces. The post-Christian nature of a country like Sweden is not simply a case of forgetfulness or faulty catechesis — a brief spell of materialism, from which a Christian people can awake. The contours of the new spiritual landscape emerging are antichristian in several respects that demand careful attention.

The Triumph of Faith, or Supernaturalism?

In his latest book, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever*, Rodney Stark, the well-known and rhetorically gifted sociologist of religion, attacks once again with gusto the secularization thesis (which predicts that modernization automatically leads to decreased levels of religious faith and practice — at least eventually).ⁱⁱⁱ Using, among other sources, the massive data gathered by Gallup World Polls, Stark even claims that a global religious revival is under way.^{iv}

The main challenge to such spiritual optimism is obviously the low levels of religious enthusiasm in Europe, as measured in visits to churches and belief in Christian dogmas. At first sight, it is difficult to discern any signs of a religious revival on the mother continent of modernity. At least in Western Europe, religious apathy seems pervasive.

Stark’s first counterargument is that the level of church attendance has always been low. He claims that, “there has been no decline because hardly any Europeans attended church in the Middle Ages, and medieval Christian theologians condemned the popular religion of the day as mere superstition and magic, or even as witchcraft.”^v He continues with that even today the number of atheists in any European country is low.

What this argument amounts to is that the European peoples never became thoroughly Christianized, at least not in the idealized way. At the same time, the general level of supernaturalism has always been high and remains so even to this day. Accordingly, the de-Christianization of the public sphere will not lead to widespread materialism, but constitutes an opportunity for all kinds of alternative belief systems and spiritual practices.

In the tables of Stark’s book, Sweden emerges as a worrying anomaly for the triumphalist thesis of a Return of Religion. According to one of them, only thirteen percent of Swedes participated in a religious meeting the week before the survey, and a mere sixteen percent claimed that religion was an important part of their lives. In the United States, the corresponding numbers are forty-six and sixty-six percent. Sweden is, hence, as Stark writes, “always presented as exhibit A in the case for the triumph of secularization.”^{vi}

One of the Swedish polls that Stark does not mention is that performed by the Gothenburg based SOM-institute. Despite showing even lower levels of attendance at religious meetings — only six percent claimed to attend every week — almost half of the Swedish population believed in some kind of god.^{vii} There is, then, a clear discrepancy between the frequency of going to religious meetings and believing in supernatural entities, such as a god. But, I wonder, in what kind of god do Swedes believe? Is it the traditional Christian God, or is it a set of gods, that is, powers of nature, as in classical polytheism? Or, is it a distant force with little consequence for everyday life? Like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a notion coined in 2005 by two sociologists, and used by Rod Dreher in his recently published and much discussed book *The Benedict Option*.^{viii}

In the case of Sweden, Stark, zooms in on data showing high levels of belief in supernatural phenomena besides that of gods. For example, twenty percent believe in reincarnation and thirty percent in their personal horoscope. Stark also refers to an article by Ulf Sjödin by the name "The Swedes and the Paranormal" in which Sjödin by including beliefs in paranormal phenomena in the concept of religion — such as UFOs, contact with the spirits of the dead, and some kind of life force — arrives at the conclusion that seventy-eight percent of Swedes are religious.^{ix}

Even if Stark with the help of Sjödin can argue that Swedes are not as irreligious as one might think, because many still believe in supernatural phenomena (or at least in UFOs), this is hardly a sign that a religious revival is underway in Sweden.

Nevertheless, just for the sake of argument, let us assume that this is indeed the case. A revival is thus brewing if one looks at religiosity outside the walls of Churches, temples and mosques. At the same time, in accordance with the results of the SOM-survey, organized religiosity will decrease to a point where a majority of the population are not members of a Christian church. Left is then a small nucleus of committed Christians surrounded by a people adhering to a kaleidoscopic collection of supernaturalist ideas: nature spirits, magic, reincarnation, astrology, and benevolent, super-intelligent aliens. This multifarious, individualistic, esoteric mentality will gradually permeate culture and society until it gains socially prominent expressions. The end result would be a manifestly New Age, Neopagan society.^x

It is important to note that this openness to the supernatural is formed by a modern understanding of the self: its goal and purpose. It is not simply medieval superstitions that have lived on with the addition of imported Eastern religious ideas. It is not the magic of the farmer concerned with the health of his livestock, but the magick, with an added k, of the modern individual.^{xi}

Spiritualized Modernity and a New Christendom

I presume that some of you are now thinking, with the natural skepticism that one needs to live sanely in these times: all of these New Age beliefs are of no *real* importance; they are held with no high degree of seriousness; they carry no social power. They are merely the superstitions of middle-aged women in search of a self-gratifying aura of spirituality — decorative elements like the fat smiley Buddha, perfumed candles and peaceful yoga postures. Part of a decadent spa-culture, like in the late Roman Empire. And, honestly, how many active witches are there?

Increasingly, I tend to disagree with this sceptic view. For example, in February 2017 a call went out to all witches to cast a binding spell on the American President Donald Trump and to repeat this every month. It was reported on BBC and on other mainstream news media, but I saw no criticism expressed, no indignation at such an act.^{xii} It seemed a normal way to protest; one could even sense the sympathy of the reporters with the moral outrage motivating it. It was an act of political magic, probably only the first instance of similar public magical acts.

In his *Triumph of Faith* book, Stark writes that one of his future projects is to make a global comparative study of “unconventional, unchurched, popular religiousness and mysticism.”^{xiii} The reason is that current data seem to show that when visits to churches are low, beliefs in supernatural phenomena remain at significant levels. The interest of Stark mirrors a general trend in religious studies, and of my graduate students in religious studies (but not theology) many are within this field. For them this is thrilling, I think, as an alternative grand narrative of the West, decentering Christianity. It is freer, more geared toward the empowerment of the individual, and open to all sexual preferences and lifestyles, fitting nicely into the late modern context of individualism, dogmatic relativism and pluralism. In a sense, the excitement of my students is similar to that of my own when imagining a New Christendom, only that they are imagining, as indicated by Stark, a New (Modern) Heathendom.

My main point is that a New Christendom that aspires to a transformation of human life in all its aspects, both individual and social, needs to take into account that modernity could be on the verge of morphing from a mainly secular form to a plurality of kindred spiritual incarnations. These spiritualisms are united by a set of basic modern values and understanding of human life, with a likewise “holistic” claim to the whole of human life. Examples are: the glorification of the rebel, the ideal of the deification of the human individual who with its own resources and will power can reach liberation, both as success in this world and as gnostic insight; the centrality of emancipation from all forms of dependence; the idea of progress; sensualism fed by an increasingly powerful entertainment industry and given moral leeway through skepticism, leading to both dogmatic and ethical relativism.

All of this builds up to the theme of the 1968 Rolling Stones song *Sympathy for the Devil*. The rebellion against divine and human authority combine in the spirit of revolution. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Archbishop Chaput, in his recent book *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World* — which as *The Benedict Option* is a reflection on the dechristianization of America and a discussion of ways to live this new reality — quotes from the dedication page of Saul Alinsky's 1971 *Rules for Radicals*. There Alinsky acknowledges “the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom—Lucifer.”^{xiv}

Another example from my own discipline could be in order to show that this perspective is not only that of a zealous community organizer, and perhaps said with an ironic twist, but is representative of a wider subculture of western academic intellectuals. Indeed, that this kind of occult perspective is becoming more prevalent and established. A clear instance of this is the 2007 book *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*, by Jeffrey Kripal, J. Newton Rayzor Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at Rice University.^{xv} He is a former Catholic, who received formation in a Benedictine monastery, but who embraced a gnostic perspective combined with Hindu tantrism, focusing in his writings on themes of eroticism and the paranormal.^{xvi} He claims to have had a transformational supernatural experience in Calcutta in 1989, and in his writings a believing supernaturalist occult substratum is clearly manifest.^{xvii} This makes him an ideal representative of the turn from traditional Catholicism, even in the form of a Benedict Option, to the perspective of the snake and the principle of sexual and spiritual emancipation:

Inspired by early gnostic Christians who could not help noticing just who in the story was graciously bestowing knowledge (the serpent) and was jealously and rather pettily trying to prevent it (God), I take the ancient gnostic myth as a powerful and ultimately positive parable for all of us who would wish to “grow up,” leave the garden of our sexual and religious innocences (and the two, I will argue, are almost always connected), and venture forth into larger, if admittedly more ambiguous, visions of the world, ourselves and the divine.^{xviii}

The gift of the serpent, the fruit in the garden story, stands according to Kripal for an erotic gnosis that effects both moral awareness and the divinization of the human being.^{xix} The “wise snake,” the “gracious giver” is set against God, who “stands against our own moral maturity, against sexuality, and against the divinization of human nature through the acquisition of knowledge and sensual pleasure.”^{xx}

I think Kripal, in the quote above, offers a clear vision of a spiritualized modernity and it is important to note that this is not some fringe New Age publication by a shady guru, but a book published by University of Chicago Press by a most distinguished American professor.

With the risk of repeating myself, I want to emphasize that the new relevance of beliefs in spirits and spiritual phenomena, including beliefs in “god,” is not identical to a return to faith. A post-Christian

people is not simply a people that have lost its Christian faith, but is a people that have embraced a new “faith.” At first, this is perhaps proposed as secular, as not resting on ideas of supernatural entities and persons; still, it forms a coherent frame of values and goals, a worldview, with a distinct spiritual profile. The clearest expressions of this (quasi) religiosity to this date are the French revolution, and the different totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. However, a future regime of similar sort could, without contradiction, be explicitly spiritual. In this way, the religious potential of modernity will be brought out into the open.

It is, therefore, a mistake, I think, to imagine that a smaller, more marginal role for traditional Christianity in the West will be set against a religiously indifferent materialism. If my hypothesis is correct, it is more fruitful to be attentive to the spiritual nature and potential of consumerism (the pleasure principle) and emancipation. This makes one aware that this development has already partly happened. Contemporary secular culture is saturated with neopagan and occult themes, symbols and ideals. That erotic gnosis, as promoted by Kripal, is a more appropriate label for business as usual in mass media than chaste faith, should be obvious to even the most slowwitted. But, it is not considered especially noteworthy anymore. It is commonplace, a natural part of computer games, movies, books and music, both popular and serious. Sometimes it amazes me that this gets so little attention in the Catholic Church — for example, in papal or episcopal discourses.

Within a liberal framework, when the Christian churches have been reduced to their active members, alternative religions will have equal access to social resources and prestige, if not even more. In future interfaith dialogues, Wiccans, that is organized witches, and Satanists will be inevitable and prominent participants. From a Christian position, they cannot be rejected based on the principles of freedom of religion and speech; these freedoms do not include the rejection of other religious or spiritual beliefs. Satanists and Witches can only be rejected based on claims such as that they are incompatible with a Christian society, or that they are in conflict with the rule of law, or basic moral principles. But, to repeat, the basic values animating modernity have a distinct sympathy for the devil, the ancient rebel against moral restrictions and access to knowledge. In such a confrontation, I believe, *ceteris paribus*, the majority of the population will be sympathetic toward the “tolerant” neopagan position in contrast to Christian “fundamentalist” aspirations.

When one becomes conscious of the occult themes of contemporary Western culture, one also begins to realize the degree and depth to which the spiritual values of modernity have already transformed the mentality of a majority of Christians, both laypersons and clerics. In many surveys, there are strong signs that many Christians, including Catholics, are in reality postmodern pagans. A pagan Christ is just one among many gods; one road among countless others to the final goal. Moral principles are only ideals and the focus is foremost on creating the good life here on earth; while salvation is for a gnostic elite. As it says in one of the introductory textbooks that we presently use at my department:

The challenge of new age religions is a challenge to the purity of tradition. Persons involved in postmodern spirituality do not see themselves in an “either/or” situation. They do not see themselves as having to choose one spiritual practice or path to the exclusion of others. In fact, they see themselves in a “both/and” situation. For the new age believer, one can be a Jew and still engage in Buddhist rituals and meditation; one can be a Catholic and still practice Hindu meditation and ritual; and so on.^{xxi}

I will come back to Catholics doing Hindu meditation after the break, when I will speak about yoga. Right now, I think it is important that we remember that Pope Pius X formulated the call of *instaurare omnia in Christo* against the backdrop of 19th century modernity. It was a call to turn back from what he saw as a dangerous course.

We were terrified beyond all else by the disastrous state of human society today. For who can fail to see that society is at the present time, more than in any past age, suffering from a terrible and deeprooted malady which, developing every day and eating into its inmost being, is dragging it to destruction?^{xxii}

Pope Pius X saw this looming destruction in an apocalyptic light:

When all this is considered there is good reason to fear lest this great perversity may be as it were a foretaste, and perhaps the beginning of those evils which are reserved for the last days; and that there may be already in the world the "Son of Perdition" of whom the Apostle speaks (II. Thess. ii., 3). Such, in truth, is the audacity and the wrath employed everywhere in persecuting religion, in combating the dogmas of the faith, in brazen effort to uproot and destroy all relations between man and the Divinity! While, on the other hand, and this according to the same apostle is the distinguishing mark of Antichrist, man has with infinite temerity put himself in the place of God, raising himself above all that is called God; in such wise that although he cannot utterly extinguish in himself all knowledge of God, he has contemned God's majesty and, as it were, made of the universe a temple wherein he himself is to be adored. "He sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself as if he were God" (II. Thess. ii., 2).^{xxiii}

Over hundred years later, it can be tempting to see such a reaction as overanxious, displaying a “fortress mentality”; the world did not end, after all, a sceptic might say. But, I think it is more accurate to see it as prescient, when compared to Edwardian optimism, as only eleven years later, the first World War broke out, followed by the Russian Revolution, the horrors of the Second World War, the holocaust, and the many Gulags of Communism. When contemplating the increasing apostasy of the Western world in 1903, Pope Pius X saw the seed of what was to come: the 20th century horrors of man raising himself above God.

The divinization of man that so worried Pope Pius X is still with us; actually, it is the central thesis of New Age spirituality, and, for example, crucial to Kripal's neognosticism. Hence, when materialist secularism gives way to a renewed appreciation of religion or spirituality, as seems to be the case in many places, it does not automatically ignite a Christian revival. There has been a thorough transformation of consciousness, a shift of mentality and spirit, long in the making, several centuries

actually, which channels the innate religiousness of, for example, Swedish citizens in different riverbeds than those of traditional church Christianity. Indeed, I believe, such a resurfacing of man's religious instincts will lead to the culmination of the apotheosis of man in the form of a spiritualized modernity with its twin focus on pleasure and gnosis.

In the beginning of the 21st century, it is, therefore, probably wise, if one wants to join Pope Pius X in his zeal for a restoration of all things in Christ, to adopt also his apocalyptic realism. Otherwise, I fear, we will, like the Edwardian gentleman of a hundred years past, fail to read the signs of our time.

Virgin Mary and a New Christendom

To sum up my main argument, to picture a Christological restoration of all things is a fascinating exercise in that it frees imagination to break out from the confined space of private religious practice — and some remnants of Christianity at the state level — to instead imagine a New Christendom: a Christian way of life embracing all aspects of individual and society. Not a theocracy in the Iranian style, nor a narrow nationalism, but a Christian universal (that is, Catholic) civilization both incorporating and transcending cultural boundaries.

At the same time, the modern post-Christian individual, although not a natural atheist or nihilist, is predisposed to spirituality in particularly modern ways. One has to probe the heart of modernity to understand this more fully, as there is a Faustian bargain and cult of the promethean rebel behind modern forms of empowerment.

To imagine a New Christendom, where everything is transformed in Christ, involves thus, at the same time, as Pope Pius X did, understanding its opponent, which in its purest form is Luciferian Modernity.

As a result, the challenge can seem greater than the fascination. Is a New Christendom, therefore, a Utopia? A mere mirage that will only lead us into dangerous terrains? Will the Stadium of the Holy Cross never materialize in Sweden? And, is the result of such “daydreaming,” merely the loss of one's head, as in the case of St Thomas More? Indeed, is the only viable strategy of traditional Christianity now the Benedict Option, that is, to leave Babylon? Must a New Christendom, then, first be built as an alternative society, as a new Ark of Noah, and ride out the waves of civilizational collapse? And when the waters have settled, re-civilize the earth.

If we, in also this case, are to follow Pope Pius X, who hundred years ago so presciently perceived the horrors of mechanized warfare and totalitarianism looming at the horizon, it is to Virgin Mary we should turn. In his encyclical *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, released in 1904 (one year after *E Supremi*), he writes:

...the Virgin is more powerful than all others as a means for uniting mankind with Christ. Hence too since, according to Christ Himself, "Now this is eternal life: That they may know thee the only truly God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John xvii., 3), and since it is through Mary that we attain to the knowledge of Christ, through Mary also we most easily obtain that life of which Christ is the source and origin.^{xxiv}

In this way, Pope Pius X imbued the program of a transformation of all things in Christ with a crucial Mariological dimension. To me at least, this has special resonance in 2017, the centenary of the Fatima apparitions. Maybe, the first step of *instaurare omnia* is to put up a large statue of Virgin Mary in my garden, and from that, everything will follow.

Imagining a New Heathendom

Introduction

Perhaps my thesis of the spiritualization of modernity has not convinced some of you. Maybe, you think that I am overreacting. The West is still profoundly Christian, and the threat posed by mass immigration has, at last, awoken the instinct of social self-preservation, thereby reactivating the national religio-cultural subconscious. You may think that national Christian churches will, therefore, be strengthened by the present wave of nationalism surging over the world. Liberal globalism is over and new particularisms are taking its place, focusing first on securing the borders of the nation state and then interacting with other countries and cultures. A more inter-national than global world. Back to normal, one could say.

To strengthen my somewhat abstract thesis, I will, therefore, elaborate on the theme of modernity and pre-Christian religions, with special attention to the use of Eastern spirituality and the phenomenal success of Modern Yoga.

Imagining a Non-Christian West

Histories and genealogies of modernity sometimes locate its origins in 14th century Nominalism, or in the Renaissance and the Reformation. Still, even if the reformation was animated by some of the basic ideas of modernity, such as the hermeneutic privilege of the individual and the rejection of tradition, it is with the Renaissance that we can discern the will to find alternatives to Christianity taking more solid shape. This tendency grew in power as modernity developed a more openly antichristian nature, which came to a frenzied culmination in the French Revolution and later in the Russian revolution.

For those championing a modern brave new world, it was necessary to imagine a non-Christian West, and later global civilization. One way is, of course, to assert that everything that came before was darkness, that now a New Era begins, one of light, devoid of religion, based only on human reason. The logical conclusion is then to strip away all traces of Christian civilization, at least from public life, and construct a pure style of no ornaments and symbols that remind people of Christendom. Everything, at least in principle, is defined by its utility and directed toward the future, where a modern utopia beckons us to press on relentlessly. Such a heroic modernism is exhilarating for a futurist in love with the raw power of machines or the cerebral potential of computer technology. It is a science fiction dream in which we surge ahead at light speed onboard a functionalist dream ship, dressed in democratic uniforms. It is the Star Trek solution: the male, Martian, yang version of modernist imagination.

Such a rationalist imagination is hard, full of white, sharp, manmade corners. The alternative is that of enlisting religious alternatives as tools in claiming more ancient origins than Christianity. Such a neopagan traditionalism, with its enchanted world, is still modern in its values and understandings of individual and society. All the ancient religious traditions and texts are mere raw material for the autonomous individual who mixes and chooses, thereby creating new forms and fusions. Spirits are conceptualized as instantiations of pseudoscientific energy and force fields, or fluorescent ectoplasm. In this way, technological society is imbued with a religious nimbus. This is the Star Wars solution. The female, Venus, yin version of modernist imagination.

Buddha in the Garden of Eden

Actually, Gardone exemplifies, in a remarkable way, such a modern appropriation of foremost Eastern religions. I remember last summer when watching John Rao lecturing here at the hotel, with his usual energy and enthusiasm (on early modern Christian history, I think) while standing beneath a bust of the Hindu God Ganesha; and everywhere I turned there was a statue of the Buddha or of a similar Oriental religious person or symbol. Later, when I mentioned it to John, he was surprised; this was not something he had really noticed, or to which he had paid much attention. In the same way, foremost on the minds of most of the participants were the recent acts of the present pontiff, or of some cardinal or bishop, not the surrounding Eastern style interior decoration.

This observation serves as a reminder that Italy — which on the surface of its material culture looks like a Catholic country, formed by two millennia of Catholic history — has effectively become postchristian, and that in a way that most do not notice.

For example, have you seen that there is a Botanical garden here in Gardone? If you go to its webpage, you are greeted by a large picture of a reclining Buddha enclosed in a verdant jungle. The accompanying text is “The Most Luxurious among Eden Gardens.” The combination of these three symbols is significant. First, the peaceful Oriental religious figure in harmony with nature. Second, the Judeo-Christian symbol of Eden, the paradise garden. Third, the concept of “Luxury” brings in late modern consumerist lifestyles with their focus on the physical body and pleasure.

But, how do these three fields of meaning relate to each other? In this modern Orientalist Paradise Garden, is there a sense of a fall from grace and a need of redemption? Or, is it an installation taking the side of the serpent and his gospel of eroticized gnosis?

If you go to the garden, or continue reading on its webpage, you are greeted at the entrance by “enigmatic snakes and symbols of day and night.” The combination of snakes and the earlier reference to the Garden of Eden clearly speaks to a Christian imagination, but the religious content of the garden is mostly Asian as perceived by modern western artists. The webpage explains, “Several elements

connect with multiple traditions and spiritualities: Buddhist and Tibetan symbols, Indu [sic!] statues such as the Great Ganesh by Rudolph Hirt, elephant-god of luck and wisdom, protector of education, coexist with symbols of metropolitan culture and modernity.” Ganesha again; and now coexisting with metropolitan modernity.

Also the pagan religions of antiquity are represented. For example, the founder of the garden, André Heller, has created a sculpture called *Genius Loci*, that is, the name in the old Roman Religion for a protective spirit of a particular place.^{xxv} And, to remind ourselves, the genius of the Emperor was considered the *genius loci* of the whole Roman Empire; it was to this the early Christians were obliged to sacrifice.^{xxvi}

The garden is thus a neopagan fantasy, a modernist combination of East and West. However, not all is peace and gentle nature. There is also a Bridge of Monsters, which includes two heads on pikes that spit at each other, symbols of the intolerance of contemporary man, the website tells us. Leaving the bridge you find soothing calm by passing through a Torii gate, a reference to the Japanese Shinto religion.

There is also a Christian symbol, a stele described on the webpage as “[it] remembers a cross, but the characters moving on it carry sexual references.” The artist of the stele, Keith Haring died of Aids in 1990, only 31 years old, and in an essay, aptly named “Heaven and Hell,” Ralph Melcher writes that Haring’s art is characterized by a dark undertone:

The numerous scenes of perforation, in the concrete bodily sense as well as the figurative sexual sense, the monsters, absurd creatures, skeletons, snakes and beasts of prey which populate Haring’s pictures, in particular almost always add a more or less tangible, nightmarish or violent character to his multi-figured, pattern-like works.^{xxvii}

The remembrance of the cross in this paradise garden thus comes thus through a filter of sexual monstrosity, while the Classical and Asian religions are presented as peaceful and in harmony with nature. And as the webpage concludes, “We hope you will also leave this magic place with a happy heart.”

Yoga and Self Religion

The Gardone garden is a clear example of the spiritualization of modernity, which appropriates fragments of the Orient, while at the same time marginalizing and ultimately rejecting Christianity. Still, it is mainly an aesthetical and ideological project. To understand how such a project can be influential in people’s everyday lives, we need to focus on practices, with other words, rituals.

The best example, besides different forms of meditation practices, of such a ritualized New Age spirituality is, I think, Modern Postural Yoga, which has achieved an amazing level of popularity. It

travels with ease on the global currents of consumerism and address deeply felt personal needs in late modernity.

Since the late 19th century, there have been pioneering figures influencing the trajectory of Modern Yoga, but its development and spread has the character of a multifarious movement, growing and changing by its own inner potential, generating ever new forms and shapes. It is presently a global phenomenon, not a centrally governed mission, although the Hindu nationalist government has made postural yoga part of its nation-building project.^{.xxviii}

Still, as Buddha in the Gardone garden, modern yoga is only superficially oriental. There is precious little continuity with premodern forms of yoga. In her book *Selling Yoga*, Andrea Jain summarizes the research in the following way:

In other words, today's popularized yoga systems are new, not continuations of some static premodern yoga tradition from which practitioners and nonpractitioners alike often claim they originate. Even postures and breathing exercises were marginal to the most widely cited sources on yoga prior to the twentieth century, and the forms of postures and breathing exercises that were present in those sources dramatically differ from those idiosyncratic forms found in postural yoga today.^{.xxix}

Jain makes a difference between two phases of modern yoga, the countercultural, which comprises the first half of the 20th century, which was spearheaded by a controversial elite, including Theosophists, the ritual magician Aleister Crowley and American Transcendentalists — all opposed to “prevailing religious orthodoxies.”^{.xxx}

In the middle of the twentieth century, yoga expanded from this esoteric milieu into pop culture. It became possible due to a new openness among youth to Eastern spiritualities, and as yoga by then had appropriated gymnastic forms of stretching already prevalent in the West.^{.xxxi} Yoga was thus transformed, from Indian forms of asceticism and meditation laboring to transcend the body, to regimes aimed at health both in the form of physical fitness and mental balance.

Even if Jain places Modern Postural Yoga firmly within the context of a globalized capitalist consumer culture with branding and detraditionalizing as important elements, she still sees it as a form of religious practice.^{.xxxii}

...postural yoga reflects the dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture, which links the self to the body so that attainment of health and beauty is central to the transformative and transcendent process of self-development. The postural yogi believes herself or himself to transform the body into a temple, a sacred vessel, transcending the mundane flesh and bones while remaining in those very same flesh and bones.^{.xxxiii}

She continues, “therapeutic approaches to healing, such as postural yoga, can play the same role as religious approaches to salvation.”^{.xxxiv}

At this point, where Jain connects the modern ideology underlying yoga practice with religion, I think it is appropriate to reconnect to the analysis of modernity made by Pope Pius X in 1904, who found the characterization of the Man of Lawlessness in the second letter to the Thessalonians to be pertinent for our times:

He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. (2 Thess 2:4)^{xxxv}

Pope Pius X interprets the temple in this quote as the material universe, in which man gives to himself the adoration due only to God. My guess is that it was foremost the triumphalist atheist worldview of modern science that troubled the pope. But, if we reconnect to the quote by Jain above, which claims that the yoga practitioner transforms her (more often than his) body into a temple, we can link this to another passage in the first letter to the Corinthians, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...” (1 Cor 6:19) The context here is different, namely Paul’s argument against fornication, but, still, the temple metaphor used for the human body creates a link to the Antichrist passage in the second letter to the Thessalonians. This is especially important for yogic praxis, which is extremely body centered, but which also, especially when combined with relaxing techniques and meditation, aims toward mental peace and control. The body is formed through yogic postures, but also through dietary practices, which the believers think not only are conducive to health and boost performance, but morally superior, as, for example, in veganism. The Temple Body enshrining the human self is to be carefully constructed; its muscles toned and showcased in closefitting tights.

To become more concrete, we will take a look at a home page promoting the Body Temple Yoga School founded and trademarked in 2012 by Daniella Ambika Cotreau.^{xxxvi} The main slogan of the webpage is “Your Body is a Temple: Embody the Temple of your Heart” set against a slideshow of Cotreau in strongly colored tights, or seminude, doing a split, or other modern yogic poses. Somewhat contradictorily, the background image is that of the Taj Mahal toned orange by the sunset. The Taj is, as you probably know, a Muslim mausoleum, but it is used here, with its dreamy spires and onion dome, despite having nothing to do with Hinduism or Yoga, to symbolize the spiritual orient, I presume.

The message on the Body Temple Yoga homepage is explicitly religious, though mostly expressed in vague New Agey spiritualist language, as in aligning your body with the consciousness of your heart, knowing and expressing your true self, and achieving opening and freedom. And a quote from Deane Juhan, a so-called Body Worker drives home the temple metaphor, “Our bodies are our temples. The essential function of a temple is to provide communion, feed the soul and awaken the spirit.”^{xxxvii}

Moreover, in a short text called, “her story,” Cotreau claims to have been “keenly aware of a connection to the Universe/Spirit/Source” since she was five years old.^{xxxviii} This awareness made her

realize that Love and the power of the heart was more than one might know, upon which she asked the Universe to show her more.

There is little evidence on her website of the quasi-scientific jargon otherwise pervasive in alternative religion.^{xxxix} The focus of her spirituality seems instead to be the Heart, though she never explains precisely what she means by this metaphor.

Obviously, the goal is self realization, of expressing your true self, and the primary method physical fitness through yoga poses, but Cotreau also uses sounds, that is, she sings and plays the harmonium. We are left wondering what the Universe, or Spirit, or Source, really is, and how it relates to the individual and her heart and quest. Nevertheless, she includes an “Invocation” in Sanskrit, which in English translation, (which she does not provide) means, “AUM, HRIM, honor to Shiva; honor to the divine Guru.” The two first monosyllabic words are primarily sacred sounds that can be given many meanings, and Cotreau’s flowery interpretation is as follows:

OM – radical affirmation of the whole of reality.

HRIM – the humbling experience of one’s own Heart as containing the seed of the whole universe.

NamaḥŚivāya – Reverence to the Divine, defined as unbounded Consciousness reposing in the innate bliss of Self-awareness.

Tasmai Śrīgurave namaḥ – to that auspicious, bountiful, beautiful, and radiant Consciousness that manifests as the Teacher, reverence!^{xl}

Without much ado, she thus renames the Hindu God Shiva as the Divine and Consciousness, which, of course, makes things less clear, who and what the divine is. Shiva is a god with a distinct mythology, temple worship and theological schools, but who is the Divine? Is the Heart and the Divine the same thing, for example? What is the relation between human consciousness of the heart and radiant Consciousness, we are left wondering.

In one of her blog posts, the Hindu theistic dimension is made more explicit, in that Cotreau explains that her middle name, which is a given spiritual name, Ambika, is an epithet of the Hindu Goddess Durga, famous for killing the buffalo demon. When Cotreau heard the mantra of Durga for the first time, she

...immediately felt a resonance with a deeper part of myself, an aspect of her that was me. She was an archetype that lay within me but not fully cultivated, yet waiting inside of me. What I did not realize at the time was that my draw to her was that part of me calling me out in a much bigger way. That feeling was the call to know myself more in the ways of deep inner strength. I was meant to embody that energy, her energy and completely.

It is somewhat difficult to know if she considers Durga only an archetype within herself, enabling self knowledge, or if it is an actual goddess who effects that change. Anyhow, after this experience,

Cotreau continued for two years to call upon Durga daily to assist her: using the mantra, invoking the name of the goddess, dancing and praying to her, working with her, and feeling her energy within herself.

In this form of yoga, a higher spiritual divine principle is thus acknowledged, variously called by abstract names such as the Universe or Consciousness, sometimes manifest as Hindu gods, but seemingly fusing with the spiritual core of the individual. There is no idea of sin or redemption, only of emotional blockages that hinder you from being your true self. The goal is self-realization, understood as salvation within the sacred temple of the body, effected through one's own efforts, as there is no recognition of grace.

Important is that this Self Religion with its heavy emphasis on therapeutic transformation has a clear religious dimension; it is a spiritualized modernity, in which the temple is the body and the primary object of adoration is oneself.

This is further underscored by the understanding of the modern yoga session a religious ritual, which is explicitly acknowledged in Cotreau's Body Temple Yoga:

She holds a sacred, transformational and playful space that empowers each student to remember that their Heart is their greatest teacher (Inner Guru) and their Body a great Temple to guide them, live from their Heart, heal and express their divine truth.^{xli}

In her book *A History of Modern Yoga*, Elizabeth de Michelis calls the yoga session a healing ritual of secular religion.^{xlii} The yoga studio and class constitutes a separate space and time, created by the use of mantras, special clothing and stylized bodily gestures. It follows a classical tripartite structure with a central liminal time and place, in which the participants are rendered equal, and social distinctions abandoned. In this way, the individuals become malleable to the transformation vital for all initiation rituals.

I would like to argue that yoga poses, in fact, are examples of an extreme ritualization of the body, even hyper-ritualization. Imagine similar bodily contortions in a Christian liturgy. It makes the most solemn Latin Mass seem relaxed, even colloquial in comparison. Jain claims that “the excesses of yoga—retreats, workshops, dieting, onerous postures—signify its reversal of conventional life for the sake of rebirth back into that life as a renewed and better self.”^{xliii} And as Michelis remarks that “It is this element of sacralized personal transformation and healing, ultimately, which motivates the practice.”^{xliv}

Virgin Mary and Yoga Girl

The imagination of a new Christendom, if this is not only the vision for a strategic retreat from society, has to engage with its competing neopagan and New Age imaginaries, which in the case of Modern

Yoga fuses central values of modernity with Oriental spiritual themes and fragments, in a similar way as the Garden of Gardone.

The architects of a new Christendom must understand the Antichristian impetus behind spiritualized forms of modernity, as in Jeffrey Kripal's rethinking of religious studies from the viewpoint of the serpent: the bringer of wisdom in the form of erotic gnosis. The New Age understanding of the body as a temple of the spirit is the opposite of the stern admonition of St Paul to stay away from fornication; instead, the body is through spiritualized gymnastics to be made perfect for fornication, understood as self realization. In consumerist spiritualities, desire is not to be restrained, but cultivated as *the* path to liberation. This requires emancipation on many levels, but foremost in relation to God, who puts restrictions on desire — on our eating of fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Spiritualized modernity does not recognize sin (evil), but only immaturity and there is thus no need for the cross. The human person is at heart divine and needs only recognize its spiritual potential, and then realize it by its own efforts, rising to a higher level of selfhood. In this sense, man is enthroned in the temple of his own body worshipping himself, as there is no higher spiritual principle. The serpent is merely the facilitator of this cult, promising: "You will be like God."

Modern yoga is mostly a ritualization of the female body, with a view of increasing its attractiveness and health, in both physical and mental aspects. An influential example of this is the (platinum) blond Swede, Rachel Brathen, alias Yoga Girl, who teaches yoga full time on a Caribbean island. Her blog, unsurprisingly, includes many pictures of her in swimsuits and bikinis doing poses on sandy beaches and surfboards always happily smiling.^{xlv} For those of you knowledgeable of social media, I can inform you that she has two million Instagram followers, a number which makes most teenagers almost faint, muttering something about respect.

We are thus back in the Garden of Eden, though I cannot spot any snakes, merely some flamingos in the foreground of one the photos of Rachel bending deeply on a surf board with one leg in the air. Yoga promises, as for Yoga Girl, a way from, as the website says, a destructive life, to an earthly paradise, where we can flex our perfect bodies standing on our heads, while all emotional blockages just melt away in the hot sun. There is no hint of spiritual battle, or of taking up the cross of redemptive suffering. This tropical Island Yoga is a vision of paradise. And, for only 1405 dollars, it can be yours for five days.

I am sorry, if I turned somewhat whimsical toward the end of this talk, but to sober up, I cannot think of any better recipe than reconnecting once again to the belief of Pope Pius X that Virgin Mary holds a special role in these times. Especially as regards snakes.

Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem et semen tuum et semen illius ipsa conteret caput tuum et tu insidiaberis calcaneo eius. Gen 3.15

Et signum magnum paruit in caelo mulier amicta sole et luna sub pedibus eius et in capite eius corona stellarum duodecim. Rev 12:1.

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- i Pope Pius X, *E Supremi: Encyclical of Pope Pius X on the Restoration of All Things in Christ* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1903), http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_04101903_e-supremi.html.
- ii Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]).
- iii Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2015).
- iv Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, 2.
- v Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, 3.
- vi Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, 47.
- vii Forty-seven percent said they believed in some god, which was an actual increase of two percent since 2011. Linn Annerstedt, Annika Bergström and Jonas Ohlsson, *Religiositet och tro i Göteborg*, SOM-rapport no 2016:12 (Göteborg: SOM-institutet, 2016), 10.
- viii Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 10–11.
- ix Sjödin does not deal with the praxis dimension of alternative religiosity, as he thinks that modern supernaturalism is mostly on the level of individual ideology; that is, it has yet not found organized expressions to any high degree. Ulf Sjödin, “The Swedes and the Paranormal,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17: 75–85.
- x For a discussion of the relation between the concepts Neopaganism and New Age, see Wouter Hanegraaf, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1996), 77–79. Hanegraaf decides for Neopaganism as part of the wider phenomenon of New Age.
- xi The notion “magick” was coined by the notorious occultist, ceremonial magician, and founder of the religion Thelema, Aleister Crowley, who self-identified as the Beast 666, in order to delimit his form of magic from mere magical tricks. According to Henrik Bogdan and Martin Starr, Crowley “was an influential twentieth-century religious synthesist. His esotericism was not a reversion to a medieval worldview; instead, in its questing for a vision of the self, it was a harbinger of modernity. /.../ His mission was that of a charismatic prophet of a new dispensation for humankind that proclaimed the absolute liberty of the individual to self-actualize without regard for the moral codes and religious strictures of prior ages.” Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, “Introduction” in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, eds. (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199863075.003.0001.
- xii “Witches cast 'mass spell' against Donald Trump” BBC News, February 25, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39090334>.
- xiii Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, 47.
- xiv Saul Alinsky quoted in Charles J. Chaput, *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017), 164.

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- xv Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- xvi "Jeffrey J. Kripal" Rice University, Department of Religion, Faculty, <http://reli.rice.edu/Content.aspx?id=258>.
- xvii Jeffrey Kripal, *Comparing Religions* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, Blackwell, 2014).
- xviii Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*, 1.
- xix Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift*, 3.
- xx Ibid.
- xxi John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, Todd T. Lewis, *Religions of Asia Today*, 3rd ed. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- xxii Pope Pius X, *E Supremi*.
- xxiii Pope Pius X, *E Supremi*.
- xxiv Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum, Encyclical Of Pope Pius X on the Immaculate Conception* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1904).
- xxv "The great anthropomorphic bust with open arms, emerges from the grass and erects himself as protector and guide-spirit." www.hellergarden.com/en/lichtenstein-haring-novak-works, accessed 2017.05.12.
- xxvi Darrin McMahon, *Divine Fury, A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), Ch. 2.
- xxvii Ralph Melcher, "Heaven and Hell," The Keith Haring Foundation, http://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/heaven-and-hell#.WNTuzfnhCUk, accessed 2017-03-24.
- xxviii See, for example, the home page for the International Yoga Day managed by the Indian government, <https://yoga.ayush.gov.in>, accessed 2017.05.12.
- xxix Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.
- xxx Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 21.
- xxxi Ibid, 37.
- xxxii Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.
- xxxiii Ibid, 105.
- xxxiv Ibid, 105.
- xxxv *New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (1995).
- xxxvi www.bodytempleyoga.com, accessed 2017.05.12.
- xxxvii www.bodytempleyoga.com/daniella-cotreau.
- xxxviii Ibid.
- xxxix Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2004).
- xl www.bodytempleyoga.com/body-temple-yoga, accessed 2017.05.12.
- xli www.bodytempleyoga.com/body-temple-yoga, accessed 2017.05.12.
- xlii Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London, New York: Continuum, 2005)
- xliii Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 113.
- xliv Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 258.
- xlv "Rachel Brathen: Yoga Lifestyle," <http://rachelbrathen.com>, accessed 2017.05.12.