

Christopher Partridge

The Disenchantment and Re-enchantment of the West: The Religio-Cultural Context of Contemporary Western Christianity

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Introduction

The modern, scientific, rationalist, industrial culture which is rooted in the secularizing presuppositions of the Enlightenment is, after a little over two centuries, collapsing. There is a cultural shift taking place, a shift which has been identified by many as the shift from modernity to post-, late- or perhaps high-modernity. Not only has there been a rapid evolution of communication technologies, consumerism, and all that these developments entail, but also, more particularly, there has been a celebration of religious plurality, an encouragement to experiment, and a consequent increase in the attraction of personally tailored spiritualities. Increasingly, people are unwilling to respect traditional authorities. Even the findings of scientists (the priests of the modern era) are no longer simply swallowed whole as if delivered from God himself. People are very aware that everything is subject to interpretation and that the knowledge dispensed by scientists, doctors, and other professionals is flawed and limited. Similarly, the Christian minister might have the unalloyed respect of some of his flock, but s/he carries little weight in society generally. Apart from the reported cases of appalling abuse and hypocrisy within the Christian community, all of which have undoubtedly contributed to the collapse of trust in and respect for institutionally Christianity, for a variety of broad sociological and cultural reasons, the Church has lost much of its intellectual and political credibility. Consequently, whilst Christianity may still be seen as respectable by many westerners, this does not mean that it is particularly appealing. Moreover, what were, not too long ago, considered to

be dangerously deviant forms of spirituality are gradually becoming more acceptable as people adopt non-Christian, often non-theist, religious understandings of the world. The point is simply that the emerging culture is spiritually very different from the culture of modernity in which many of us grew up.

Convinced that many Christians are not fully aware of the nature and extent of this cultural shift, a view which I find supported in recent books on mission and revival, the principal aim of this paper is to provide an initial mapping of the situation in the West, and secondarily, to suggest areas for missiological reflection. It is not my aim to propose new mission strategies.

The Disenchantment of the West

Religion, for many of its Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment critics, was understood to be little more than an immature response to a world that can be better explained by science. Most dogmatically stated, the ideology that has been termed 'scientism' simply insists that all reality, including the existence of religion, is scientifically explicable. Moreover, as our knowledge of the world increases, so it is claimed that the numbers of religious believers will decrease. In other words, the increased acceptance of scientific thought will be accompanied by the gradual erosion of religious belief. Whilst we would want to question some of the presuppositions informing this conclusion, the force of the secularization thesis is hard to resist. It would seem to be overwhelmingly evident that religious beliefs, practices, and symbols are gradually being abandoned at all levels of modern society. If the general public's and the media's apparent level of interest in traditional, organised religion is any measure of contemporary religious commitment, then there would seem to be evidence of acute secularization. As Steve Bruce commented in 1996, 'Sales of religious books have declined. The space given to church and spiritual matters in the popular press is now vestigial; only a sex scandal (for the tabloids) or a money scandal (for the broadsheets) will get the church out of a bottom corner on an inside page.'¹

As to the nature of secularization, nowadays, it is generally felt that, whereas a more scientifically educated, cynical, and less credulous public is an important factor in, what Max Weber termed, 'the disenchantment of the world', it is not the only, or even the principal, factor. To quote Bruce again, 'Increasing knowledge and maturity cannot explain declining religion. There are too many examples of

1 S. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford, 1996), 34.

modern people believing the most dreadful nonsense to suppose that people change from one set of beliefs to another just because the second lot are better ideas.² Rather, following in the footsteps of Émile Durkheim (but going significantly beyond him in several respects), later theorists have argued that the reasons for secularization are primarily social, not intellectual. Secularization is intrinsically related to modernization, in that modern societies inhibit the growth of religion and may eventually stifle it altogether. Central to societal modernization is the differentiation and specialization of social units. Commerce and industrialisation have led to the division of labour and thereby to increasing societal fragmentation. Small closely-knit, family-based communities with the Church at the centre, and living under what Peter Berger has called a 'sacred canopy', have collapsed. Communities in which people operated with a shared religious worldview, a shared morality, and a shared identity, and within which an individual's material, intellectual, and spiritual sustenance was provided, have disappeared. As Robert Hefner puts it, 'Kinship, politics, education, and employment all separate from an original unity and assume a dizzying variety of specialized forms. In the process, human society is transformed from a simple, homogenous collectivity into the pluralistic entities we know today.'³ Consequently, over the past few centuries religious authorities have lost their grip on the reigns of economic power as the world of employment has been increasingly driven by its own values. Gradually, education, economic production, healthcare, and a host of other activities have shifted from ecclesiastical control to specialised secular institutions. Consequently, religious influence is gradually weakened to the point at which it is all but absent. The history of modernization has therefore been the history of the gradual demise of the social significance of the supernatural worldview.

Along with, and included within the corrosive process of modernization, another feature of the West which has contributed to disenchantment is increasing religious plurality. Unlike pre-modern communities in which a single religious worldview was dominant and permeated all areas of community life, in modern societies there are few shared values to which one can appeal and the beliefs an individual does hold cannot be taken for granted. Many contemporary westerners will simply assume, as a matter of self-evident fact, that religious belief is not the result of any correspondence with objective

2 *Ibid.*, 38.

3 R. W. Hefner, 'Secularization and Citizenship in Muslim Indonesia', in P. Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1998), 150.

reality, but rather the result of a variety of culturally relative subjective factors. Rather than being, for example, the result of divine revelation, religion has far more to do with where one was born, the culture into which one was born, and the beliefs of one's family and peers. Once this is accepted, as it often is in modern societies, religion begins to lose its transcendent referent. The result is, again, a decline in the social significance of religion.

This creeping relativism and the exclusion of traditional concepts of deity is further encouraged by contemporary consumer-centric cultures that are driven by an insistence on variety and individual choice. As Bruce argues, 'by forcing people to do religion as a matter of personal choice rather than as fate, pluralism universalises "heresy". A chosen religion is weaker than a religion of fate because we are aware that we chose the gods rather than the gods choosing us.'⁴ Religion is increasingly a private, rather than a public, matter. Again, modern, multicultural societies are seeing religion gradually become socially insignificant. Recently referred to as the 'differentiation thesis',⁵ this understanding of secularization expects, not the total disappearance of religion (the 'disappearance thesis'), but rather its relegation from the social to the private sphere. For example, a palpable consequence of this overall secularizing, relativizing shift in modern democracies has been a series of laws that have repealed certain sanctions in order to ensure the equality of most forms of religious expression. Hence, in Britain, the 1951 repeal of the 1735 Witchcraft Act was not an attempt to promote Witchcraft, but rather a logical step in a modern, secular democracy. There is no longer an acceptable rationale for defending the rights of one religious belief system over another. Since religion is simply a matter of personal preference, and since concepts of religious truth have been relativised (there being little empirical evidence to establish the validity of one choice over against another, or indeed to establish the validity of any of the choices), there are few reasons to limit choice. 'Modern society seeks to assimilate all citizens into the mass culture of free-wheeling choice where community commitments are notoriously difficult to maintain.'⁶

4 S. Bruce, 'Pluralism and Religious Vitality', in S. Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992), 170.

5 Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas have recently distinguished three types of secularization thesis, *disappearance* (religion will eventually disappear), *differentiation* (religion is becoming increasingly privatised), and *deintensification* (religion will remain weak and relatively insignificant). See *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (Oxford, 2000), 307-308.

6 A. Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission, and Culture* (London, 1996), 6.

Finally, central to the disenchantment of modern societies is what is often referred to as 'rationalization': i.e. 'the concern with routines and procedures, with predictability and order, with a search for ever-increasing efficiency.'⁷ Rationalization has therefore led both to increased bureaucracy and to an emphasis on process and organization. Everything can and should be done better, faster, cheaper, and more efficiently. Consequently, religious beliefs such as, for example, the value of prayer, God's providence, and the whole concept of divine intervention, are all at odds with a culture that values predictability, order, routine, and immediate quantifiable returns. Many westerners, including those with religious convictions, will implicitly or explicitly accept that there are better, more effective ways of getting through life than the traditionally religious ways. As such, secularization theorists point out that there seems to be relatively little left in the world for God to do. In pre-modern societies, if your goat was unwell, if your crops failed, if you woke up with a headache, or even if you fell in a ditch, you would very likely make an immediate spiritual and moral connection with the physical event. As you emerged muddy from the ditch you would have words of repentance on your lips regarding some event during the week. If your livestock was sick, you would turn to prayer. If your crops failed, you would search your soul and fall to your knees. In the modern, industrial world, individuals instinctively seek a physical cause for a physical effect and, consequently, initially turn to physical remedies. Christians may pray for relief from a migraine, but few will not first avail themselves of the appropriate medication. Again, we can no longer accept that psychiatric disorders such as epilepsy are the result of demonic possession; we know there are physical causes which can be very effectively controlled by the careful use of scientifically researched chemicals.

This then is the disenchanted world in which we live – or so many sociological accounts of the West would have us believe. The decline of the community, the proliferation of large, impersonal conurbations, the increasing fragmentation of modern life, the impact of multicultural and religiously plural societies, the growth of bureaucracy, the creeping rationalization, and the influence of scientific worldviews have together led to a situation in which religion is far less socially important and far less plausible than it used to be in pre-modern communities. Certainly, a large question mark has been placed over the notion that there exists a single religious and ethical worldview which alone is true and, therefore, to which all good and rea-

7 S. Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 48-9.

sonable people should assent.⁸

The Re-enchantment of the West

Whilst there is much in the secularization thesis that demands serious attention, its analysis of the West is flawed. In particular, I want to argue that new religions and alternative spiritualities present a fly in the ointment, in that their proliferation is hardly a ringing endorsement of the demise of religion in the West. However, before continuing with this critique, it is important to note that some theorists have argued that new religions are, in fact, a confirmation of secularization. For example, Bryan Wilson has argued that, far from being a resurgence of religion, they are actually evidence of the trivialization of religion.⁹ Similarly, Bruce has recently argued that New Age spiritualities are little more than the dying embers of religion in the concluding stages of the history of the secularization of the West.¹⁰ In short, he seems to argue for a form of the differentiation thesis, in that the New Age provides a privatized spirituality for secularized westerners who want to hang on to the remnants of religion without inconveniencing themselves too much. Western culture is increasingly characterised by forms of religion that do not claim absolute truth, do not require devotion to one religious leader, do not insist on the authority of a single set of teachings, but rather encourage exploration, eclecticism, an understanding of the self as divine, and, consequently, a belief in the final authority of the self. Moreover, in response to evidence that would seem to suggest that 'interest in the supernatural is a constant . . . [and] that we have mistaken for secularization what is merely a change in the mode of expression of that interest', after acknowledging that this would be an 'easy' conclusion to reach, he insists that it would be a wrong conclusion.¹¹ In actual fact, he argues, the number of people interested in new religions and alternative spiritualities is relatively small,¹² and,

8 'The single "sacred canopy" . . . is displaced by competing conceptions of the supernatural which have little to do with how we perform our social roles in what is now a largely anonymous and impersonal public domain and more to do with how we live our domestic lives. Religion may retain subjective plausibility, but it does so at the price of its objective taken-for-grantedness. Religion becomes privatised and pushed to the margins and interstices of the social order' (*ibid.*, 46-7).

9 See e.g. B. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (London, 1976).

10 See S. Bruce, 'The New Age and Secularization', in S. Sutcliffe & M. Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh, 2000), 220-36.

11 *Ibid.*, 232.

12 See S. Bruce, 'Religion in Britain at the Close of the 20th Century: A Challenge to the Silver Lining Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11 (1996), 261-274.

moreover, 'for the vast majority of people interested in the New Age milieu, participation is shallow.'¹³ He is also confident that new religions and alternative spiritualities lack ideological weight, in that, 'because they are not embedded in large organisations or sustained by a long history . . . many elements of the New Age are vulnerable to being co-opted by the cultural mainstream and trivialised by the mass media.'¹⁴ Eventually, as individualism and consumerism increase in the secular West, so the distinction between New Age religion and institutional religion will be eroded as all forms of religion become increasingly trivialised and subject to personal choice and whim.

Whilst there is undoubtedly some truth in the above assessment, there is a significant body of evidence to suggest that key aspects of its analysis are mistaken. Indeed, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have argued that the weight of evidence suggests that religion *per se* is so psychologically and socially bound up with the human condition that it is unlikely ever to disappear. If mainstream religion loses authority, new forms of religion evolve to compensate. Therefore, any apparent disappearance is illusory. Religion will sooner or later surface in other forms – in the contemporary West new religions and alternative spiritualities are some of those other forms.¹⁵ Indeed, it would seem clear that secularization theorists are too wedded to their grand metanarrative of a linear, irreversible secularization which is based on the decline of traditional organised forms of religion. Consequently, they fail to recognise the importance of new forms of spirituality. As David Lyon comments, 'faith's fate in the modern world may turn out not so much to be lost in the everyday life-paths of ordinary people, but to be lost from view in academic accounts of the modern world. The secularization of scholarship thus precedes the scholarship of secularization.'¹⁶

Bearing both the secularization thesis and the above comments in mind, it is clear that the religio-cultural context of Western Christianity presents some acute missiological problems. Not only has there been a shift away from the Judeo-Christian worldview, but also,

13 S. Bruce, 'The New Age and Secularization', 233.

14 *Ibid.*, 234.

15 See, for example, R. Stark & W. S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, 1985); R. Stark, 'Modernization, Secularization, and Mormon Success', in T. Robbins & D. Anthony (eds.), *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America* (New Brunswick, 1991), 201-18; R. Stark, 'Rationality', in W. Braun & R. T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London, 2000), 239-58.

16 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, 2000), 24.

it would seem, this shift is continuing apace. Indeed, it is entering a second stage. The first stage was disenchantment, the second is non-Christian re-enchantment. More specifically, still informed by the ideas that led the initial move away from Christianity, this is no pre-modern, theistic re-enchantment. Indeed, as with the forces of disenchantment, so with some manifestations of re-enchantment, Christianity (particularly traditional Christianity – as opposed to recently re-encharmed forms of Christianity, such as ‘creation spirituality’¹⁷) is seen as one of the principal errors to be overcome. As for disenchantment, whilst it is still with us, it is beginning to lose its appeal – not that thoroughgoing disenchantment has ever been particularly attractive for the majority of westerners. Re-enchantment, which can be traced back to eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, and can be observed in cultural trends such as the rise of the Gothic in the modern era, is showing signs of rapid growth. Put simply, I depart from strong secularization theories in that I believe disenchantment to be only the first step of a much larger process. In far greater numbers, with a great deal more commitment, and with far more significance than some secularization theorists are willing to admit, the West, whilst still characterised by disenchantment, is turning to mysticisms, to new religions of Eastern origin, to Paganism, and to various other forms of alternative spirituality. (Whilst I am aware that some sociologists are beginning to recognise that religious belief can and does thrive in modern societies and are consequently starting to think in terms of ‘sacralization’,¹⁸ I want to retain the term ‘re-enchantment’ in order to indicate the particular mix and process discussed in this paper.)

One of the effects of re-enchantment is the gap between religious ‘deviance’ and ‘respectability’ has considerably narrowed in recent years. Whilst this has been recognised by Bruce, it is interpreted in terms of secularization, rather than sacralization or re-enchantment. Because the concept of deviance ‘presupposes consensus’ (in that, there must be a consensus about what is considered ‘deviant’), the current process of re-enchantment, in which spirituality *per se* is valued and promoted (rather than any one particular spirituality), removes any such consensus – all forms of spirituality are accepted as legitimate. Again, there has been a gradual shift towards a spiritual

17 See particularly M. Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, 1983), and *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the People of the Earth* (San Francisco, 1991).

18 Even Peter Berger, the influential architect of much secularization thought, has recently changed his mind. See P. Berger, ‘The Desecularization of the World: a Global Overview’, in P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, 2000), 1-18.

milieu characterised by variety and choice. This, of course, is what Berger meant when he identified the universalisation of 'heresy' in modern Western societies,¹⁹ the literal meaning of 'heresy' being simply 'to choose'.²⁰ The point is that religion and what it means to be religious has changed. As Lyon argues, 'secularization may be used to refer to the declining strength of some traditional religious group in a specific cultural milieu, but at the same time say nothing of the spiritualities or faiths that may be growing in popularity and influence. If we view religion in typically modern, institutional fashion, other religious realities may be missed.'²¹ Indeed, I would agree with Julie Scott who argues that there is currently underway a 'reshaping of the Western religious consciousness.'²² Similarly, Robert Wuthnow identifies 'a "consciousness reformation"; that is a period in which individuals are re-addressing the claims of the old established and organised religions in the face of evidence from other religious/spiritual "resources".'²³

As to what is driving this process of re-enchantment, I want to argue that popular culture is a key factor which has a far more influential role in the shaping of contemporary worldviews than is often realised. More specifically, popular culture has a relationship with contemporary thought that is both expressive and formative.²⁴ Whether musical, visual, or literary, popular culture is both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture, in that it contributes to the formation of worldviews and, in so doing, influences what people accept as plausible. In this sense, I agree with Elizabeth Traubé when, in her discussion of the relationship between academics and producers of mass culture, she argues that it matters little whether or not media professionals are concerned with the construction of subjectivities or with the simple telling of pleasurable stories, because the stories themselves 'are vehicles for constructing subjectivities, and hence what stories are cir-

19 See P. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (London, 1979).

20 Gk. *hairein*: 'to choose'.

21 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 21.

22 J. F. Scott, 'The Truth is Out There: the Renewal of the Western Religious Consciousness', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 18 (1997), 116

23 Ibid., 125. See R. Wuthnow, *The Consciousness Reformation* (Berkeley, 1977).

24 R. Ohmann (ed.), *Making and Selling Culture* (Hanover, 1996) is an interesting volume discussing the extent 'moviemakers, television and radio producers, advertising executives, and marketers merely reflect trends, beliefs and desires that already exist in our culture, and to what extent . . . they consciously shape our culture'.

culated is socially consequential.²⁵ Whatever is intended by the producers of popular culture, there is little doubt that people are developing religious and metaphysical ideas by, for example, reflecting on themes explored in literature, film, and video games²⁶ – which, in turn, reflect popular re-enchantment (and thus might be understood as part of the process of what José Casanova has identified as ‘the deprivatization of modern religion’²⁷). However, whilst I am not claiming that this use of culture (high and low) is a new development (for it clearly is not), and whilst I don’t want to discuss the relative merits and demerits of using culture in this way, I do want to draw attention to the fact that, not only is popular culture helping people to think through theological and metaphysical issues, but also it is providing resources for the construction of plausibility structures. For example, in her intriguing book *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Jodi Dean demonstrates a close two-way relationship between popular culture and seriously held conspiracy theories regarding alien abduction. The rise of interest in UFOs and alien abductions is not only expressed in programmes such as *The X Files*, but also is stimulated and shaped by such programmes: ‘*The X Files* capitalizes on and contributes to pop-cultural preoccupation with aliens.’ ‘Apparently, significant numbers of Americans are convinced. In June 1997, 17 percent of the respondents to a *Time/CNN* poll claimed to believe in abduction.’²⁸

As to religion *per se*, there is a particularly close correlation of pop-cultural themes and narratives with the cosmologies of contemporary new religions and alternative spiritualities. For example, in a recent conversation with one of the moderators of a popular occult website, the religious significance of certain films was explained to me. *The Matrix*, for example, is widely understood to be an ‘initiatic’ film, in that it is understood to have been specifically created with certain ‘trigger’ symbols for ‘those who understand’. As such, it is one of a group of recent films which can initiate a person into a more enlightened understanding of reality. That is to say, for such occultists, understandings of reality and plausibility structures are directly shaped by such films; they have profound religious signifi-

25 E. Traube, ‘Introduction’, in *Ibid.*, xvi.

26 It is significant that interactive video games in which fantasy worlds are explored, occult symbols deciphered, new ethical frameworks constructed, and supernatural powers utilised, are not only easily outstripping the sales of films and books, but also they are being discussed as important forms of art.

27 See Woodhead & Heelas (eds.), *Religion in Modern Times*, 454–456.

28 J. Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca, 1998), 25, 30.

cance. Again, it is not difficult to demonstrate the influence of science fiction and fantasy literature upon religions and worldviews.²⁹ Whilst, more often than not, such pop-cultural influences have inspired non-institutional forms of spirituality in which the individual constructs his or her own private sacred cosmos, there are examples of science fantasy influencing the formation of particular new religions. An obvious example, is the direct relationship that exists between Robert Heinlein's 1961 science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the establishment of the first Pagan group to obtain full state and federal recognition in America, the Church of All Worlds. Indeed, taking its name from the fictional religious group described in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the movement claims that 'science fiction [is] "the new mythology of our age" and an appropriate religious literature.'³⁰

Perhaps the author who stands out as being particularly influential in this respect is J. R. R. Tolkien whose magnum opus *The Lord of the Rings*, which itself draws on the cosmology of Norse Paganism, has been read by many budding alternative religionists. As Graham Harvey has observed, whilst academic literature has been important in the construction of contemporary Paganism, 'Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy writings are more frequently mentioned by Pagans. Fantasy re-enchants the world for many people, allowing them to talk of elves, goblins, dragons, talking-trees, and magic. It also encourages contemplation of different ways of relating to the world . . . It counters the rationality of modernity which denigrates the wisdoms of the body and subjectivity. Alongside Future Fiction, the genre explores new and archaic understandings of the world, and of ritual and myth, and attempts to find alternative ways of relating technology to the needs of today.'³¹ Although, like C. S. Lewis, Tolkien was writing from a Christian perspective,³² and although many of his ideas are, strictly speaking, antithetical to the Pagan worldview, the *Lord of the Rings* has encouraged a host of Tolkienesque fantasy works which are written from an explicitly

29 According to the influential Pagan thinker Aidan Kelly, 'The only authors who are coping with the complexity of modern reality are those who are *changing the way people perceive reality*, and these are authors who are tied in with science fiction.' A. Kelly, quoted in M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and other Pagans in America Today* (Harmondsworth, 1997), 285 (my emphasis).

30 Quoted in M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 286 (my emphasis).

31 G. Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London, 1997), 181-2.

32 See C. Duriez, 'The Theology of Fantasy in Lewis and Tolkien', *Themelios* 23 (1998), 35-51.

Pagan perspective. The point is, again, that particular concepts and cosmologies explored in popular culture are not merely expressions of contemporary interests and concerns, but rather they lead, firstly, to familiarisation and fascination, and secondly, to the shaping of new plausibility structures and worldviews. Hence, whilst there is a complex network of reasons for the rising interest in, for example, Paganism, it would be difficult to argue that cult television programmes such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, or films such as *The Craft* or *Star Wars*, or books such as Pratchett's Discworld series, or the flood of fantasy video games, or even innocuous recipes for spells in girls' magazines³³ are merely expressions of a disengaged interest and not, in some way, shapers of future re-enchanted worldviews. Indeed, a recent sympathetically written article in the British teenagers' magazine *Marie-Claire* on Wicca in America makes the following interesting points: 'Witchcraft, or Wicca, is the fastest growing "religion" in the USA today. It is estimated that around a million and a half teenage Americans, often as young as thirteen, are practising Wiccans. Television programmes such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and films like *The Craft* have sparked continent-wide interest in witchcraft and awarded it the official Hollywood stamp of "cool".'³⁴ It is perhaps worth noting that, this final comment is extremely important, in that it is hard to underestimate the evangelistic significance of 'cool' in youth culture (and, it should be noted, adult culture – the distance between the two is narrowing rapidly). Popular culture has shaped the thinking of certain sections of Western society to such an extent that alternative religion and supernaturalism are perceived as 'cool'. Certainly the Pagan community are cautiously welcoming many of the increasingly sympathetic portrayals of their beliefs and mythologies in the visual and literary arts.

To follow this line of thought a little further, it is interesting to compare contemporary 'horror films' and the older films of the same genre made between the 1930s and the 1970s. Although there are still few films which wholeheartedly endorse the occult, there is a notable shift from the unsympathetic treatments of Paganism as sinister, satanic, and dangerously deviant, to more positive portrayals of it as intriguing, sexually-exciting, and darkly cool. Having said that, it should also be noted that portrayals of the occult as intriguing, mysterious, and not without an element of sexual appeal is not entirely new, in that, as I have suggested above, these themes can be found in

33 E.g. 'How to be a Witch in Your Living Room', *Marie-Claire* (November, 2000), 152. My thanks are due to Susie Clark for drawing my attention to this issue of *Marie-Claire*.

34 Jane Brum, 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', *Marie-Claire* (November, 2000), 146.

Gothic literature from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), through to Byron's and later Bram Stoker's portrayal of the iconic figure of a handsome, aristocratic vampire, the appeal of which seems perennial. However, earlier treatments of the occult tended to end with either rational explanations for apparently supernatural events,³⁵ thereby reinforcing the disenchanted worldview, or they were essentially moral tales warning against dabbling in the occult and demonstrating the power of the cross as a symbol for vanquishing evil (most obviously evident in the vampire stories), thereby reinforcing the Judeo-Christian worldview. Nowadays, the supernatural world is a fact, sceptical rationalists are made to eat their doubting words, occult powers can be used for good as well as evil, Paganism is seen as an environmentally friendly alternative to oppressive institutional religion, and the symbols of Christianity (particularly the crucifix) are shown to be impotent.

All this supports the re-enchantment thesis, it being indicative of (a) a rising interest in the spiritual and supernatural, and (b) a fundamental shift away from the Judeo-Christian worldview. Many of the spiritualities and philosophies which inform Western re-enchantment have roots in Paganism, Western esotericism, non-Christian Eastern spiritual traditions, or a combination of these. More specifically, although there is an 'Orientalization of the West',³⁶ there is also a Paganization of the West: 'nearly one fifth of all religious titles published in the UK in the 1990s has been classified as "occult".'³⁷ Again, whilst these two broad streams of spirituality which feed Western re-enchantment can and do flow separately, increasingly they are merging and flowing together. That is to say, whilst many people have beliefs that are very clearly influenced by Sufi, Taoist, Hindu, or Bud-

35 Whilst there are of course exceptions, it does seem to be the case that whilst the Enlightenment mind was fascinated with the occult, it was also dismissive of it. For example, Ann Radcliffe closed her novels with rational explanations for apparently supernatural events, and, as Gamer comments, whilst Walter Scott produced many works with occultic and supernatural themes, 'he nevertheless moves from producing texts that celebrate black magic and the supernatural to debunking these same subjects in his crucial writing – doing so with cool rationality in *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) . . .' Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge, 2000), 33.

36 See M. McLuhan & Q. Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (San Francisco, 1997), 5.

37 S. Sutcliffe, "Wandering Stars": Seekers and Gurus in the Modern World', in S. Sutcliffe & M. Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age*, 18-19.

dhist thought,³⁸ others hold basic ideas which are informed by Pagan, Western esoteric, and primal religious worldviews. Still others, who might be understood as being typically 'New Age' (a term which is becoming passé nowadays), are more overtly eclectic and syncretistic in that they will source their personally tailored spiritualities from a variety of Oriental and Pagan belief systems.³⁹ (This collapse of transcendence and the rise of religious immanentism can be understood in terms of neo-Romanticism, in that one finds many striking parallels in the thought of, for example, Goethe, Schleiermacher, and Coleridge.) As James Lewis perceptively commented some years ago, 'My impressionistic sense of the New Age is that it is merely the most visible part of a more significant cultural shift.'⁴⁰ That cultural shift, I have suggested, should be understood in terms of re-enchantment.

The overall tendency of this shift is toward a self-centric immanentist, sometimes pantheist, worldview. In this regard, I agree with much of what Paul Heelas has to say about trends in contemporary religion. There is a groundswell of 'expressive spirituality . . . spirituality which has to do with that which lies "within", rather than that which lies over-and-above the self or whatever the world might have to offer.' He continues, 'Together with the historical point that expressivism is more important today than, say, at the beginning of [the twentieth] century, a whole range of theoretical considerations mean that it is highly likely that the self, as a source of significance, will continue to grow in importance.'⁴¹

'I Want to Believe': The *Liminal* Stage of Re-enchantment

I want now to briefly comment on a stage of belief which, it seems to me, is experienced by an increasing number of westerners. Those familiar with *The X Files* will know that, in Fox Mulder's office there hangs a poster on which there is a photograph of a supposed UFO accompanied by the simple statement 'I want to believe'. These words are indicative of what I understand to be the liminal experi-

38 An excellent survey of Western teachers of Eastern traditions and of the impact of Eastern thought on the West can be found in A. Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago, 1997). See also C. Campbell, 'The Easternisation of the West', in B. Wilson & J. Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response* (London, 1999), 34-48.

39 See P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement: the Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford, 1996); S. Sutcliffe & M. Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age*.

40 J. R. Lewis, 'Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement', in J. R. Lewis & J. G. Melton (eds.), *Perspectives on the New Age* (New York, 1992), 4.

41 P. Heelas, 'Expressive Spirituality and Humanistic Expressivism', in S. Sutcliffe & M. Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age*, 242-3, 249.

ence of many contemporary westerners. In referring to the liminal stage, I am, of course, making use of the theories of the anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and, particularly, Victor Turner.⁴² Many years prior to Turner, Van Gennep identified three phases in rites of passage: the 'pre-liminal', the 'liminal', and the 'post-liminal'. The liminal, or the threshold phase, is the period during which a person passes from being an 'outsider' to being an 'insider', but at which s/he is neither one nor the other. For Turner, liminality is an extremely important, creative, and transformative period in which real and profound changes take place. During this period the old ways of thinking and the old plausibility structures are questioned and may even be torn down as new ones are adopted and created. Indeed, a rite of passage is essentially a journey from structure, through anti-structure, and back to structure as one passes from one's old ways of thinking and behaving, through a transformative stage, to a new world of ideas and practices. This liminal period of adjustment and change, which can be very brief or extended indefinitely, is a period of uncertainty, questioning, and preparation. Whilst Turner's theories have not gone unchallenged, and whilst I am not myself wedded to all that he has to say, I do think that the 'I want to believe' phase is just such a creative, anti-structural, liminal period in which many westerners find themselves as their worldviews are gradually re-enchanted. Intrigued by new forms of spirituality, many are beginning to dip into a range of spiritual and quasi-spiritual worldviews, from shamanism to UFO religion, from yoga to feng shui, from channelling to astrology, from Reiki to celebrity-centric spirituality. Unsatisfied by disenchanting worldviews, unhappy with traditional, institutional religions, inspired by an increasingly re-enchanting popular culture, but not yet certain of new ideas that seem strange and irrational to their secularized minds, they move from the pre-liminal stage of detached curiosity to a liminal 'I want to believe' stage in which new worldviews are entertained and old certainties seriously questioned. Understood in this way, it comes as little surprise to read Melanie McGrath's account of 'New Agers' being 'suspicious' of the profanity of rationalism, and a little afraid also of the pace and alienation of the times. Technology too had invaded and terrorized their spirits. The world, to them, seemed to be in the process of decline. They felt overwhelmed by loss – the loss of intimacy, the loss of community, the loss of symbolism, the loss of belief. Disillusioned by conventional religion, which called into question

42 A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, tr. by M. B. Vizedom & G. Cafee (Chicago, 1960); V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Ithaca, 1991).

their right and duty to think as individuals, horrified by the rise of Christian fundamentalism, they had decided to make their own way towards meaningfulness.⁴³

Furthermore, Turner observed that during periods of liminality people experience a sense of *communitas*, a sense of being united in a community of shared experience. Whilst there is not the space to develop the significance of this particular point for my argument (although I will discuss the importance of community below), it is worth noting that such liminoid *communitas* is evident, not only in networks of people with similar alternative religious beliefs, but also in the mass responses evoked by events such as Live Aid (1985) and tragedies such as the death of Diana, Princess of Wales (1997).⁴⁴

Some Missiological Implications

Much of this paper has been devoted to an overview of the fluid and complex context in which we live as Christians. The argument has been that, whilst the secularization thesis needs to be taken seriously, it is an inadequate and flawed analysis of the contemporary West. Far more notice needs to be taken of the culture of re-enchantment which is beginning to shape the Western mind. In particular, new religions and alternative spiritualities should not be dismissed as superficial froth or the dying embers of religion in the West, but are rather the sparks of a new and increasingly influential way of being religious, a way of being religious which is shaping and being shaped by popular culture. Just because people are leaving organised Christianity, does not mean that they are abandoning spirituality. As Lyon has observed, 'Religious life is not shrinking, collapsing, or evaporating, as predicted by modernistic secularization theorists. Rather, in deregulated and post-institutional forms, the religious life draws upon multifarious resources with consequences, for better or worse, that are hard to predict, but that cry out for understanding.'⁴⁵ My argument in this section is essentially twofold: (a) the church in the West needs to seek understanding and, having done so, (b) it needs to seek appropriate ways to live and to communicate the gospel. The following are a few modest suggestions for consideration.

43 M. McGrath, *Motel Nirvana: Dreaming of the New Age in the American Desert* (London, 1996), 226.

44 See C. Sugden (ed.), *Death of a Princess* (London, 1998); J. Richards, S. Wilson, & L. Woodhead (eds.), *Diana: the Making of a Media Saint* (London, 1999); J. Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle, 2000), ch.5; D. J. Davies, 'Popular Reaction to the Death of Princess Diana', *Expository Times* 109 (1997-1998), 173-6.

45 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 19.

Firstly, many (particularly conservative) theologians, apologists, and missiologists, overly exercised about the rationalist impact of the Enlightenment project, have neglected the subtle and pervasive impact of Romantic streams of thought.⁴⁶ As such, they have tended (a) to accept too readily the disenchantment thesis, and (b) to be unconcerned about, even dismissive of mystical and immanentist thought.

Secondly, if my analysis of the West is at least partially correct, then it is important that the liminal or 'I want to believe' stage of faith commitment is understood. As we have seen, not only is a person more receptive to new spiritual worldviews during this period, but also it is obviously far more difficult to introduce Christianity to one who has passed from liminality to post-liminal commitment. Moreover, it is crucial to account for the fact that this is a sensitive and fragile period of faith development. Whilst it would not be true of all alternative religionists, McGrath's comments regarding her time with American New Agers are insightful:

they dreamed of finding intimacy, community, love, and a simple moral world. They set about to turn their lives into havens for the satisfaction of positive emotions. They ran from pain and 'negativity', but they lived lives of terrible self-consciousness as a result, lives of over reflection, of constant doubts about the authenticity of their experience. All their hugs were thus contingent and their loving neurotic Fear prowled about them, self-consciousness and literalism ate them up. They concerned themselves with living in the moment merely because they were fearful of the future, and often of the past. They had no stomach for pain or suffering of any kind, but this in itself could not prevent it. The New Age beliefs that sustained them were so radically at odds with their own experience that they had constantly to reinvent their experience The self-deception they routinely demanded of themselves showed up as a kind of nervousness behind the New Age mask of positivity While I met few New Agers who seemed, on the surface, down at heart, I met none who were particularly joyful either.⁴⁷

It also needs to be recognised that this is a phase during which old authorities are not trusted and generally understood to be overly monopolistic, authoritarian, and patriarchal. As such, generally speaking, when communicating the Christian faith in the West, confrontational evangelism, rationalist apologetics, and dogmatically expressed exclusivist theologies are inappropriate. Rather, what needs to be appreciated is the value of genuine friendship, humility regarding one's knowledge of another's worldview, and a palpable desire to understand.

46 This is, to some extent, evident in Newbigin's work.

47 M. McGrath, *Motel Nirvana*, 226-7.

Thirdly, whilst much spirituality is self-centric, there is, as McGrath's comments indicate, a desire for fellowship and community (whether on the internet,⁴⁸ at retreat centres, or, preferably, at frequent local gatherings). As I noted at the end of the previous section, there is a close relationship between liminality and *communitas*. Hence, I would argue that some discussions of contemporary spirituality tend to overly rely on the caricature of 'rampant individualism' and fail to recognise the significance of a person's sense of 'belonging' to a community with shared values and goals, in which his or her ideas can be taken seriously, in which beliefs are apparently verified by other believers, and in which religiously significant experiences are shared and evoked.

Bearing this in mind, root and branch changes may be required in the local church. The work of Grace Davie, James Beckford, and other sociologists would seem to suggest that people value community and that, therefore, it is *initially* more important for westerners to belong, rather than to believe. Hence, I suggest there is a pressing need to establish open communities in which individuals can belong before they believe. Indeed, in a recent study of disillusioned Christians and those who eventually exit evangelical churches in New Zealand, Alan Jamieson has shown the value of small, supportive home-based groups outside institutional structures.⁴⁹ This seems to me to be a healthy and constructive way forward for both church leavers and liminal spiritual explorers with no particular commitment to Christianity.

Fourthly, the presentation of abstract theological constructs, the communication of systems of belief, and the refutation of other plausibility structures in the style of modernist apologetics, the methodology behind which was developed in a passing culture of disenchantment, simply lacks persuasive force. As I was recently informed by one New Ager (who didn't like the academic style of my own writing), such arguments are unconvincing remnants of 'the passing age of left brain thinking.' Nowadays, people need to see a religion working, need to *feel* its truth, need to *experience* its ability to spiritually satisfy. Hence, the future of *effective* Christian mission in the re-enchanted West is likely to focus on local groups/communities functioning as 'the hermeneutic of the gospel' (Lesslie Newbigin). The role of the Christian academic and the minister in the West will be redirected to the support and facilitation of such groups/communi-

48 See L. L. Dawson & J. Hennebery, 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14 (1999), 17-40.

49 A. Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Churches* (Wellington, 2000).

ties. Whilst the implications of this line of thought may be unsettling and involve methodologies we feel uncomfortable with, I am convinced that greater applied theological, interdisciplinary thinking is required. Charles Kraft speaks of his frustration (a frustration shared by many Christian workers) that 'much of the theology taught to us in our home churches, local colleges, and seminaries turns out to be extremely difficult to use in cross-cultural contexts *in the form in which we learned it.*' It is worrying that he often 'found it necessary to ignore many of the issues about which our professors were exercised.'⁵⁰ Academic theology that fails to serve the church in its missiological task is an esoteric luxury Western Christians cannot afford. Stanley Hauerwas is right to remind us that theology is not more important than the church. 'Theology can too easily appear as "ideas", rather than the kind of discourse that must, if it is to be truthful, be embedded in the practices of actual lived communities.'⁵¹

Fifthly, although it should be a point too obvious to make, the communicator needs to understand those to whom s/he communicates and the context in which that communication takes place. At this point I depart from missiologies which, for example, seem to assume that an English speaking westerner is in a position to communicate with other Anglophone westerners. Newbigin, for example, claims that the missionary problem for Christians in the West 'is not one of communication. We already know the language because it is our own language and we use the words every day with the meaning that our culture gives them.'⁵² This immediately raises the question, What is *our* culture? Is there only *one* culture? In actual fact, there are several cultures and several languages. Moreover, just because most people speak English in the West, does not mean that they all speak the same language. That is to say, particularly in the world of new religions and alternative spiritualities, the words I use can change shape as they pass from my mouth to another's ears and vice versa. I may be in a position to decide what is said, but I am not in a position to decide what is heard. Similarly, in trying to understand the beliefs of other communities, it is very easy for me to assume that, because I speak the same language, the words I use carry the same meaning.

In order to understand how one's words will be heard, there needs to be some understanding of the worldview into which they are trav-

50 C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York, 1979), 13-4.

51 S. Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh, 1998).

52 L. Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Edinburgh, 1994), 164.

elling.⁵³ To this end, the serious study of a person's religion and culture is required. This in turn requires a critical understanding of one's own presuppositions, the cultivation of empathy, and a commitment to long-term dialogue within the context of a genuine, natural, and unconditional friendship. Needless to say, uninformed resistance, anti-cult condemnation, and patronising attitudes are not conducive to understanding and communication.

The skills and methodologies developed in the discipline of religious studies, not theology, should be utilised. In particular, the aim should always be the phenomenological ideal of objectivity and judgement-free analysis. When the study of religions moves beyond this, thereby giving up the pursuit of an objective understanding, it becomes a theological interpretation of religion. Whilst, from within the discipline of systematic theology, it is crucial that theological interpretations of religions are constructed, Christian theology is not the place to begin when one is seeking to understand what another person believes and practices. Although absolute neutrality is not an option (in that no scholar can be purely neutral), the value of seeking scholarly objectivity is hard to underestimate. In short, my argument is that an accurate understanding of a faith or culture can be most effectively realised through sensitive study and encounter in which the Christian aims, as far as is possible, to empathetically imagine his or her way 'into' that faith: to see as the believer sees, and to feel as the believer feels. Just as Christians would prefer/expect others to spend time seeking to understand the Christian faith from the inside in order to avoid caricatures and misunderstanding, so they should do no less when seeking to understand non-Christian beliefs: '... in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you ...' (Matt.7.14). Indeed, it is not only the Christian's duty, but also it is crucial to an effective missiology, that every attempt is made to secure the most accurate and sophisticated understanding possible. I would even go so far as to argue that, if you cannot empathise with a person, if you cannot feel the pull of their religion, then it is going to be very difficult for you to relate the gospel meaningfully to them.

This level of commitment and empathy with those of other faith

53 As Kraft makes clear, the significance of an individual's worldview is hard to overestimate: 'Cultures pattern perceptions of reality into conceptualizations of what reality can or should be, what is regarded as actual, probable, possible, and impossible. These conceptualisations form what is termed the "worldview" of that culture The worldview lies at the very heart of culture, touching, interacting with, and strongly influencing every other aspect of the culture . . . [The] worldview of a culture or subculture [is] the "central control box" of that culture.' *Christianity in Culture*, 53.

traditions seems to have been central to Paul's missiology. 'Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law, but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Cor. 9:19-22). Whilst it may be a good place to begin, it takes a great deal more than reading a handbook of religions to enter into the world and experience of others. There is a need for accommodation, for inculturation, for incarnation, for the type of informed appreciation of contemporary religion and culture that Paul encourages and demonstrates. Again, in his address to the meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34), Paul took pains to span the cultural chasm between himself and the Athenians. There are few more effective ways of shutting a person out and confirming their beliefs about offensive and dogmatic Christians, than condemning their ideas, judging their religious experience as counterfeit, and demonstrating a lack of love and understanding; all of which unhelpful attitudes are frequent with regard to new religions and alternative spiritualities. For example, Stuart Rose's wide-ranging survey of those involved in New Age belief and practice provides evidence that New Agers feel demonised by some Christian writers who belittle their experiences.⁵⁴ As a result, their negative understanding of Christianity is, for the most part, confirmed, and they are encouraged to explore the occult subculture further.

Finally, I would argue that, ideally, empathy for a particular worldview and culture should arise naturally in a person, and that this will happen if that person already has an interest and 'feel' for that worldview or culture. That is to say, for a variety of reasons (such as previous personal history, interests, musical taste, knowledge of an area etc.), an individual will find it easier to empathise with one faith, or type of spirituality, or aspect of contemporary culture than another; it is that faith, type of religion, or aspect of contemporary culture that s/he will, in the final analysis, most comprehensively grasp. If, for example, you know nothing about the club scene, hate trance music, cannot appreciate the force of contemporary values, and are bewildered by the appeal of *The X Files*, then you should perhaps avoid a

54 S. Rose, 'An Examination of the New Age Movement: Who is Involved and What Constitutes its Spirituality', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13 (1998), 19.

life devoted to dialogue with youth culture – there are plenty of others who are eminently qualified. To truly understand and to effectively communicate, one must be able to get under the skin of a culture, must feel drawn to people who belong to that culture, must be able to appreciate the attraction of that culture, and must be able to interpret the language of that culture. Detached head knowledge and half-digested facts are not enough.

Abstract

Are we witnessing the 'disenchantment of the world' (Weber)? Eroded by the forces of modernization, the inevitable demise of religion in the Western world is the contention of the secularization thesis, at least in its strongest form, and often assumed to be the greatest challenge facing Western Christianity. The argument developed in this paper is that, whilst there is much in the secularization thesis that demands attention, its analysis of the West is flawed. In particular, there is a failure to grasp the significance of popular culture, new religions, and alternative forms of spirituality. Rather than secularisation/disenchantment the West is currently witnessing 're-enchantment'. That this is so has immense implications for theology, missiology, and apologetics.

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Ian Randall is Director of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies at the International Baptist Seminary, Prague and Tutor in Church History and Spirituality at Spurgeons College, London.

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