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A Newer New Age

Irony and the Enchantment of Atheism in Syntheist Religion

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Abstract: The purpose of this thesis is to study how the stipulations of religious thought changes as society gets increasingly digitalized, life become more virtual and people get interconnected through the internet. The thesis engages with the new religious movement Syntheism, which is considered to be an example of said changes. Syntheism holds that information is holy, the internet is God, and although gods might only be imaginative beings, they are nevertheless very real. As a methodological starting point, Syntheism is viewed as a discursive complex, consisting of several discursive trends that together makes up the ideological system. The focus of this study is the esoteric currents present in the book *Syntheism – att skapa gud i internetåldern* (2014), and how these are legitimated through strategies of epistemology, as suggested by Hammer. The stated question is “How are the three strategies of *tradition, science* and *experience* employed within Syntheism in order to legitimate its system of thought?” The results of the study are that Syntheism claims to belong to a philosophical tradition of mobilism, present in Western philosophy as well as in Zoroastrianism, that considers change and movement the fundamental conditions of the cosmos, instead of the existence of static objects. This is thought to be confirmed by quantum physics, where the wave is given priority before the particle, and reality is seen as indeterminate rather than predictable. Finally, the mobilistic quality of the universe can be experienced first handedly through the use of psychedelic drugs to reach the mental state of the “infinite now”, where the subjective sense of self is transcended and the Syntheist experiences herself as united with the cosmos. All in all, this amounts to an enchanted world view, where every phenomena in existence are seen as interconnected, and the borders between spirit and matter are broken down. There is also an ironic streak in Syntheism. Although claiming that gods exist as representations of the existential principles of the universe, it is simultaneously held that these gods are mere psychological projections upon existence in order for human beings to fill it with meaning. This thesis argues that the ironic streak is a mode of religiosity that is characteristic of the post-modern era, aimed at retaining the existential meaning found in religious thought while at the same time avoiding to actually believe in it, thereby not risking the embarrassment of believing in what is false.

Keywords: religious reconfiguration, contemporary esotericism, irony, atheism, discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

This thesis will discuss the new religious movement called “Syntheism”, and how it can be seen to represent a radical reconstruction of religious imagination as a result of the rapid spread of information technologies and the digitalization of society. Syntheism places the internet at the heart of its cosmology, arguing that it is the basic metaphor for the interconnected and relational aspects of reality. It also holds, in what might be quite controversial but at the same time also the very characteristic for the late-modern age, that while God is nothing more than a human construct, it is through the Internet that God is realized. It is a religion that is something as paradoxical as a theistic atheism, or the synthesis between atheism and pantheism; thus the name “Syntheism”. The movement poses an interesting challenge for scholars of religion that might become an increasingly pressing concern as the world gets increasingly interconnected: what happens to religion when people starts suspecting that, really, it is all fake?

1.1. Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to analyse transformations of religious thought related to the rapid spread of information technologies in the contemporary world, by using the fledgling religious movement Syntheism as an example. The primary source material will be the book *Syntheism – att skapa gud i internetåldern* (english title *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*, published in 2014), written by Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist. *Creating God in the Internet Age* is the fourth book written by the duo, the other being *The Netocrats* (2000), *The Body Machines* (2002) and *The Global Empire* (2009), all exploring certain aspects of the impact that the emerging information society will have and already have had upon humanity's way of being in and relating to the world. As the latest in the line, *Creating God in the Internet Age*, deals with the importance of spirituality in the age of information, and is aimed at fleshing out a theological structure for the already existing religious movement of Syntheism.

Due to being of fairly recent origins, founded in the early 2010's, there has been little to no research made upon Syntheism. The one exception consists of a master's thesis written by Fredrik Karlsson at Stockholm University.¹ Karlsson's study is based first and foremost on interviews with Alexander Bard, and co-Syntheist Joel Lindefors, focusing on questions regarding the origins, identity and proclaimed purpose of the movement. The interviews are then complemented by various blogg posts, online articles and pod casts where Syntheists, mostly especially Alexander

¹ Fredrik Karlsson, "Religion in the Making, or The Modern Prometheus. Om Syntheiströrelsen och samtida religion och religiositet", Master's thesis, Stockholm University, 2014.

Bard, are discussing their worldview. Karlsson concludes that Syntheism is radically different from traditional forms of religion and has arisen as a “consequence of rampaging individualism, commercialism, globalization and the developing internet society.” Despite engaging with a fairly ambitious empirical material, Karlsson's research is ultimately of a descriptive kind. He lets his informants speak, and doesn't take it much further than that. Rather than analysing their statements, or trying to put them into an historical or sociological perspective, he simply takes their words for fact. The aim of the present thesis, however, is to go beyond mere description, and instead provide an analytical account of how the Syntheist movement seeks to present and position itself within the contemporary religious and cultural landscape. This will amount to a sort of “temperature check” of contemporary spirituality; how is religious meaning created, legitimized and made relevant in the late-modern age, and to whom is this meaning actually relevant?

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Syntheist movement is that its members are all well aware that they are participating in an invented tradition. Even more perplexing is that they are fully aware that their enchanted cosmology is in itself invented. There are few, if any, claims of hidden or higher knowledge involved, and the founders do not conceal that they perceive God not as an entity that is “real”, but rather as a very imagined being, that they believe in just because it makes them feel good. Claims to realism are, it seems, quite irrelevant to them. Nonetheless, the movement still attracts members, well educated, intellectual people who yet seem to take the whole thing quite seriously. This obviously challenges our conception of faith-based religion as being a matter of belief in a set of truth-claims. As I intend to show, this ironic stance towards not only religiosity but to life itself is actually a pervading feature of our current age, and Syntheism thus serves as an excellent case study for understanding this aspect of contemporary culture.

As a method, I will use discourse analysis to break down and structure the contents of *Creating God in the Internet Age*. As a theoretical basis, I will turn to the “strategies of epistemology” suggested by Hammer, in order to show how truth is negotiated and legitimated within Syntheist thought. Hammer has argued that in order to be established as legitimate systems of faith, invented esoteric movements tend to construct a perennial philosophy of truth, borrowing elements from various religious traditions as well as from natural science, in addition to prioritizing subjective experience as a means of understanding this truth.² Thus, the stated question reads as follows: “How are the three strategies of *tradition*, *science* and *experience* employed within Syntheism in order to legitimate its system of thought?” These strategies, along with the approach to discourse analysis, will be further discussed in section 2. As a referential point, I will view

² Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge. Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

Syntheism as an expression of the contemporary esoteric spiritual culture of the late-modern Western society, most commonly understood in terms of the New Age movement. Three main esoteric ideological currents that figure within Syntheism will be delineated in this thesis, as well as one none-esoteric, and discussed in section 3. Before moving on, however, I intend to provide some background regarding the characteristics of the age of information and how this relates to the study of religion.

1.2. Religion in a Digitized Age

To a greater or lesser extent, a majority of the people of the industrialized world, and an ever increasing number in the developing countries, live in a state of being constantly connected to each other through the vast, flowing communication network that is daily referred to as the internet. Through the use of computers, and perhaps even more importantly smartphones, people now not only have constant access to an enormous amount of information in the form of news papers, videos, sound files, dictionaries, and electronic libraries, but are also able to share information with a number of people that stretches far beyond the reach any form of “real-life”, analogue network, through the use of social media. This connectedness is bound to exert a huge impact on the way human beings conceive of their world, not only because ideas are circulated much faster and between far more people than before, but because the abundance of information challenges the very foundations of how we see communication, right to information, and the even the very meaning of being human.³ Perhaps it is already irrelevant to speak of our “access” to information - the stage where information was something we simply accessed whenever we needed it and then put away when we no longer didn't may already be past - and the fitting term may be to speak of how we “interact with” and “relate to” information. How then, will this development influence our way of thinking about religion, and how are we to study it? Of course, there is no shortage of research concerning religions and religious people on the internet. In the *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: Religion on the Internet*, five chapters are devoted to Christianity on the internet, four to Islam in the internet, and one chapter to Buddhism and New Age spirituality respectively.⁴ However, we can also turn our gaze towards entirely new religious phenomena, systems of faith which have not been merely adapted to the age of information, but actually been molded in it, for whom the internet is not a only a tool for communication, but the basis for religious thought. An

3 This is not least apparent in the controversies regarding on the one hand file sharing and on the other surveillance that has been on-going topics for over a decade. These controversies points to reconfigurations regarding ownership over what once was considered quite abstract categories, original ideas and personal privacy respectively, which are increasingly taking the form of ever more concrete, but yet decreasingly obtainable, objects.

4 Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson & Enzo Pace (eds.), *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion vol. 6: Religion on the Internet*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

excellent example is Crow's study of paganism in the online virtual game Second Life. For the pagans in the Second Life world, computer technology is in itself something magical and spiritual. One of the players uses computer programming as “part of his magical practice, which included creating scripts for avatars in Second Life to use in ritual.”⁵ Another player discusses the seemingly unlimited possibilities for developing completely new forms of religious rituals when not confined by the limitations of “RL”, or “real life”.

The environs always dictated ritual in RL, so perhaps different environs should dictate different ritual technique ... I think imagination can get around mostly anything and electricity has always been an amazing channel for spiritual energy. We might actually find a way to use it [Second Life] that will exceed our results in RL.⁶

The virtual world is actually seen as more spiritually significant, perhaps even more “real”, than the one lived in the flesh.

A second example of religion whose existence is based on the internet is that of the Missionary Church of Kopimism. As this movement has arisen from much the same soil as Syntheism has, the technologically advanced and education oriented present day Sweden, it might be the most relevant example for this thesis. Born out of the Anti-Piracy movement, Kopimists holds that the copying and sharing of information makes up a fundamentally holy practice, and that they because of this belief should be exempt from copyright regulations. The movement sparked quite a controversy when they were recognized as an official faith community by the Swedish Government in 2011. The movement has often been considered as somewhat of a prank, and has been labelled a “a political adventure”, or a “PR-stunt”, but also accused of being a “devaluation of [presumably 'serious'] religion”.⁷ In his study of the movement, Sinnreich shows that Kopimism really did start out as a joke. Christian Engström, representative of the Swedish Pirate Party, has explained that the idea originated when a prosecutor in the Pirate Bay trials likened the piracy movement to “some sort of religious sect” (words that of course carry strong negative connotations in the highly secularized Sweden). “Someone thought it was funny and said 'Oh yeah, we're Kopimists.' A year or two later, someone got it registered as an official religion.”⁸ Thus, many people hold that the movement challenges not so much conceptions of religious practice and spirituality, but rather of bureaucratic typologization and governmental officialism. However, just because it *started out* as a joke, does

5 John L. Crow, "Accessing the Astral With a Monitor and Mouse" in *Contemporary Esotericism* (eds. Asprem & Granholm) (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 179.

6 Crow, *Accessing the Astral*, 178.

7 Per-Erik Nilsson & Victoria Enkvist, "Techniques of religion-making in Sweden: The case of the Missionary Church of Kopimism" in *Critical Research on Religion* vol. 4:1 (2015), 3.

8 Aram Sinnreich, "Sharing in spirit: Kopimism and the digital Eucharist" in *Information, Communication and Society* (2015), 2.

this mean that Kopimism is *just* a joke. Engström admits that as the time went on, he and others started taking Kopimism more and more seriously. While many of the movement's sacred texts do showcase a style of seemingly absurd humour, one, for example, being called “POwr, Broccoli and KOPIMI” urges followers to “Give yourself cult status” as well as “Be careful of burning kittens”,⁹ the discussions conducted by the members on topics regarding morality, ethics and existential issues are many times both serious and sincere. They actively reflect on the logical contradiction of the right to freedom of information and the right to freedom from surveillance, and typically argues that freedom to information regards such information that is beneficial for all of society. For example, one of the members reasons that the possibility of sharing nuclear launch codes is not a moral problem, because since “no one wants to launch them [nuclear missiles]”, nobody would actually share such codes.¹⁰ Likewise, the right of the individual to keep information private that he or she does not want to share must be respected, because the sharing of private information against somebody's will would be “detrimental to society.”

Gordon Lynch has suggested that religion in contemporary society should be analysed as cultural systems which ground such concepts as ultimate meaning, truth and power into relatable objects.¹¹ In the Missionary Church of Kopimism, information is made out as just such an object. It is something that quickly is becoming the fundamental ground for meaning and the basic understanding of man's place in the world, and thus new ways of relating to information is being developed. “The belief system, though still being inchoate, bases its moral precepts on a fundamentally spiritual understanding of information and its role in human affairs, and draws some nuanced ethical guidelines around the acts of producing and disseminating information.” Information and the sharing thereof is given such an important role in the Kopimist's belief system that its members have a hard time to describe it as anything but holy, “because it's that big of a deal.”¹² Sinnreich's conclusion is that although having a humorous character, Kopimism is becoming a value system that “allows people living in information-rich environments to make complex ethical decisions with a moral focus that is not addressed by traditions religions and not prioritized by today's conflicting and often politicized legal codes.”¹³ Goes to show that a joke can be taken a really a long way.

9 Sinnreich, *Sharing in spirit*, 3-4.

10 A view that although being quite naive, nevertheless tells of a will to engage in such complex ethical conundrums. Sinnreich, *Sharing in spirit*, 7.

11 I have previously discussed this concept of objects of sacredness in more detail in Wedin, "Video Games and Contemporary Esotericism – A study of eco-spirituality and the Grand Polemical Narrative", 2014. See also Gordon Lynch "What is this 'Religion'?" in *The Study of Religion and Popular Culture*, 2007.

12 Sinnreich, *Sharing in spirit*, 5.

13 Sinnreich, *Sharing in spirit*, 7.

1.3. Syntheism

Syntheism and Kopimism are products of mostly the same cultural soil, the present day Sweden. Sweden is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world,¹⁴ where internet use and technological gadgets such as smart phones and personal computers have become more or less second nature to its inhabitants. This is not least due to the active efforts of the Swedish government to make information technologies accessible to the entirety of its population,¹⁵ and a high level of education (more than one third of the population have some form of higher degree).¹⁶ On another note, Swedish people are generally held to be some of the most irreligious in the world, especially when regarding traditional forms of worship.¹⁷ On the whole, one could say that people in Sweden are highly connected, knows a whole lot but doesn't really believe in anything very much. This, it turns out, is a splendid breeding ground for internet based religiosity.

Syntheism has no author and no founder. At least, that is what is continuously stressed by its members. In an environment where information exists in abundance and is freely distributed, there is little point in claiming any original authorship. The role of the Syntheist agent is seen not as that of creation, but rather as of reproduction, modification and sharing. Still, it is hard to think of Alexander Bard, co-author of *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*, as anything but the founder of the movement.¹⁸ The idea struck him when he attended the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. At the time of the burning of The Man, Bard was sitting in a coach, being high on drugs that, according to himself, gave the sensation of “having a female orgasm for six hours”.¹⁹ The whole experience, he says, completely changed the way in which he thought of religion and spirituality.

14 The Global Information Technology Report of 2015 puts Sweden as the third most network ready country globally. World Economic Forum, "The Global Information Technology Report 2015", <http://reports.weforum.org/global-information-technology-report-2015/report-highlights/>.

15 Efforts that interestingly enough have been ideologically motivated. In a report from 2003, it is stated that there are "several democratic aspects" that motivates investing in the expansion of internet access. Swedish Government, "Digitala klyftor - förr, nu och i framtiden", http://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/3cc54152b4134867bb6a91a9d59d65fc/digitala-klyftor---forr-nu-och-i-framtiden_3.

16 SCB, "Utbildningsstatistisk årsbok", http://www.scb.se/sv/_hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/utbildning-och-forskning/befolkningens-utbildning/utbildningsstatistisk-arsbok/64475/64482/behallare-for-press/379597/

17 Phil Zuckerman, "Why are danes and swedes so irreligious?" in *Nordic Journal of Religion in Society* vol. 22:1, 2009.

18 Apart from his new found role as religious leader, Bard has been a visible public figure in Sweden for the better part of the last three decades, having had a successful music career as both an artist and producer, stirred up controversy as a proponent of the liberalisation of both narcotics and prostitution, openly confessed to Satanism as well as Zoroastrianism, played the part of the mean member of the jury of the Swedish Idol tv-show, and as of late profiled himself as a cyber philosopher. His partner in writing, Jan Söderqvist, is somewhat less visible in the public sphere, although he does work as a film critic for Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet. Because of Söderqvist's rather toned down role, Bard will be considered the main spokesperson for Syntheism, even though they have produced *Creating God in the Internet Age* together.

19 "What if the internet is God? Alexander Bard at TEDxStockholm" YouTube video, 5:33, posted by TEDx Talks, November 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXA7TewF53w>.

I was sitting there [at Burning Man] when The Man got burned, and there were, what, like 40 000 people there or something... so I was sitting there with my American friends and I just thought 'Okay, this is like a fucking religious experience', and they all go 'Yeah, of course it is'. Ok, so you guys, 70 000 people, you go out in the desert and you manifest a religion? 'Yeah, yeah we do'... So my friend, Henrietta from Canada, she is sitting right next to me, and she looks over and says 'That's your fucking next book, isn't it Bard?' And I just realize, yeah, it is.²⁰

Since then Bard has been, apart from playing an active role in developing the Syntheological thought, going out of his way to try to spread the message. He has conducted three TEDx-talks regarding the subject, as well as having appeared in radio shows, pod casts and Swedish television to talk about Syntheism. The book *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*, which was written together with Jan Söderqvist, is just the latest manifestation of his engagement in making the movement spread and grow. Of their book, he says that it is written to provide a theoretical foundation for taking the movement to the next level. They are not claiming to be “inventors” of any original thinking or practice, but rather as the ones that systematizes already existing ideas floating around. “What's so good about Syntheism is that no one even knows how it started. Suddenly it was practised among people, so who then is the inventor? It's nobody. I'm a theoretician among many, I'm apart of a dialouge.” Bard sees himself and Söderqvist as nothing but humble “civil-servants of the practice.”²¹

As of 2014, Syntheism in Scandinavia is practised in three congregations, located in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Copenhagen. The local members gather for masses each Sunday, but there has also been larger gatherings with as many as 100-150 people attending.²² Aside from their engagement in the material world, the movement has unsurprisingly also a presence in the virtual one. There is the web page *syntheism.org*, containing blog posts, guidelines for performing Syntheist rituals, suggestions for philosophic literature, and a free English version of *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*. There are two groups on Facebook: *Synteisterna - Forumet för religiösa ateister* which is in Swedish, and *The Syntheist Movement - The Religion of Spiritual Atheism* in which discussions are conducted in English. The groups consists of 886 and 1945 members respectively (as of 2015-11-14), of which a majority appears to be quite highly educated. Several of them claims to be affiliated with a university, or to have highly qualified jobs such as engineer or computer programmer. Lastly there is a mailing list and a Google-group that are reserved for the “inner core”

20 "The Syntheist Movement :: Alexander Bard at the 2015 Burning Man European Leadership Summit." YouTube video, 1:13, posted by Burning Man, May 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdmclHjdfDc>.

21 Karlsson, *Religion in the Making*, 19.

22 Karlsson, *Religion in the making*, 20.

of the movement.²³

1.4. Thesis Outline

This introductory chapter has provided a background for understanding the basic conditions of the cultural environment that Syntheism has arisen from. The rapid integration of information technologies in our everyday life does radically restructure the ways in which we humans understand reality and our own place in it, which is of course bound to effect the ways in which we understand religion. Because Sweden is among the most digitized and at the same time secularized countries on earth, it can be suspected that it is in this cultural landscape that the hyper-real reinterpretations of religion will be most radical and visible. Digital information technology offers new challenges and moral conundrums that are not necessarily addressed by traditional religions, as well as new models of understanding reality through.

Section 2 of the thesis will discuss the methodological and theoretical implications of discourse analysis. Syntheism is considered a discursive complex, an interrelated set of discourses, and will thus be discursively analysed in order for its ideology to be broken down. As a theoretical basis, I will use the strategies of epistemology, suggested by Hammer, in order to show how Syntheism is discursively legitimizing its truth claims.

In section 3, I will account for three esoteric ideologies that make up Syntheist discourse. These are; a spiritualized form of *individualism*, where ultimate authority is assigned to the individual subject, who is considered the ground for authenticity, meaning and truth, and whose choices and preferences may not be put to question; a *holistic interpretation of science*, where science is thought of as pointing towards a spiritual understanding of the natural world; and *entheogenic shamanism*, in which psychedelic drugs is seen as a means of achieving a higher, more profound knowledge regarding the nature of truth. This section also discusses the *ironic mode of religiosity* that characterises the post-modern age, where the ironic stance is presented as an alternative to fundamentalism.

The analysis is conducted in section 4, 5, and 6. Section 4 seeks to explain the Syntheist system of thought. The movement is based on the thought that life in the modern, rationalised world is one of isolation and alienation, where meaning can't be retained. The cure for this ailment of modernity is the community making powers of religion, which has the potential to bind people together in warm, sincere and above all meaningful relationships. Through religion, existence can be experienced as enchanted and meaningful, and one's own individual identity replaced with a

²³ Karlsson, Religion in the making, 2.

dividual identity, where a person is not defined in isolation, but in his or her's relation to the whole. Although dealing with several gods, it is emphasized that Syntheists does not actually believe in said gods. Rather, they are but imaginative projections of the Syntheists' desires and wishes, but that, however, does not make them false. The pantheon of Syntheism is considered to be true, not because it exist in any objective meaning of the word, but simply because it feels good to believe in them. Because of this, Syntheism is thought of as the religion for atheists.

In section 5, *Creating God in the Internet Age* is viewed through the lens of the strategies of epistemology. The book constructs a perennial philosophy that sees the universe as monistic, mobilistic and interconnected. A plethora of Western philosophers are referred to in order to construct a mobilistic tradition of thought, where existence is thought to be in constant motion with no fixed parameters. Quantum physics are thought of as proving that everything in existence are interrelated with each other, and nothing exists in isolation. This aspect of reality can ultimately be experienced through mystical techniques, most prominently through the use of psychedelic drugs.

The result of the analysis is then further discussed in section 6, where I demonstrate that although trying quite fiercely to distance itself from the New Age movement, Syntheism actually resembles the New Age quite closely, and can be considered an intellectualized form of New Age thought adjusted to the internet society. A sort of Newer New Age. The movement is also shown to be fundamentally ironic in its way of being religious. Religion is not genuinely believed in, but adhered to in an ironic way simply because it feels good and brings meaning to the life of the Syntheists. This is argued to actually be a consequence of existing in a society where no absolute values are allowed to exist, and all truths are eventually deemed false. Irony is thus a strategy of retaining meaning by keeping a distance to a set truth claims, to avoid to be proved wrong.

Finally, section 7 concludes the thesis by summing up its results, as well as discussing their possible implications for future research.

2. On How to do Things With Words

As this thesis considers Syntheism as an example of how religious thought is reconfigured in the contemporary society, it will for methodological purposes be considered an ideological complex, where a number of discourses, practices and beliefs are tied together to form an intracoherent world view. Because of this the present study will focus mainly on the book *Syntheism – Att skapa gud i internetåldern* (english title *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age*). The book was released in 2014 by Bookmark, and spans 380 pages. The book contains the most thorough and ideologically dense representation of the movement's ideology available, compared to the rather scattered content of blog posts and social media links. Although it is claimed that there are no founders or definite authorities within the movement, the fact that Alexander Bard has played such an active role in promoting it through various TEDx-talks, podcasts and televised interviews, as well as the book having been made freely available on the Syntheist web page, suggests that it is being presented as the closest thing to an “official” line of Syntheist thought. The approach to ritual presented on the web page, the blog posts and the information that is shared between the members of the social media groups will, although certainly being interesting in their own right, not be part of the analysis. The reading is based upon the Swedish edition of the book, as this is the original edition. Although an English translation has actually been made available for free on the Syntheist web page, this online version lacks pagination, and is therefore quite problematic to make proper references to. As such, all translations are my own, and aimed at preserving the style of the original quotes to the best of my ability. All italics in the quotations are original unless otherwise stated.

The material will be engaged through critical discourse analysis, seeking to delineate on one hand the ideological currents that make Syntheist thought, and on the other to demonstrate how these ideologies are employed to position Syntheism as a legitimate form of religion. As discourse is a complex term, and the analysis thereof constitutes a method as well as a theory, some further points on the subject needs to be made.

2.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis can, if one is allowed to oversimplify the concept in an almost absurd manner, be described as “the study of how to do things with words”.²⁴ I say oversimplify, for discourse theory states that it is language that makes up the conceptual frame work that we use to understand and relate to the world. The language one uses shapes that person, cognitively as well as culturally.

²⁴ Titus Hjelm, "Discourse Analysis" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 135.

Discourses are the ways in which meaning is constructed through linguistic utterances, and can therefore ultimately be seen as constitutive for how human beings both as individuals and as collectives structure their conception of reality. At the same time, discourse also has a functional role in that it is a practice, aimed at reproducing or upsetting social norms.²⁵ Strong versions of discourse theory even argues that as every human act is constituted by culture and language, all human acts must be seen as discursive acts, and no human activity at all can be possible outside of discourses.²⁶

The premise of discourse theory is that words do not carry meaning in themselves. Instead, the understanding of a term is made possible by its relation to other terms, whom in turn must be understood in relation to yet other words, resulting in a complex linguistic web of meaning. A statement such as “Swedish people are rational” does on one hand relate to a discourse of rationalism, where “rational” most often refers to being calculating and in control of one's emotions, and on the other hand constructs the inhabitants of Sweden as a homogeneous “people” that share certain attributes. If the statement is uttered in a context of praising Sweden's technological accomplishments, “rational” likely has positive connotations and is associated with an affirming attitude towards science and progress, but if it is uttered in a context of lamenting the lack of spirituality in modern man, the very same term is likely to be thought of as negative and associated with lack of intuition and imagination. As such, discourse always carries with it normative values, meaning that all representations of the world are to some degree normative.²⁷ Another aspect of discourse analysis is that that which is *not* said might be just as important as that which is actually said. If the statement “Swedish people are rational” is uttered in a discussion that regards Italians, the primary meaning of the statement might actually be that by contrast Italians are *not* rational, rather than stating anything particular about Swedes. Thus, a normative and condescending meaning can be masked through ways of discourse.

My general approach to discourse analysis is based upon its function as a tool to unveil how the power relations and ideological constructions that underlies specific world views are masked and naturalized through the specific ordering of linguistic utterances, thereby making these world views immune to any criticism from within their respective paradigm. There are, however, some apparent problems connected with the use of discourse analysis, the most pressing being the risk of arbitrariness. Sometimes the difference between a proper discursive analysis and a simple subjective interpretation of a statement may seem quite unclear. In order to avoid these relativistic

25 Hjelm, *Discourse Analysis*, 135.

26 Hjelm, *Discourse Analysis*, 140.

27 Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse – Textual Analysis for Social Research*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 124.

notions, some further points needs to be made in order to specify the methodology and basis for the coming analysis.

2.2. Method: Discourses on the Esoteric

As any system of thought is bound to relate to an immense number of discourses, this thesis will be limited to discussing those that relates to Contemporary esoteric discourses. This is not to say that other strands of thought are irrelevant or uninteresting, but rather that contemporary esotericism is, as I will argue below, perhaps *the* main feature of the emerging new forms of religiosity that arises in the late-modern society.

More specifically, my methodological approach is based on that of “discursive currents”, as suggested by Granholm. A current is synonymous with a “discursive complex”, which defines as “collections of specific discourses in specific combinations”. A current is made up of several discursive strands, that are all interdependent, as in that they mutually defines one another. “Each individual discourse assumes a unique form due to its dependence on the other discourse constituting the complex.”²⁸ Put in less technical terms, this means that as all traditions and systems of thought are embedded in their respective cultural situations, they will inevitably take on the form of said culture to a certain extent. Theosophy of today is not identical with theosophy of the late nineteenth century, because while some of the theosophical content may have remained intact, the surrounding discourses have changed and thus altered the meaning of said content in more or less subtle ways. Approaching esotericism as currents of discursive complexes thus entail that we should refrain from defining our empirical objects of study as sets of static categories whose meaning is constant over time.

The merits of this approach is twofold. First, it lets us follow the way in which esoteric currents has transformed, through history, into their contemporary form. By studying the different meanings that has been given to, say, the millenarianism of New Age thought, we can better highlight not only the meaning it is given today, but also in which way it becomes relevant in the current state of contemporary culture. Second, the method of esoteric currents as discursive complexes bridges the gap between the study of esotericism and more general religious studies. Instead of the compartmentalisation in which the field is divided into separate studies of esotericism, Christianity, Buddhism etcetera, the perspective allows for an inclusive understanding of how a plethora of ideological currents have intermingled to form the complexes that we know as religious traditions. It can thus act as a platform for future interdisciplinary efforts where esotericism can take the place

28 Kennet Granholm, "Esoteric currents as discursive complexes", *Religion* vol. 40:1 (2013).

as an auxiliary rather than central perspective.

On a further note, it needs to be emphasized that discourse analysis can not be approached in a methodologically linear way. This might not be entirely evident, as the structure of a thesis is very much a linear one, and thus does not reflect the analytical process very well. There is no clear cut beginning, middle or ending to this process, where one moves from processing the material, to applying a certain theory and finally drawing conclusions. Instead, the analysis is ongoing through the entire process, and the conclusions actually take form in parallel with the compilation of the material, rather than arising strictly as a product of it. In practice, this means that the discursive currents that have been identified as constituents of Syntheism was not given on beforehand, but products of the analytical process, most prominently that which is conducted in section 4. The topics of the previous research accounted for in sections 3.2 – 3.5 has therefore been selected after my reading of the material and not prior to it, and is intended to reinforce the analysis.

2.3. Theory: Strategies of Epistemology

Discursive complexes do not, however, arise from nothingness. Although they may be built up of previously existing discursive currents, these currents do not spontaneously converge into what we can recognize as a religious ideology. Rather, this happens due to active contestation and negotiation within discursive fields: “discourse presupposes a discourse-producing process.”²⁹ As a means to describe this process of discourse-production, Hammer has suggested three strategies for legitimizing the knowledge claims made by post-Enlightenment esoteric movements. These strategies consists of making appeal to *tradition*, *scientific truth* and *personal experience* in order to legitimate a religious discourse, thereby providing motivation for people to actually believe in it. Central to Hammer's argument is the construction of a variety of *significant Others*, that are employed to position the discourse in relation to opposing world views.³⁰ A significant Other may be positive ones, often seen as desirable ideals to live up to, as well as negative ones who acts a cautionary cases to avoid. Examples of the former would be wise men of the orient with the access to hidden knowledge, or indigenous people and their intuitive wisdom that comes from the close proximity with Nature, whereas examples of the latter would be the literal minded fundamentalist that refuses to search for religious truth on his own, or the modern Western business man that cannot see any higher values in life than economic and materialistic. Note that by selectively choosing which traits to highlight, one and the same object can serve as both a positive and a negative significant Other. The scientist that bravely carries on with his research even though it

29 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 42.

30 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 44.

might be banned by the oppressing Christian church is certainly a positive significant Other, but becomes a negative one when he prioritizes his rational thinking before his intuitive, or puts the material existence before the spiritual.

The first strategy is the *appeal to tradition*. This reflects how a statement is said to be true because it adheres to the sacred age old traditions of the past, the ancient wisdom of old, and the secrets of long gone prophets and masters. As the field of esotericism is dealing with movements that are fairly young, in the present case merely a few years old, one might find it hard to believe that esoteric movements have enough of a tradition to successfully make its claims to. A tradition, however, is according to Hammer never so much as a factual thing, but rather an invented construct. He discriminates between on one hand *emic* and on the other hand *etic* historiographies, or history as seen by the believer and the history as seen by the non-believing historian respectively.³¹ The *etic* historiography might be seen as, in lack for a better word, the body of historical “facts” that are recorded, documented and compiled by historians for the sake of giving an accurate account of what “actually happened”. The *emic* historiography relies to a lesser or greater extent upon the *etic*, in that it selectively refers to this body of historical facts, not for the sake of historical accuracy, but for the construction of a coherent tradition.³² Historical facts from a wide variety of sources are employed or rejected due to whether they affirm the narrative of the religious inventor or not. This amounts to the construction of a tradition through several *stages of appropriation*. First is the stage of *reduction*, which refers to strategies aimed at “reducing the complexity, variety and contextuality of the traditions from which elements are taken”.³³ Thus, within the New Age, “shamanism” pertains to only a handful of the ritual techniques that could be said to belong to this wide ranging and heterogeneous concept; meditation and yoga have been partly disembedded from the intricate philosophical systems of their native traditions; and the rich, far reaching tradition of Jewish Kabbalah has been reduced to “a basic system of correspondences that can be explained in one, slender volume.”³⁴ This amounts to “smoothing out the edges” of a variety of traditions that does not really have anything in common, thus making them compatible with the invented tradition, and lending it some of the exotic connotations of the appropriated practices. The next stage is *pattern recognition*. When the complexity of various traditions has been reduced, the religious inventor is

31 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 92.

32 The notions of being able to tell history as it “actually happened” rather than as something constructed by the one doing the telling has been thoroughly criticized by post-modern historians for the last four decades, who argues that all historical accounts are ultimately selective compilations of facts aimed at constructing and enforcing a specific narrative, may it be told by proper historians or not. Curiously enough, Hammer does not engage in any discussion regarding possible problems of a strict separation between *emic* and *etic* views on specific historiographies, nor the homogenization of *etic* historiography as “[h]istory as seen by non-believers”. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 85.

33 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 159.

34 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 160.

free to search for parallels between them, suggesting that they, in all their diversity, is really pointing towards one and the same perennial philosophy, typically the spiritual heritage of mankind. In pointing out such parallels, “a variety of symbols that may etically appear to be selected more or less at random from the vast variety of options, are claimed to be more or less universal or near-universal.”³⁵ Thus, the number seven is interpreted as having a universal spiritual meaning as it figures in Christianity as well as in Brahmanical religion, ancient Egyptian religion and Freemasonry, and the world wide religious use of different minerals is used to legitimize the practice of crystal healing, even though that the metaphysical grounds of the “Indian astrology’s” use of gems and the “Mexican Indians” belief in transformation of souls into stones lies quite far apart. The third stage of appropriation is *synonymization*. Whereas pattern recognition is concerned with religious practice, synonymization regards the homogenization of religious terminology. Although existing in vastly different cultural contexts, the Polynesian term *mana*, the Indian *prana*, the Chinese *chi*, as well as the mesmerist *Animal Magnetism* and Paracelsus' *Archeus* are all said to refer to the same quality; the life force inherent in all living organisms. Apart from reinforcing the perennial notion of universality, synonymization allows for the use of an exotic terminology that “gives an air of authenticity to the text, a hint that the author is cognizant with the writings of an exotic culture, or at least with a specialized and arcane vocabulary.”³⁶ Taken together, in constructing a perennial, universalist tradition through the stages of appropriation, religious inventors can make claim to not really represent something entirely new, but rather just being the latest in a long, unbroken line of expressions of the same religious idea. By positioning themselves as such an historically continuous mode of thought, the construction of tradition points not only backwards in time, but also to the future. By salvaging the lost wisdom of old, the invented tradition is seen as the pre-cursor of the coming of a new age of harmony, understanding and joy. The New Age movement, and its Age of Aquarius, is obviously the most literal example. Hammer describes the timeline of the typical invented, esoteric tradition as U-shaped;³⁷ although once having known the ways of wisdom and truth, mankind has successively lost touch with the spiritual world through the spread of monotheist law, rationalistic scientism and exploitative capitalism, but as the old ways are rediscovered through the invention of the esoteric tradition, the world will be redeemed and mankind will once again live in prosperity and harmony.

Second comes *scientism as a language of fate*. As “science” is probably *the* hegemonic producer of truth in the modern world, there are few to better ways of legitimizing a truth claim, religious or

35 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 161.

36 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 164.

37 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 167.

not, than by position it as scientifically sound. As with the case of tradition, this does not necessarily mean to build one's argument upon facts established as canonical by the scientific community, but rather by the interpretation of a selective assortment of empirical discoveries and theoretical and methodological statements, often contested, outdated or at the fringe of the scientific community. Appealing to science for legitimating a truth claim in this way is referred to as *scientism*: “the active positioning of one's own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features”, but disregarding the approved methods or general acceptance of these manifestations or one's interpretation thereof.³⁸ As such, the discourse of scientism closely resembles the stages of appropriation that underlies the construction of a tradition. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, stating that the act of measuring constitutes the qualities of that which is measured, is reduced to an idealist view of the universe, where matter is created by our imagination.³⁹ Pattern recognition takes the form of, for example, using the law of the indestructibility of matter found in chemistry as confirmation of the theosophic notion that the universe is eternal but temporarily goes into states of being unmanifested. Chemical terms such as “molecule”, “atom” and “particle” are synonymized with occultist “Hosts”, “Monads” and “Devas”, and the “forces” of physics are said to refer to the same phenomena as “Devas” or “genii”.⁴⁰ Another common trait of scientism is to select scientific interpretations of data that strengthens the own argument, even when these interpretations have already been disproven or rejected by the scientific community.⁴¹ Taken together, in New Age thought these strategies are used to construct a scientific world view that is, typically, holistic and monadic, where the boundaries of the material and the spiritual is broken down, making it compatible with the claim of religious universalism. It also positions itself against “conventional”, materialist science. A more in-depth discussion of this form of holistic scientism will be conducted in section 3.3, “Esoteric Currents II: The Holistization of Science”.

Third comes the *narratives of experience*. Due to the anti-authoritarian streak in modern liberal ideology, appeals to tradition as well as science will always have a secondary status to the unquestionable truth of the subjective experience. The emphasis of personal experience can a bit paradoxically be seen as both the democratisation of religion in that every practitioner, and not just the elite, are encouraged to seek out spiritual truth for them selves, but also as a contested arena of

38 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 206.

39 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 294.

40 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 266.

41 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 285.

power claims over what actually constitutes a spiritual experience.⁴² The spiritual experience is most typically framed as a personal narrative, a story told by the religious inventor that ultimately points towards the validity of the truth of the advocated tradition. Hammer discusses first-, second-, as well as third person narratives, focused on a wide variety of topics such as healing, divination, channelling and the gaining of paranormal powers. However, as none of these narratives or topics really figures in Syntheism, I will only account for the one quite marginal section in Hammer that actually does; that of mystical experiences. Because the mystical experience usually revolves around the meeting with enlightened spiritual beings, coming into contact with a higher truth, or perceiving reality through an enhanced state of mind, its revelations can rarely, if ever, be scrutinized by the use of everyday logic or empirical observations. Its truths are of a different kind than the mundane, valid in either a deeper or higher sense than can be grasped by ordinary reason. To truly understand, one must personally partake of the experience by means of, for example, meditation, drumming or the use of psychedelic drugs. The experience in itself is held to fundamentally be qualitatively the same between individual mystics and across cultural borders, once again suggesting the presence of a perennial religious truth.⁴³ Typically, the legitimacy of the personal experience also carries a pragmatic rationale to it. The truth of a spiritual revelation is based upon its value for the person's well being. This form of psychologically based pragmatism can be found in foundational thinkers such as William James, who held theism in higher esteem than materialism because of the former being more morally useful, and Carl Gustav Jung, who “explicitly claimed that all religious experiences are true to the extent that they are integrated into the experiencer's life. If a Pueblo Indian believes that the Sun is God, that is the truth – for him.”⁴⁴

What should be noted is that these three strategies are not used separately, but rather employed in conjunction with each other to construct and reinforce a certain *philosophia perennis*, a wisdom narrative of universal truth. Once and again, it is the very same ancient tradition of wisdom that is being (re)discovered by modern science, as well as being felt in the religious experience. Thus, by analysing the Syntheist ideology through the lens of the strategies of epistemology, I intend to uncover just what form this perennial thought takes within the movement.

On a further note, a thorough critical dissemination of the first two of the strategies of epistemology within any invented tradition is bound to be an extremely demanding task for any scholar. To be knowledgeable enough of the invoked traditions and scientific theories to be able to actually account for them accurately, to de-reduce and de-synonymize them, would require

42 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 340

43 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 374.

44 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 377.

resources far beyond the scope of this thesis. Because of this, the analysis will stop at delineating the construction of the perennial thought in Syntheism, and not go on to actually evaluate the legitimacy of the claims it makes.

Finally, where Hammer's study cover a relatively wide range of Western esoteric systems, namely the various currents of Theosophy, Anthroposophy and the New Age, the present thesis is mainly concerned with the forms of legitimization strategies employed in the latter, the New Age tradition. As will be demonstrated, Syntheism is a movement that closely mirrors a great portion of New Age ideology and ways of construction of meaning, although this might not be apparent upon a first look, not least because any parallels with New Age culture are fiercely denied by the adherents of Syntheism.

2.4. Summary

The chosen method for this thesis is discourse analysis, “how to do things with words”, or more precisely how the social world is constructed, contested and reproduced by means of linguistic practices. Syntheism is viewed as a discursive complex of ideological currents, which claims legitimacy through the three epistemological strategies of *tradition*, *science* and *experience*. The ideological currents that makes up Syntheism will be discussed in section 3 and has, after engaging with the material, been identified as *spiritual individualism*, *holistic science*, *entheogenic shamanism* and religious irony.

The analysis of the Syntheist discursive complex will be conducted in three stages. The first stage, conducted in section 4, aims at demonstrating how the ideological complex that makes up the Syntheist world view ties into some of the main discursive currents of contemporary the New Age. The second stage is conducted in section 5, in which the strategies of epistemology is used to demonstrate how the Syntheist world view is discursively legitimized. The third stage takes place in section 6, where section 4 and 5 are discussed in relation to the esoteric currents accounted for in section 3, with the aim of positioning Syntheism the cultural framework of contemporary esoteric spirituality.

3. Previous Research

This part of the essay seeks to position Syntheism firmly within contemporary esoteric spirituality by accounting for three esoterically oriented ideological currents that constitute the movement: spiritual individualism, entheogenic drug culture and holistic scientism. In addition, a non-esoteric mode of religious thought will be discussed: that of the ironic orientation of post-modern religion.

3.1. *Contemporary Esotericism and Politics of Opposition*

To place Syntheism within the field of esotericism is neither totally self-evident, nor without its problems. This is largely due to the field itself being somewhat ambiguously defined, if not outright arbitrarily, a fact that has been an almost constant source of debate for the last two decades. An initial problem with the field of esotericism lies in its use in conjunction with the word “Western”. According to Asprem, what “Western Esotericism” connotes is not so much a geographical delineation, but instead a spatial over an idealist one. The term was adapted in order to distance the field from religionist notions of any sort of inherent, universal esoteric experience, and not so much as for marking opposition to some any of “Eastern”, “Northern” or “Southern” esotericisms.⁴⁵ “Western Esotericism” is thus a *specific* form of religiosity, not a universal one. Unfortunately, the term still carries strong Eurocentric notions, with the result that any forms of esotericism not belonging to the Western historical tradition has been deemed unworthy of study. This thesis, on the other hand, is concerned with “Contemporary Esotericism”. Rather than implying a geographical orientation, this term points towards a *temporal* specificity of the object of study; the forms of esotericism that are present in the cultural landscape of the contemporary, (late-)modern world. This is a world characterized by mass-media, consumerism and globalisation. Perhaps most importantly, it is a world where an unprecedented number of people, distributed over vast areas, are connected through digital media, enabling communication, interaction and an exchange of ideas that transgresses existing cultural boundaries. That is not to say there isn't a Western bias lingering. The present study is engaged with a group that consists of a majority of Northern Europeans and Americans, who in their writing almost exclusively refer to philosophers and scientists of Western origins. The same can be said for the defining work of the admittedly still very young field, *Contemporary Esotericism* (2013), in which no more than two out of the twenty contributing chapters' engagement lies outside the spheres of Western Europe and the United States.⁴⁶ However, in contrast to the study of Western esotericism, the imbalance towards Western expressions within

45 Asprem, "Beyond the West", 8.

46 Egil Asprem & Kenneth Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism*, (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

Contemporary Esotericism is less due to a geographical fixation, but more likely to be the result of the fact that global culture is to a greater or lesser degree westernised (or perhaps even Anglicised). Although there are of course many exceptions, a majority of the culture shared and disseminated on a global scale stems from the English speaking spheres of the world, and as English is the *lingua franca* of the late modern world, not least on the forums and message boards of the internet, even non-Western cultural exports tends to take on somewhat of an Anglo-Saxon character. This would make the Western biased somewhat inevitable when studying Contemporary Esotericism as a mode of global culture *today*, but it leaves open the possibility for a wider, more inclusive array of topics, especially if or when the Western culture loses its hegemonic position.

A second problem lies in defining what it is that “esotericism” actually entails. Asprem notes that there are two major schools regarding what is to be considered “esoteric”; either it is an historical category, entailing the study of groups and authors that have been classified as belonging to the esoteric genre, and the continuity of the ideas and practices of these groups and authors during history; *or*; it is a typological concept in which a set of stipulated conditions (such as “the concept of living nature” or “claims to higher knowledge”) are used to deem whether a group or author is esoteric or not.⁴⁷ Syntheism doesn't fall within any of these definitions. It is a movement that was created only in recent years, and pays more homage to Western philosophy and Zoroastrianism rather than any typical esoteric system. Neither does it make many specific claims of higher or secret knowledge; rather it takes a philosophical approach, and bases its truth claims upon argumentation and scientific references. That being said, despite the somewhat vague meanings of the term, there are good reasons to analyse Syntheism as an esoteric movement. First of all, while not making any explicit references to esoteric philosophy, the movement is engaging in discourses relating to religion and spirituality that is quite typical in the contemporary society, whose lineages can be traced to esoteric thinkers, most prominently that divinity is of a cosmotheist nature, the divine exists *within* the natural world rather than being separated from it, and that spiritual experiences are the fundamental feature of religion that can and should be attained through the use of psychedelic drugs. Secondly, Syntheism construes its identity in stark opposition against modernity. According to Hannegraaff, what we call “Western Esotericism” is an umbrella term for a wide array of spiritual practices that during the early-modern period was deemed to be deviant either by the protestant church, the scientific community or, most often, the two of them working in tandem.⁴⁸ Through this history of rejection and deviancy, Hannegraaff shows that protestant

47 Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West. Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism", *Correspondences* 2:1 (2014), 5.

48 Wouter J. Hannegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Christian and scientific thought are not essentially separate, but very much intertwined in that they both arise from the same overarching ideology; modernity. Western Esotericism has thus functioned as the distant Other of modernity, as a discursive process that Hannegraaff calls the “Grand Polemical Narrative”. However, while the esoteric corpus might have originated as rejected practices, it also offers its adherents a platform for the practice of rejecting. In being deemed all that modernity is not, the referring to esoteric symbolism can act as a marker of distance towards modernity, and the scientific and religious practices that comes with it. I have previously suggested that the Grand Polemical Narrative makes up an excellent perspective for understanding contemporary forms of esotericism as opposition towards modern society, and the hegemony of not only Christianity and science, but also of capitalism, technological instrumentalism and totalitarian aspects of liberal democracy.⁴⁹

Therefore, this thesis' perspective of Contemporary Esotericism is aimed not only at sketching out the ideological currents that Syntheism is made up of, but more importantly to show how these currents are employed to discursively position the movement against what is perceived of as structures of power that upholds the contemporary, modern society.

3.2. Esoteric Currents I: Late-modernity and the Power of the Individual

When discussing New Age religion and contemporary esotericism, it is virtually impossible not to take the “subjective turn” and “subjectivization thesis” into consideration. Proposed by Heelas & Woodhead in their influential volume *The Spiritual Revolution*, the subjectivization thesis states that due to a general subjective turn in contemporary culture, religious life is shifting away from that of traditional congregation towards an increasing emphasis on subjective experience.⁵⁰ Heelas & Woodhead argues that previously, living in society was characterized by “life-as”. A person's sense of self was derived from his or her role in society, the basis of their identity was their life-as a mother, life-as a labourer, life-as a catholic. In contemporary society, however, life is being lived as “subjective life”. People are turning away from defining themselves from the external expectations of their jobs, their families or their congregations, and instead chose to live their lives according to their own, inner experiences. “The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one's own authority. ...the key value for subjective-life is authentic connection with the inner depths of one's unique life-in-relation.”⁵¹ Conversely, any authority that is perceived to be external to the individual is seen as standing in stark opposition of the authentic subject. When

49 Wedin, Video Games and Contemporary Esotericism.

50 Paul Heelas, Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerynski, Karin Tusting & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution – why religion is giving away to spirituality*, (Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2005).

51 Heelas et al, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 4.

living life-as, “[w]hat matters is obeying, heeding, pursuing ways of life which stand over and above the individual self and bestow meaning onto life... Virtue and the 'good life' are characterized in terms of sacrificing, disciplining or masking those aspects of oneself that pull one away from the 'oughts' of the embedded life.”⁵² According to Heelas & Woodhead, this emphasis on the subjective authority and inner experience is the fundamental reason of why we can observe a rapid decrease in the participation in traditionally religious congregations, such as Christian churches, and at the same time see increasing rates of participation in what is known as “alternative spirituality”, “the holistic milieu” or, most commonly, “the New Age movement”. The people of today are simply preferring the flat hierarchical structures of the New Age movement, together with the possibility to pick for themselves which beliefs, rituals and practices they are to embrace or reject, compared to the take-it-or-leave-it “package deal” offered by traditional churches, just as they prefer child-centred education or patient-centred health care.⁵³ Three possible explanations are given to explain this development.

The first is the “process of plurality”, in which the individual is exposed to such a wide variety of conflicting world views that all notions of any “absolute truth” are seriously devalued. When there is no outer source that can be ascribed with absolute authority, we start to look inwards for truth. The second explanation is that the subjective turn is due to the “democratic revolution”. “By emphasizing the value of equality, and the importance of respecting the freedom of others to decide how to live out their own lives, these developments generate reactions against life-as systems ... which violates equality and which do not respect the unique subjective-life.” Thirdly is the process of autonomyization, “whereby people come to think of themselves as autonomous agents, and aim to enrich the quality of their subjective-lives by going out into the world in order to feel powerful or successful (for example).”⁵⁴

When put together, the authors argue, this is nothing short of a religious revolution, comparable to the protestant reformation in scale and importance. Or more precisely, a *spiritual* revolution, in that the institutionalised religions are giving way to the personal, experience oriented, inner spirituality. This view has been adopted by so many scholars that it can probably be considered a current paradigm within the contemporary study of religion. Some of these scholars have embraced the idea of a shift from a beforehand given religiosity to a choice-based spirituality rather enthusiastically. Partridge writes “There is no longer an acceptable rationale for defending ones religious beliefs over another. Since religion is simply a matter of personal preference, and since

52 Heelas et al, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 3.

53 Heelas et al, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 130.

54 Heelas et al, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 130.

concepts of religious truth has been relativized... there are few reasons to limit choice.”⁵⁵ Droogers on his hand goes so far as to state that religious institutions have been spiritual “prisons”; “Religion’s individualised expressions occur wherever modernisation has eroded traditional social structures and has reduced social control. Modernisation has liberated religion from the institutional prison.”⁵⁶ Others, such as Possamai, takes a more cautious stance towards spirituality, noting that most often it goes hand in hand with consumerism and materialist culture. He still admits, though, that the post-modern spirituality is ultimately about the free choice of the individual. “In this time period, religious actors make choice about what to believe or what not to believe. In the western world, the choice to have ultimate choice can be made by an individual, or the choice to have less choice can be relegated to an authority, be it a person, a group of people, or a text.”⁵⁷ Even when somebody doesn't enjoy complete choice, it is ultimately because this person has chosen to delegate the choosing to an outer authority. To summarize, the essence of New Age spirituality is that the “authentic individual” makes up a natural category, as opposed to the constructed nature of a socialized person, that this individual is free to make choices based off of his or hers preferences, and that all external influences upon these choices are to be seen as inhibiting for the subject's authentic nature.

However, the notion of the authentic individual is not as unproblematic as may initially seem to be the case, which has been pointed out by Martin. In his volume *Capitalizing Religion*, he argues that far from being a naturally given concept, individualism is by all means an ideological construct, which works to undermine certain forms of power structures, while reinforcing others.⁵⁸ He argues that within the discourse of alternative spirituality, being a “free” individual does in no way mean that a person can act in whatever way it pleases her. Rather, being “free” and “authentic” refers to a very specific set of ideological policies and behavioural acts. These policies are structured into the categories *quietism* and *individualismism*, as well as *consumerism* and *productivity*.

Quietism is when “freedom” is defined as refraining from criticizing hegemonic authorities, and instead just focusing on being happy and content with life. As religion is a private matter, it should not exert any serious demands of its followers, except to conform to the norms of capitalist society. There are no moral impediments and no ascetic ideals, only the encouragement to “be nice”, which can really mean anything at all. “[O]ne must not lie, except when it is required; one must not be mean, except when it is deserved; one must not be violent, except when it is necessary. In addition, no objective criterias are offered that would help readers sort out when to make such exceptions – it

55 Christopher Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West, Volume 1*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 16.

56 André Droogers, "Towards the concerned study of religion", *Religion* vol. 40, 2010, 232.

57 Adam Possamai, *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*, (London: Equinox, 2009), 81.

58 Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

seems that one must go on one's 'feeling.'"⁵⁹ Apart from "being nice", one should just pay one's taxes, and not come into conflict with society or other people, as these are external factors that doesn't have anything to do with real religion. Rather, religious freedom is an entirely personal matter. This might be best exemplified by self-help author Christopher Moore's novel *The Gospel According to Biff*, who utters the following statement through the mouth of Jesus Christ. "Moses didn't need to ask Pharaoh to release our people, our people didn't need to be released from the Babylonians, and they don't need to be released from the Romans. I can't give them freedom. Freedom is in their hearts, they merely have to find it."⁶⁰ This brings us to the second theme, *individualism*. Individualism, rather than simply being the ideal of an autonomous subject, refers to the assignment of ultimate authority to the individual subject. The belief that social change does not happen through political struggle, but rather through the therapeutic, spiritual transformation of individuals is called "the miracle motif".⁶¹

As for *consumerism*, this entails that to be spiritual is to express one's religion in ways that does not interfere with life as a consumer. To be free is to be able to buy a nicely looking veil or to wear a beautiful cross around one's neck. Oppression lies not so much in being denied certain options in life in general, but being denied those options tied to consumer behaviour specifically. With *productivity* is meant that the purpose of spirituality is to enhance efficacy and productivity in one's working life. Working hard is seen as a spiritual activity, and the stress and pressure of intense working conditions should be relieved by spiritual practices such as mindfulness of yoga, not by actually demanding a lighter work load. All in all, when spirituality is reconfigured into defining people solely as their function in the consumer society, we can say that "[l]ate-capitalism provides people with their values, but the spirituality/religion discourse makes it seem as if those values sprang directly from the soul."⁶² While consumerism and productivity certainly are important aspects of spirituality in the neo-liberal society, they are themes that do not play any central part in Syntheist ideology, and will therefore not be further accounted for.

At first, there may seem as though there is somewhat of a paradox inherent in individualist culture. If individuality and autonomy are held as the ideals to live by, wouldn't this, we may ask us, make individuality a way of conformity? Wouldn't the only way to go against the pack then be to *not* think for yourself but actually just do what everybody else does? Which, of course, is thinking for themselves and not conforming to the norm. "It is as if Heelas, Woodhead, Roof and Lyon are not in on the joke – the increasing popularity ... of something called 'individual spirituality' belies

59 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 104.

60 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 105, quoting Moore.

61 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 79.

62 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 74.

both the uniqueness and distinction implied by the qualifier 'individual.'"⁶³ This paradox, Martin tells us, is due to the misconception that the opposite of individuality is conformity, which is actually not the case. Individuality does not connote autonomy or uniqueness, but rather distinction. To be an individual is to make yourselves distinct from other, not freeing yourself from all external norms. Martin illustrates this with the example of fashion. While fashion functions as a way of distinguishing one self from others, it works by people actually being aware of the current trends. The "most fashionable" people that are at the forefront of fashion distinguishes themselves by cutting edge conformity, constantly adapting to the latest fads before everybody else catches on. This is equally true of those that takes no heed of fashion at all. Their rejection of fashion trends lies not in being oblivious of them, but rather by inverting them, thus not following but always accepting and relating to these trends.⁶⁴ As such, individuality should be understood not as subjective liberty, but as conforming to a wide array of norms of which distinction is but one. The point is ultimately that as scholars, we should refrain from assigning analytical finality to whatever "choices" or "preferences" individuals report. Rather, to assign causation to these choices and preferences is to give up our analytical task. Instead, we must ask ourselves what makes people chose and prefer these practices in the first place or, in the words of Martin, "whose interests are advanced by assigning causation in this way rather than that way?"⁶⁵

Interestingly enough, Syntheism actually contains both sides of the view on individualism. As will be demonstrated in section 4, the individual as the authentic core of existence is firmly rejected for an appreciation of the complex and constructed nature of the *dividual* subject. Yet, this subject is still given the ultimate authority, the final interpretative prerogative and is deemed the ground for meaning and truth. Although paradoxical at first sight, this might actually be a very rational consequence of operating within the individualistic paradigm, as when each and everyone has become fully fledged individualists, the only way that remains to truly distinguish oneself might be to actually deny individuality.

3.3. Esoteric Currents II: The Holistization of Science

As already been hinted at in section 2.3, science within contemporary esotericism is used to reinforce the validity of a perennial thought that is supposed to underlie existence. Given that the construction of such a world view, and not simply the dissipation of the latest scientific discoveries, is the goal of New Age science writing, it might be safe to say that such authors' concern is not

63 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 31.

64 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 49.

65 Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*, 160.

primarily natural science at all, but rather a philosophy of nature.⁶⁶ This philosophy of nature is most typically an understanding of the cosmos as a unified monist entity, in which the value of the spiritual, the paranormal and the soul can be retained. Hanegraaff suggests that the underlying thought of New Age scientism is basically made up of five strands of thought; the paradigms of the *hologram* and of *self-organisation*, the hypotheses of *formative causation* and of *Gaia*, and the literary genre of parallelism.⁶⁷

First of the philosophical schools is the *holographic paradigm*, where it is argued that the universe as well as the human consciousness exposes the same structure as that of a hologram, in that each fragment contains the entire information regarding the whole object. Thus, information is not compartmentalised, but implicit in all of the individual parts, making these parts not so much free floating building blocks but monadic manifestations of the larger structure.⁶⁸

The second school of thought is the *paradigm of self-organisation*, postulating that the universe operates in a manner of an increasing complexity of self-organisation. This lends a certain quality of creative evolutionism to the workings of the cosmos; phenomena self-organizes into ever more complex structures, until radically new phenomena emerges from this increasing complexity. The way matter emerges from energy, life emerges from non-living matter, or culture emerges from individual beings are example of such increases in self-organising complexities.⁶⁹

The first scientific theory is the *hypothesis of formative causation*, stating that phenomena appears not by the sake of causation in the tradition sense, but due to their “morphic resonance”, meaning that when a certain organisational structure has once arisen, this structure is bound to be repeated. This suggest that things keeps existing in certain because they already are, and points to a rethinking of science, replacing old paradigms with holistically oriented ones.⁷⁰

The second theory is the *Gaia-hypothesis*, which states that the earth function as one, unified living organism. In New Age thought, this hypothesis is generally interpreted as stating that the earth actually *is* a living organism.⁷¹

Finally, the genre of *parallelism* is dedicated to point out similarities between scientific theories and religious discourse, most typically the type found in oriental mysticism. The genre most often

66 Hanegraaff uses the name of the german school of thought *Naturphilosophie* to delineate this line of thought from that of *natural philosophy*, out of which the modern sciences emerged. I will, however, use the term *philosophy of nature* for reasons of convenience. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism as the Mirror of Secular Thought* (University of Utrecht, doctoral dissertation, 1995), 57.

67 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 59.

68 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 60.

69 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 60.

70 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 60.

71 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 61.

suggests that science can be aided and enhanced by acknowledging a spiritual understanding of the world, not least because of how the discoveries of modern science corresponds to that which the mystics of old have been talking about the whole time.⁷²

3.4. Esoteric Currents III: Entheogenic Shamanism

The third esoteric current relevant for understanding Syntheism is the way in which the altered states of consciousness that are induced by psychedelic drugs have been interpreted as carrying a religious significance. Although psychedelic substances, or entheogens,⁷³ has played a part in the religious rituals of a number of cultures for several thousand years, their role in Western religiosity is less than a century old. Before the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, Western people exposed to psychedelic plants more often reported feelings of nausea, confusion and delirium rather than any form of religious ecstasy or spiritual awakening.⁷⁴ This suggests that there is in fact nothing universal about the religious interpretation of the psychedelic experience, but that it is very much culturally conditioned. Still, the use of entheogens in Western culture is often thought of as a form of shamanism among its adherents, suggesting that psychedelics transports their user to an alternative, spiritual world, but also retaining an aspect of nature spirituality to the experience. Terrence McKenna, one of the iconic figures of psychedelic drug culture, viewed psychedelic shamanism as an archaic revival. McKenna saw psychedelic substances as not only fundamental for the religious experience, but for the development of the human intellectual capability in itself. He speculated that the spark that triggered the rapid growth of the human brain was when a distant hominid ancestor stumbled upon a variety of hallucinogenic mushroom. This caused an expansion of consciousness in the half-ape/-half-man, and laid the ground for a symbolic appreciation of the world as well as for introspection. McKenna even suggests that because these kind of mushrooms grow exclusively in the dung of cattle, the proto-human fascination for these mind altering experiences is what eventually led to the domestication of animals.⁷⁵ The entheogens thus re-establishes an intimate, spiritual connection with nature that has been lost in modern society, “a paradise that once existed on the mushroom dotted plains of Africa where plant-human symbiosis occurred that pulled us out of the animal body and into the tool-using, culture-making, imagination-exploring creature that we are.”⁷⁶ There is also a certain aspect of agency ascribed to the entheogen.

72 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 61.

73 The word "entheogen", literally meaning "the god from within" has been suggested as an alternative to "psychedelic", due to the latter's purportedly negative connotations. As the term is widely used in the psychedelic religious culture, not least by Syntheists, I will make use of the word when referring to the use of psychedelic drugs in a spiritualized discourse, rather than simply as hallucinogenic drugs.

74 Andy Letcher, *Shroom – A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom*, (New York: Ecco, 2007), 70.

75 Christopher Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West, Volume 2*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 114.

76 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 115.

The messages and insights received in the psychedelic state of mind does not come from within oneself but is conveyed, either by a spirit residing in the entheogen, but more often than not by connecting the tripper to an Overmind, a cosmic form of consciousness that one is normally cut off from. According to McKenna, the Overmind is a “much larger, much wiser organising force that we all carry around inside ourselves.”⁷⁷ By connecting to this cosmic consciousness, the psychedelic shaman gains knowledge of a kind that is usually beyond the understanding of the individual intelligence, and its meaning is often about the underlying unity of reality, the illusion of the egoistical self, and the importance of ecological awareness.

Partridge has sketched out three phases in the Western, cultural history of entheogens. The *first* phase stretches between the invention of LSD in 1938 to the end of the 1950s. This was when the psychedelic state was explored as on the one hand an induced, temporary form of psychosis, but also, more significantly, as being analogous with the experience of the great mystics of history. The central figure during this phase was beat author Aldous Huxley, whose classic novel *The Doors of Perception* has been hailed as “the founding text of psychedelia”.⁷⁸ At this time, psychedelics were considered much of an acquired taste, considered to be reserved for an intellectually adventurous elite. Not everybody were considered to be fit for the experience, and the substances were carefully distributed within closed circles.⁷⁹ Aside from drawing parallels between his experiments with mescaline and mystical states of mind, Huxley also popularized the idea that psychedelics work by way of reducing the filtering function of the brain, which normally “exclude all except a minute aspect of reality”, only allowing us to experience fragments of the information our senses pick up. When experiencing altered states of consciousness, however, “this filtering mechanism is suspended, releasing a flood of information not normally available to us.”⁸⁰ This entails that the psychedelic state of mind is actually much *more* truthful than our normal, mundane encounters with the world, and that the spiritual character of the mystical experience provides a deeper and higher understanding of reality than is possible through means of sobriety.

The *second* phase is connected to the counter cultural movement, and stretches between the early 1960s to 1976, the year in which the last remnants of the flower power culture gave way to the nihilistic punk movement. If the first phase of psychedelic religiosity was elitist and seclusive, the second tended to be democratic and inclusive. Quickly embraced by the hippie movement, mescaline, magic mushrooms and LSD now became seen as something to be communally shared, as they held the power to not only spiritually transform individuals, but the whole of society. When

77 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 118.

78 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 93.

79 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 92.

80 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 91.

speaking of psychedelic culture in the 60s, it is all but impossible not to mention Timothy Leary. Originally a Harvard professor in psychology, Leary's interests in psychedelic substances quickly turned from academic to purely spiritual. Having been completely overwhelmed by experiences of love, unity and inter-being with the cosmos after his first encounter with entheogens, Leary believed that psychedelics were the key to overcome all the hate, division and oppression he saw around him. If all were to experience the psychedelic state, there would be no more strife, no more wars and no more injustice, as people would finally realise they were all the same. Thus, when Leary created the International Foundation for Internal Freedom (IFIF), whose purpose it was to not only distribute LSD, but also to educate its members of how to use it for spiritual enlightenment, this was for no other reason than to usher a new age of peace and prosperity by the "religio-psychedelic transformation of individuals."⁸¹ As such, it was during the second phase of psychedelic culture that entheogenic mysticism became both politicized and in a sense anti-political. On one hand, the liberalisation of governmental drug policies was argued on the grounds of religious freedom, one slogan being "Drug control is thought control!" On the other hand, Leary believed that no true change could ever come from political struggle, but only through the psychedelic transformation. "The choice is between being rebellious and being religious. ... Don't vote. Don't politic. Don't petition. You can't do *anything* about America politically."⁸² This phase thus provided psychedelic culture with its very own take on the miracle motif.

The third phase is characterised by rave and dance culture. Here, the psychedelic experience started to be further enhanced by prolonged dancing, strobing lights and the monotonous, pulsating rhythms of techno music. The third wave incorporates a lot of the symbolism of eastern mysticism commonly found in the New Age movement, both in the forms of musical themes and sounds, such as sitars, but also by DJs and records having names such as "Tantric Afterglow" and "The Chakra Journey".⁸³ As such, the hippie culture of the 60's and 70's in much the same way. "Instead of travelling to India to have a spiritual experience while learning sitar, sitting at the feet of a guru and, of course, getting 'stoned', the new hippies were travelling to Goa to experience while dancing to psychedelic trance and, of course, getting 'stoned'."⁸⁴ Having taken a step from both the spiritual elitism of the first phase, and the ideals of religious democratisation of the second, the third phase of rave psychedelia is split between those that are in it for purely hedonistic reasons, and those that are still seeking genuine spiritual experiences. This is not least evident in the wide spread of the drug Ecstasy in rave circles, of which is said that although it provides with blissful experiences,

81 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 98.

82 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 98.

83 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 108.

84 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 107.

they are in the end more shallow than those had on LSD or magic mushrooms. As such, those people that consider themselves as spiritually inclined takes great care to distinguish themselves from the less “serious”, hedonistic ravers. The group Spiral Tribe, for instance, proclaims that LSD and magic mushrooms are much more important than any other substance, due to their creative influence on life, one's understanding of oneself and of the world. “Spiral Tribe wanted to tap to the potential that was being filtered out by the central nervous system, to short circuit years of conditioning. Their insistence was that pleasure in itself just wasn't enough.”⁸⁵

This phase of psychedelic culture obviously ties into festival culture. As mentioned in the introduction, Alexander Bard had his spiritual awakening at the Burning Man Festival while being stoned out of his mind. The Burning Man Festival is a so called participatory festival held yearly in the Nevada Desert. The climax of the festival lies in the burning of the Man; a 12 metres tall doll made of straw that is put to fire in an almost sacrificial manner. People gather here to dance, sing, create art, listen to music, take drugs but most importantly to interact with one another, to engage in meetings and share experiences. The participatory aspect is strongly emphasized, as the idea is not simply about going there to be a passive consumer of presented cultural acts, but that each and every visitor takes part in creating works of art. Bard is in no way alone to have had spiritual experiences at the site, and many of its participants see the festival as the core of a growing spiritual movement. “[F]or many participants Burning Man was an event of *religious* significance, characterized by powerful ritual, myth, and symbol; experiences of transcendence or ritual ecstasy; experiences of personal transformation; a sense of shared community...”⁸⁶ The festival has thus been the centre for the sharing and spreading of an array of practices and ideas, not least of a spiritual nature, and a sort of utopian thought is associated with it.

The numbers of people affected by us will be far greater than the ones who ever come to [Burning Man] ... And ultimately, then, I think that will become a new kind of basis for democracy, which will be value based, community based, and can more than countervail the [consumerist] forces that are corrupting it.⁸⁷

Partridge also quite tentatively suggests that a fourth phase of psychedelic culture is underway, this time characterized by cyberculture.⁸⁸ As he does not discuss this latest phase in depth, I will attempt to delineate its characteristics. Contemporary experimentation with psychedelic substances seems to be closely connected to a variety of internet based forums. On these forums, users share their experiences of their trips, discuss their thoughts and interpretations of psychedelic practices and ask

85 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 109.

86 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 164.

87 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 164.

88 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 133.

questions regarding everything from what music to play for the best experience, the best way of ingesting a certain substance, to how to deal with drug dependency issues or with the social stigmatization that the use of narcotics can bring with it. Aside from this, the communities usually also features beginners' guides to tripping, detailed information regarding the neurological effects and pharmacological properties of the various psychedelic compounds, and even instructions in how to grow your own hallucinogenic plants. In line with other research on these kind of communities, I will refer to the users a *e-psychonauts*.⁸⁹ A survey conducted by Orsolini et al found that 51% of e-psychonauts decided to try psychedelic drugs out of curiosity for their own mind, while 21% did it for shamanistic purposes.⁹⁰ The study also found that the users tend to define themselves as a “neo-shamans”, “chaos magickians” or “techno-shamans”. Although the authors does not draw this conclusion, I find it quite likely that this is in order for the psychonauts to distinguish themselves from more causal drug users that are “just” in it for the fun, much like the ravers of the third phase.

Conversely, in choosing their own drugs, the psychonauts seem to value the spiritual, experimental and research components of the intake experience. In other words, the most significant difference between a psychonaut and a typical drug user is the motivation philosophical reason behind the drug intake itself.⁹¹

My own research on such forums centres on the “trip reports”, accounts of the experiences had when taking a psychedelic substance, posted by the users. Apart from hallucinations, the users typically describe a loss of temporal and spatial awareness, everything that is floats into a prolonged sense of now. The most central part of the trip reports, however, is the “dissolution of the ego”. The users' “ego”, their sense of subjective self, is considered something of an illusion, something that inhibits their experience of the world as it really is, and the purpose of the entheogenic experience is to dissolve the boundaries between the self and the surrounding reality. By transcending the ego, a feeling of complete unity with the cosmos will arise, the ultimate state of spiritual bliss. One user writes “In the sphere of god there is no time and space, I am everything simultaneously and knows all simultaneously.” A heavy dose is even said to result in an actual feeling of dying, but in a good way. “I will live forever... for I am already dead... and I have always been...”⁹² The feeling of complete unity is portrayed as the defining aspect of a psychedelic trip, even the whole point of it sometimes.

89 The word "psychonaut", derived from the words "argonaut" and "astronaut", can be said to mean "traveller of the mind".

90 Laura Orsolini, Gabriele Duccio Papanti, Giulia Francesconi & Fabrizio Schifano, "Mind Navigators or Chemicals' Experimenters? A Web Based Description of E-Psychonauts" in *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking* vol. 18:5, 2015, 297.

91 Orsolini et al, "Mind Navigators", 298.

92 Robert Wedin, *Voyage to the Depths of the Soul*, Bachelor's thesis, Gothenburg University, 2013, 37.

Taken together, entheogenic religiosity is characterized by mystical experiences that are considered more real than the everyday world. It strives for a unity with the cosmic consciousness, where the ego is broken down and dissolved, and no borders are left between the world and pure being. This form of religious culture is spread mainly through the dance- and festival scenes, as well as through internet forums. Just as in New Age scientism, this leads to the construction of a spiritual understanding of the cosmos as holistic, where “the world is not as sterile as science maintains, meaning resides within all things, and the essential quality of the universe, its quiddity, is one of enchantment.”⁹³ As such, I would have to agree with Letcher in saying that the “tendency to imagine drugs at the centre of a variety of ancient religions says rather more about *us ...*”.⁹⁴ Living in a society that is characterized by individuality and the demand for authenticity, it could be rather expected of its religious outlets to be characterized by these things. The psychedelic experience is completely centred on the individual as it is, quite evidently, based on personal experience. This also lends an air of uniqueness to it. The experience is constantly portrayed as a the direct, unmediated meeting with a higher power or a different reality, a unique experience which, because of its subjective directness, is given a priority that no external authority can ever trump.

As will be demonstrated, Syntheism is heavily indebted to psychedelic thought. Syntheism views entheogens as a way of experiencing reality first hand, uninhibited from the narrowness of ordinary perception. The movement exhibits the somewhat paradoxical view of political activism, where demands for religious freedom are mixed with calls for a complete rejection of society. And Syntheism itself arose out of the Burning Man Festival, and the profound experiences of leading Syntheists at the festival.

3.5. The Irony of Stories

Apart from the esoteric currents, there is one additional ideological perspective, or perhaps a *mode* of being religious, that needs to be accounted for in order to make sense of the Syntheist religion, namely the post-modern predilection for irony, and for thinking of the world as stories, or narratives. Narratives are the way we humans structure our knowledge about existence in the form of comprehensible stories. By structuring reality narratively, a sense of “internal equilibrium and conviviality” can be had in an otherwise quite chaotic senseless;⁹⁵ in other words, narratives allow us to order the world in a way that appear coherent and is meaningful to us. They make sense, quite literally. To the more literal minded person, the stance that everything are stories might seem quite

93 Letcher, *Shroom*, 298.

94 Letcher, *Shroom*, 43.

95 Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14. Quoting Jean-Francois Lyotard.

provoking. They might object that stories are just made up, while for example science is, even if not always perfect, definitely based on hard, unbending facts. There are no reasons to believe in the *story* of Biblical Creation apart from the authority of the Bible itself, but there are plenty of evidential *facts* that supports the theory of evolution. Actually, the theory of evolution is continuously framed in a narrative fashion that is so deeply ingrained that we hardly notice it. It is typical to speak of, for example, the horse's hoof as developed *in order to* being able to run faster, or that organisms are constantly *being* adapted to their environment is telling examples of such purposiveness. Strictly speaking, the hoof is the result of random mutations that happened to give certain individuals a higher chance of living long enough to procreate. During the course of evolution, these mutations resulted in an ability to run faster, which of course increased the chance of survival even further, but there were never an *in order to* involved. In the same manner, organisms aren't *being adapted* by anyone for anything. Organisms just are, they do what they do, sometimes they manage to procreate and eventually they die. Over the course of many generations, we can describe changes in the patterns of organisms as evolution, but this is just that, an abstract description, not an active force of any kind. Of course, there is nothing controversial about this. Every biologist knows that there is no agency involved in evolution, just as they now there is no qualitative hierarchy of better and lesser beings. Nevertheless, they constantly revert to using this kind of purposive language, because that is what is required to give their statements *meaning*.

Unlike 'the story of the story of the horse' ... which, because it has a point to make, provides fascinating reading, 'the story if the horse', told in properly sober and correct Darwinian terminology, has none of these things. Strictly speaking, there is no 'meaning' to the sequence of events, merely a number of contingent influences that we can only guess at.⁹⁶

The point is that when comparing a scientific theory, such as that of evolution, to a myth, such as that of creation, what we compare is not content. The content of the two is dramatically different, and is ultimately what makes the theory of evolution superior to that of Biblical Creation when it comes to describing the natural world. What unites the two is rather the way that their respective content is structured into a coherent story. In this regard they are very much alike; they both tell a story of a world with a purpose, a world that is directed toward a goal and therefore has a reason. Most importantly is that we ourselves is given the leading role in these stories, as the stars of that the show is really all about. This is why that although the theory of evolution might be better at descriptions, Creationism remains relevant as a way of making sense not of the world, but of the human condition. Stories are our way of giving meaning to our surroundings, and to ourselves.

96 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 28.

The role narrative plays in identity making should not be underestimated, neither in the individual sense nor in the collective one. Examples of story telling can be found throughout history, from the ancient world to our own.

Homer's originally oral epics were an essential part of the classical Greek sense of identity ... Through Homer, all Greeks could experience the 'sameness' that differentiated them from the surrounding barbarians ... Even more recently the stories of the founders of the United States of America, Washington, Jefferson, Paul Revere, John Paul Jones, Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett, are used to create a common feeling of 'Americanness' among an immigrant population most of whose genetic ancestors were in quite other parts of the world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when these heroes supposedly shaped their nation.⁹⁷

When a story is used in this big manner, where it defines the collective culture by letting people mirror themselves in it, it is called a "Grand Narrative". The power of good triumphing over the forces of evil through Christianity is a form of grand narrative, as is the belief in human progress through science, or the liberation of mankind from the yoke of oppression through democracy. The stories may change over time, or be replaced by other in the event of dramatic societal upheaval, but some form of narrative is always present. In the postmodern age, however, the paradigmatic narrative is somewhat peculiar.⁹⁸ The postmodern narrative is that, indeed, there are no valid grand narratives at all, only socially constructed stories, tightly bound up with power, of which no one is more true than the next. Prickett basically attributes this relativist stance to the pluralism of modern society. "Though it [postmodernism] often seems to mean many things in art, architecture, literature and philosophy, a common thread running through most of these fields is the fact that it wholeheartedly embraces rather than deploras pluralism."⁹⁹ In being confronted with so many incommensurable and contradicting narratives, the person that wishes to live and function in the world basically has two options. Either they sacrifice plurality for meaning and take a fundamentalist approach, investing everything into one single narrative and rejects all else. Or, they adapt a relativist approach, thus sacrificing meaning for plurality. How then, is one to make sense of a world in which there is no foundation for the grounding of meaning and comprehensibility? Prickett's answer lies in an ironic distancing.

Irony is defined as the "contrast between explicit and implied meaning",¹⁰⁰ basically saying one

97 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 15.

98 Of course, referring to any certain period of time as making up a postmodern *age* is problematic. Even if the ideological current that is referred to post-modernism really is the successor of modernity, and not just a new phase within the modern paradigm, one can hardly say that even the Western society, as a whole, has arrived there yet. Postmodern "thought" or postmodern "philosophy" might have been better choices of words, but then again, they don't have the same compelling ring to them. I'm sticking with postmodern age for, as it is, narrative purposes.

99 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 17.

100 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 37.

thing but meaning the opposite. As meaning is construed contextually, this makes irony a narrative art.¹⁰¹ One is constantly having to relate to a duality of meanings, where the implication is that the meaning of a statement really is false even though it is never explicitly said so.

Paul de Man, has described it [irony] as a capacity to know, but not overcome, 'inauthenticity' – even giving it, in the end, a quasi-transcendental status. We can all, I suspect, recognize the particular tone of a piece of writing or speech where the author wishes us to remain sceptical of the view being advanced, even as it is not put forward.¹⁰²

This lends an existential dimension to irony, in that it demands of us that we put ourselves outside of the meaning of the story we tell, that we recognize that it is ultimately false and inauthentic, but that we nonetheless go on telling the story, respecting its narrative structure, and wilfully play by its inherent rules. An ironic stance allows the person living in a pluralist world to partake in the telling of several contradicting stories, to alternate between narratives of absolutism and of relativism, of intuition and of rationalism, of love and of hate, without having to finally pick sides. She can describe herself as nothing but the product of biological evolutionary processes, but still maintain that her creativity carries a spark of the divine. She can say that the universe is cold and without meaning, but still feel that God cares for her, because she is telling two different stories for separate occasions. She might not believe in any of them exclusively, but she believes in them both enough for them to be meaningful.

Davie has famously denoted two modes of contemporary religiosity, “believing without belonging” and “belonging without believing”, referring to how individuals might have religious beliefs without belonging to a congregation, or conversely belonging to a congregation but not really believing in its tenets.¹⁰³ The ironic religious mindset might be better described as “believing without believing”; adhering to a faith without never truly committing to it. If late-modern religion is sometimes described as a super-market where a variety of faiths is presented to the spiritual consumer to be bought according to his or her tastes, the religious ironist doesn't buy into anything at all, but merely browses and occasionally try on the hilarious shirt just for the laugh of it. If contemporary spirituality is said to be govern by choices, even rational choices, the religious ironist doesn't ultimately chose anything at all, for s/he knows that in the end, it was all a big scam. Note that this is not necessarily as depressingly nihilist as it first may sound. Although the ironic mindset rejects authenticity and sincerity, it is at the same time a way of reaching out to and being with other people. In his study of hipster culture, the archetype of the late-modern ironist, Schiermer remarks

101 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 43.

102 Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, 45.

103 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

that irony is not so much of a choice, but rather something that is forced upon the ironist when the late-modern culture's demand for individual authenticity clashes with a consciousness of the imitational aspects of social life. We are told to be unique individuals, but yet we become individuals entirely by imitating others. As such, hipster culture revolves around a mockery of identity markers; ugly t-shirts, silly hats, sentimental music records and bad taste in movies are employed in an ironic way to express how pathetically inauthentic they all are. Once, these identity markers were invested with a great deal of cultural value, they represented the cutting edge of the cultural development and individual expression. Now, they are just a remnant of an era gone by, a reminder that everything will be used up and discarded. "It is implied that these items – emblems of other cultures, 'segments' or groups – are sold and enjoyed by the meter (by these groups). They exude a lack of individuality."¹⁰⁴ Hipsters may watch old children cartoons on VHS-tapes, listen to their parents corny LP-records, or insist to only take pictures with analogue disposable cameras, just to revel in bad taste. What might seem somewhat contradictory though, or even a bit ironic, is that in the midst of this mockery and contempt there arises some sort of fascination and genuine affection for these failed cultural objects. By indulging in failed culture, they express an appreciation for it that, although being ironic, is no less genuine. "The ironic attitude towards technologies of recent past hides a quasi-intellectual awareness of the proper 'embeddedness' in certain paradigms of fascination and attraction at totally captivating the senses, but possible to transcend with the spirit."¹⁰⁵ As such, the ironic stance to that which has been discarded and deemed obsolete allows them to transcend not only this rejection, but also the stigma of inauthenticity. The failed objects of the past are once again imbued with meaning, a meaning that is nonetheless shared with other hipsters.

Irony, however, does not simply express a certain negative, disillusioned relation to the world felt by the lonely and melancholic philosopher ... Lonely is the ironist that is constantly being taken seriously. Irony is first and foremost a way of being together ... The successful understanding of an ironic remark creates instant social bonds, whereas mistaken irony often creates embarrassing and awkward situations.¹⁰⁶

Irony is the hipster's way to redeem the past for its inevitable failure, and to redeem the individual of its inauthenticity. Rather than locking her inside a solipsist prison where everything is arbitrary, irony lets the hipster escape and create collective values in a world that has rejected all absolute values. Irony might be the only way to achieve meaning after being told that no true meaning can exist. Seen in this light, the Missionary Church of Kopimism actually starts to make quite a lot of

104 Schiermer, *Late-modern Hipsters*, 173.

105 Schiermer, *Late-modern Hipsters*, 179.

106 Schiermer, *Late-modern Hipsters*, 171.

sense. There is nothing paradoxical about the movement taking a sincere direction even though it started out as a joke, but rather it is the joke that makes the sincerity possible. By not only jokingly refer to themselves as a religious movement, but also to actually carry on this joke, Kopimists can access the sincere meaning making potential of certain forms of ideas that has largely been cast aside in contemporary culture, not least by themselves. For what is religion, if not *the* rejected ideological object of modernity? Is there anything that has been more accused of hive-mindedness, trickery and inauthenticity than religion has in the modern era? Yet, at the very same time religious symbolism holds a promise of intimate community, sincerity and of authentic experience that is hard to deny. Thus, to safely enjoy the warm embrace that religion offers, the post-modern world offer few alternatives but to so either fanatically, or ironically. To be religious in the post-modern age, one might simply have no choice but to be a hipster, and the Syntheists are no exception. As will be demonstrated, *Creating God in the Internet Age* does in many ways revolves around the tension between perceiving religion as the remedy for a lack of intimacy and authenticity of the modern world, but at the same time ultimately considering all religions to be fantasies made up by human beings. In the discussion, I will argue that it is precisely through irony that this tension is dissolved.

3.6. Summary

This chapter has delineated three esoteric currents, all part of the cultic milieu, as relevant for the understanding of Syntheism: individualism, holistic science and entheogenic religiosity.

Individualism locates final authority in the authentic individual subject. The preferences, choices and outlook of the individual are indisputable and indivisible, and cannot be reduced to social conditioning (except when they are considered inauthentic). As such, all social phenomena are seen as simply the spontaneous decision of the individuals of society, not as consequences of social structures, and therefore all change must start at the individual level, not the social one. Holistic science interprets the theories of modern science to point towards a holistic understanding of the cosmos, human beings included. Reality is seen as interconnected rather than segmented, thus breaking down the boundaries between the spiritual and the material. This is aimed at reinstating the significance of spirituality, which is perceived as having been cast aside by the materialistic modern sciences. Entheogenic religiosity comes as a natural consequence of individualism and the priority of the subjective experience. By the use of psychedelic substances, the psychonaut can transcend the limitations of the subjective self and come in contact with a higher form of consciousness, the cosmic Overmind. The cosmos is then experienced as enchanted and holistic, and the psychonaut is thereby realigned with her place in the natural world. Finally, an increasingly

important mode of religiosity in the post-modern age is the ironic stance. When faced with the likeliness that any religious truth claim will ultimately be proven to be false, when at the same time no meaning can be found without such truth claims, the post-modern individual is forced into becoming a religious hipster. In being religious, but ironically so, the hipster can keep adhering to the meaning making narratives of religions, while avoiding the embarrassment of being wrong - or even worse, fooled – in the end.

4. Creating God

Synteism – att skapa Gud i internetåldern was released in 2014, and is the first attempt at formulating and explicating a philosophical and theological ground for the Syntheist movement to stand upon. It is written in a highly intellectual style, making use of a plethora of specialized, many times invented, philosophical terms which, in the tradition typical of continental existentialism, are seldom properly defined upon their first usage. A term might not be explained at all until several hundred pages past its initial use, and even then not very clearly. In spite of heavily referring to a wide variety of philosophers, scientists, psychologists and theologians, the authors seldom make use of direct quotes, and there are no footnotes or other means of referencing. Taken together, this amounts to a very dense volume which takes some effort to fully comprehend. One needs a certain familiarity with theoretically oriented texts in order to digest the contents of the book, and even then, the lack of quotes and references makes orienting among the barrage of names of thinkers very hard, as there is little way of actually ascertaining the source of any given statement. As such, one can assume that the book is geared towards an audience that is both intellectually driven as well as academically trained, something that is not least implied by the fact that the Syntheist Facebook groups consists largely of academics. What is also noteworthy is the heavily polemical style that the book is written in.

In this part of the essay, I intend to sketch out the most crucial lines of thought for understanding the Syntheist ideological construct. These regards the nature of religion, the nature of humanity and their place in the world, the roles that gods play and, most importantly, how these concepts relate to each other. Taken together, these concepts make up a world view, and can roughly be said to correspond to the esoteric currents and religious modality that were accounted for in section 3. As such, the ideological current of spiritualized individualism (section 3.2) is recognizable in *Networks of Dividuals* (4.2) and *Morality and Ethics* (4.4). The holistization of science (3.3) is present in *Atomism, Rationalism and Modernity* (4.3), but also to some degree in section 4.2. Entheogenic shamanism (3.4) is a discourse that is present in *The Psychedelic Practice of the Infinite Now* (4.5). Finally, the ironic stance discussed in section 3.5 is spread out over *Religion* (4.1), *An Ironic Polytheism* (4.6) and *Enchanted Atheism* (4.7). Take note that due to the scattered structure of *Creating God in the Internet Age*, where terms and words are very much given meaning by their relation to each other and not stringently derived from preconceived definitions, the analysis can not be completely stringent. I have, to the best of my ability, tried to systematize the Syntheist thought into categories and to avoid employing key terms before they are explained but in the cases that this was not possible, the reader will simply have to be patient and move on.

The section intends to as accurately as possible describe the Syntheist world view as is presented in *Syntheism – Att skapa gud i internetåldern*. For the sake of convenience, I chose to consistently use to the book's English title, *Creating God in the Internet Age*, when referring to it, even though it is the Swedish original that is actually being analysed. For stylistic reasons I have chosen not to write out the full title of the book each time it is referred to. Instead I substitute it with terms such as “Syntheist thought”, “Syntheists” or simply “Syntheism”. This is not to suggest that there is *one* strict version of Syntheist doctrine that Bard & Söderqvist somehow decides, or that all Syntheists think alike, but merely a matter of convenience. In a similar manner, any statement or truth claim made within this section should be read as reflecting those made in *Creating God in the Internet Age* and not my own, even when this is not explicitly stated.

4.1. Religion

As “religion” is a particularly ambiguous term, it is the point where our inquiries regarding Syntheism ought to commence. What does the authors of *Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age* mean when speaking of themselves as founders of a new “religion”? There are basically four meanings given to the term. First of all, religion is a *fundamental* quality of humanity's way of relating to the world they live in as it is the concept to which they ground their ultimate truths. Second, as a way of monopolizing truth, religion exerts *power* over its subjects, and legitimises the reigning power structures. Third, religion possesses an unparalleled ability to *unite* people, and bind them together as a collective. Lastly, religion is an altogether human *invention*, that does not so much tell us anything about the world in itself, but rather about ourselves and our need for meaning in our lives.

First of all, it is established that religion is a fundamental human activity. “Throughout history, there has never been a human society where religion hasn't been practised in some form ... This is indisputable. Even our dead cousins the Neanderthals buried their kin in a ritualistic manner which indicates some form of religion.”¹⁰⁷ Religiosity, or more precisely religious faith, is said to be a basic temperament of humanity, an inevitable way of relating to the world. This is due to the fact that whenever trying to decide what is true and what isn't, we tend to stand on quite shaky epistemological grounds. Nobody can say to know very much about anything else than their expertise, if they can even be considered experts at all; the rest of the time we have to turn to one authority or the other and simply hope to God they are right. “Thus we chose our authorities on more or less obscure grounds, and then we chose to believe what they claim without the possibility of confirming this in any way at all ... We believe in that which corresponds to what we already

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Bard & Jan Söderqvist, *Syntheism - att skapa Gud i internetåldern*, (Falun: Bookmark förlag, 2014), 13.

believe. *We are religious.*”¹⁰⁸ As such, religion is here presented as the unfounded, leap of faith that has to be taken to accept all the unverifiable aspects of our lives as true. It might be tempting to say that this view labels religion as irrational, but there is actually more to the argument than that. This is because the role of philosophy, it is said, is to work with truth. Truth, however, can never exist on its own, it needs to be grounded in something that lies outside of it. Just as all logical systems need meta logic to be proven true, philosophy needs metaphysics as a ground for its truth claims. And metaphysics needs theology. “Philosophy is based in metaphysics, and metaphysics is in turn based on theology.”¹⁰⁹ Where philosophy is the enquiry of the nature of a given truth, metaphysics stipulates the conditions for this truth. Theology, on the other hand, makes up the attempt to verbalize the many times unpronounceable or even mystical acceptance of the premises of metaphysics; it orders metaphysics into a comprehensible story. Syntheism is therefore understood partly as an attempt to illuminate the necessary assumptions made in order to give meaning and sensibility to the world that human beings inhabit, as “each and every paradigm needs their own blind but nevertheless relevant faith as its elemental axiom,” regardless if its stated facts are objectively true or not.¹¹⁰ Instead of being irrational, this view of religion might be better described as arational or, to use the Syntheist term of choice, transrational.

As theology is the ground for the unquestionable validity of any metaphysical paradigm, it is of course ultimately bound up with the reigning power structures. The governing bodies are always in league with the producers of truth that gets to dictate the cultural conditions of being in a society.

Without popes we would never have had any kings, and without university professors the world would never have seen any industrialists. The cardinals eats pheasant with the nobles, and the academics ingests beef steak with the corporate owners for a good reason. They split and balance the *power* in the prevailing paradigm between each other.¹¹¹

Religion thus play a vital role in telling the story that legitimises the present state of the world, the *metanarrative* of any given society. In pre-historic time, people lived in small, tribal societies, practising a pagan religiosity. The conveyor of truth was the spoken word, and the religious myths of the time was centred on the origins, existence and most importantly *survival* of the tribe. With the invention of agriculture and the feudal society, the world also saw the advent of written language and monotheist forms of religion. The religious myths now come to be about the transcendent *eternity*, as a way of legitimizing the increasing inequality between the lords and their subjects by promise of better conditions in the eternal life after this. Feudalism was succeeded by capitalism,

108 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 27-28.

109 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 32.

110 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 33.

111 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 40.

whose truths could be as mass produced as any other consumer product by the printing press. By making the Christian Bible widely available, the invention of the printing press effectively made the private dialogue between God and the individual possible, and the religious narrative becomes increasingly centred upon the individual's spiritual *progress* to the point where the individual ultimately replaces God. By dictating the metanarratives of the respective epochs, religion has made sure that people have obeyed their tribal chiefs for the sake of survival, bowed down to their feudal lords for the sake of their eternal soul, and worked in the corporate owners' factories for the sake of progress.¹¹²

What one should keep in mind when speaking about power, however, is that it is a concept that is far too complex for to be thought of as just acting oppressively. It is at the same time very much a creative force. While power does subjugate individuals and moulds them into a shape that fits its needs, it is precisely the same processes that binds these individuals together into a collective. The community-making potential might be the single most important meaning that religion is given within Syntheist philosophy.

The term *religion* comes from medieval French and denominates a strong and sincere affinity that exists in a collective, a group of people that by establishing this mutual loyalty makes up a congregation. This French term stems from the Latin word *re-ligare*: to reconnect with something, to once again bind those that for some reason have lost touch with each other, that ought and/or want to belong together. Thus, when we follow the term back to its source we find that religion originally is considered a social practice, organised to create strong bonds between people, a communion that in certain cases, but far from always, also includes a togetherness between people and a set of gods, a *theism*.¹¹³

In Syntheist thought, religion is about the creation and upholding of a community, and so it has always been. The reason that religion is a fundamental human need, is that we are fundamentally collective beings. A wide range of behaviours and decisions that often seem irrational, arbitrary and many times even outright cruel, more often than not turns out to be for preserving the integrity of the group one is belonging to. “We are ... no saints, but sometimes we can be really good team players.”¹¹⁴ The big problem with this is that we are living in a society that has no room for genuine communities, but instead promotes the individual subjects as the ideal. Instead of togetherness, we are encouraged to seek only affirmation of our own individuality, which eventually results in alienating us from the collective intimacy of a community, locking us in a “narcissistic prison, the pathological self-centredness that for ever is our companion.”¹¹⁵ Thus, the society that man has

112 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 61.

113 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 31.

114 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 27.

115 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 37.

created fosters alienation and disconnectedness, but also strife, selfishness, greed, exploitation and, to top it as, a deep cynicism towards living. The only way out of this condition is the transformative power that only a religion can have to bind people together, and Syntheism seeks to be this force as the world enters the Age of Information, partly by providing an entirely new metanarrative; the story of information media as the constituting of the human condition. As each form of society has been characterized by the main way of spreading information - the spoken word of the hunter-gatherers, the written word of the feudalists and the printed text of the capitalists - the Age of Information is characterized by the internet. Instead of understanding our own place in the world in relation to survival, eternity or progress, Syntheism seeks to place the interactive *event* as the metaphysical motor.¹¹⁶

Lastly, whatever we think of as “God” is ultimately a creation of human imagination. “Gods”, it is said, “are necessary human constructions, historically conditioned projections upon existence, generating superobjects and are designed and adapted for the social circumstances.”¹¹⁷ There is no Creator from which everything originates, there is no divine spark in each and every individual, and there are certainly no souls or spirits flying about that just can't wait to communicate to the living what life is really about. Considering this view, Syntheism could be seen as a form of atheism; which it actually is. At the same time, however, it is still very much a religion. This may appear somewhat paradoxical at first, until we realize that in contrast to traditional atheists, Syntheists reason that the fact that something is made up does not necessarily make it untrue. A typical atheist holds that if the religious object does not exist outside man, it doesn't really exist at all and is therefore meaningless. Syntheism, on the other hand, argues that it is precisely *because* it does not exist outside our imagination that religion can be meaningful.

Man is the meaning making animal that constantly scans her surrounding world in a search for patterns that indicate and confirm various causal relations to induce a sense of safety. And if we can't find any patterns we don't shun away from simply making up our own. We give our lives meaning and cohesion through a distant utopian scheme. *God* is another name for the utopia, and the utopia is another name for God.¹¹⁸

Just existence by itself, on the other hand, certainly isn't a guarantor for meaningfulness, and not even considered that impressive. “That something exists in the ontic sense is not very special, *e.coli*-bacteria does that too, and in large quantities for that matter.”¹¹⁹ Religion is thus the

116 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 61.

117 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 34.

118 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 34-35.

119 The term "ontic" comes from the existential philosophy of Heidegger and refers to a thing's existence independent of a human conceptual world, as opposed to "ontological" which refers to a thing's existence in and as part of such a world. Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 13.

grounding for ultimate meaning for a creature who desperately needs meaning to function properly in the world. God may be just an illusion, but so is everything else that are meaningful to humans. An important distinction that is made, is namely that an illusion is not the same as a delusion. Turning to Freud and psychoanalysis, Bard & Söderqvist notes that “delusions always contradicts reality, something that an illusion doesn't necessarily has to do. The characteristic of the illusion is a dominating element of wish-fulfilment.”¹²⁰ Thus, as the illusion of the collective, religion is no less than the aggregative wishes of the collective, its visionary utopian scheme for a better, more meaningful world. It might be a fantasy, but for the meaning making creature that is man, it is no less true for that. “[Man constantly] reinvents God, fills the flexible and durable term with ever new dreams and wishes. Syntheism is simply the name of the next revolutionizing phase in this process without end.”¹²¹

4.2. Networks of Dividuals

Religion is what breaks the desperate state of alienation. But what causes it? What hinders us from experiencing community and affinity, what is it that blocks the feeling of belonging to meaningful whole? According to Syntheism, this is because of the autistic, imprisoning nature of the ideology of individualism. As mentioned in section 4, the basic idea of individualism is that of the autonomous subject, the authentic, inviolate core of the subjective experience. The idea started, writes Bard & Söderqvist, with “the most famous tweet of the seventeenth century”, Rene Descartes famous line “I think, therefore I am”. This innocent looking phrase came to shape the view of consciousness for several centuries, in that it sets the subjective, inner experience as the primal quality of existence. One might be able to truly know much else, but at least I, the subjective thinker, must exist, otherwise the thinking couldn't have been thought; therefore the term “the Cartesian subjective”. The ideology of individualism is later completed by Immanuel Kant, by separating the subject from the object, postulating that they exist independent of each other.¹²²

By isolating the *subject* from the *object* Kant makes it possible for the subject to deify the object and at the same time plan for its material and sexualized seduction, conquest and colonization ... Now it is the rising bourgeois middle class of patriarchal Enlightenment philosophers, scientists, industrialists, capitalists and colonizers of the eighteenth century that sees and seizes the opportunity when *the new individualist and atomist metaphysic* nourishes their ambitions. The ambitions of the bourgeois are simply transformed into the individualist ideal.¹²³

120 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 22.

121 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 22.

122 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 69.

123 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 69-70.

Floating freely, unfettered by the world of objects, the subject's main activity is that of observation from afar. The individualist ideal is thus not of being invested, but being distant from the world, objectifying it through the act of observation. The scientist seeks to understand the world by studying it *objectively*, the author treats their ideas as *objects* by claiming original ownership to them and the capitalist refers to the numerical *objective* value of things rather than their emotional subjective values. As the individual subject now has become detached from the world of objects, which also includes other people, it exists in a vacuum, void of potency to act as well as connecting to the world in a meaningful way. The subject has become alienated, and as nothing else remains, it turns to the comforts of narcissistic self-obsessiveness. Narcissism arises as a way of coping with the idea that the world exists without the subject. Either, “all production of values and identity are displaced back into the world – for example in creating and worshipping a *god*”, or it takes the form of self-deification, “the castrated subject transforms into *the omnipotent centre of existence.*” Everything that is true, meaningful and valid is completely up to the individual subject to decide, because there is nothing that binds such values outside of the subject. “Thereby the *cartesian fantasy* is realized, with the subject as the only steady basis of existence and therefore also its centre.”¹²⁴ Because of this, the postmodern state, with its radical relativism, is not seen so much as that which begins where modernity ends, but rather as the logical conclusion of the Kantian paradigm that is modernity. Postmodernism is not seen as something that is challenging the authority of objectivity and rationalism, but as a radicalization of the ontological prerogative of the subjective experience.

During the twentieth century, individualism is developed into *cultural relativism* in the universities, kantianism's ideological garbage dump and logical endpoint, where all that is left are unfounded solipsist dogmas that are taboo to compare qualitatively because of an increasing political over-sensitivity.¹²⁵

Needless to say, Syntheism wants nothing to do with individualism. Alexander Bard has gone so far as to say that he has “been in war with individualism for the past 15 years.”¹²⁶ On the contrary, the wish to see people as “dividuals”; the understanding of the subjective experience as being composed of a range of “irreducible diversities”,¹²⁷ rather than the indivisible core of existence. Taking a great deal of inspiration from the growth of the internet, Syntheism is very much a network theology. The network, as a social metaphor, means that people are defined by interconnectedness. They seek interconnection, and they are defined by interconnection. In fact, it is

124 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 106.

125 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 73.

126 “I särklass med Niklas - Alexander Bard om individualism” YouTube video, 0:35, posted by I särklass med Niklas, June 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Da-bB0g9LqY>

127 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 358.

only this interconnectedness in itself that it is relevant to speak of; the whole rather than the parts. Just as it would be irrelevant to speak of which individual computer a piece of information on the internet originally stems from, it is irrelevant to speak of what ideas or actions that belongs to an individual person. A network is never just a collection of individual nodes, it is defined by interaction. It is the combination of actors, and the flow of relations that carries meaning. “It is the pure complexity in the networks that give the agents and the phenomena their value, not the other way around.”¹²⁸

The network metaphor is utilized to understand not only the relationships between people, but (in)dividual humans as well. The human body, brain included, is made up of a range of different biological functions, cells, bacteria and so on, who more often than not works independently of each other. The human mind consist of emotions and urges that can stand in stark conflict with each other, which the mind then has to work hard to control and align. And a person's conception of the world, her ideas and preferences, are all socially conditioned and given from innumerable sources. “A person is not a single indivisible unit, a person is many divisible units that are working together.”¹²⁹ Each and every person is the totality of networking processes. The subjective experience is thus the product of all these different processes working in tandem, not of an authentic essence. But most importantly, this does not matter in any way, for the Syntheist does not seek any such authenticity, but strives for interaction. The Syntheist consumes, digest and alters information, she receives and passes on, but does not claim authorship. “We can never get a sustainable identity as the inventor of ideas, but rather as their potential transit routes and temporary containers.”¹³⁰ Agency is stressed over individual existence.

The inadequacy and uselessness of the Cartesian individual as a basic concept in the new cyber world does that the individual *dies* ... and is replaced by the *network* as the bearing metaphysical idea. The human being is transformed from an individual chained to the narcissistic self into an open and mobile *dividual* in an all-encompassing, gigantic network that increasingly behaves as one single *emergent phenomenon*, as one single globally connected *agent*. We call this agent with historically seen godlike proportions and attributes *the internet*.¹³¹

4.3. Atomism, Rationalism and Capitalism

Individualism may be the overarching ideology of modernity, but there are also three auxiliary discourses that upholds the hegemonic status of modern thought and Enlightenment philosophy;

128 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 142.

129 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 38.

130 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 186.

131 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 41.

atomism, rationalism and capitalism.

Atomism is the metaphysically grounded principle that when reducing a phenomena into smaller and simpler parts, you will eventually reach a level where further reduction is impossible; the indivisible core of the phenomena, or its “atoms”. If every phenomena is ultimately composed of nothing but such atomistic building blocks, the consequence is that reduction is possible without any loss of information. Since molecules consists entirely of atoms, there is nothing to be learned from the molecule that can't be learned from studying its individual atoms by themselves. And the other way around, if we could gain a perfect understanding of the indivisible, it would then be possible to deduce everything that happens higher up in the hierarchy. If we have a complete understanding of the atom, not only can we gain a perfect understanding of the molecule, but also of much more complex phenomena such as distant galaxies, biological life and human relations. Atomism has been the basis for much of scientific thought since the early-modern period began. The atoms of physics are of course the most telling example of atomism, hence their name, but we could also see the principle of utility maximization in economics, linguistic atoms in analytical philosophy or the original author in literature as consequences of the same line of reasoning. They all makes up some sort of constituting building block of their respective phenomena, and everything that makes up the phenomena can be reduced to its atomic foundation. In *Creating God in the Internet Age*, what is most emphasized is the important role that the atomistic thought has played in individualism. Atomism, it is said, “does for the object what humanism does for the subject, the two isms are therefore different sides of the same coin, individualism, and with the same authors from the European Enlightenment, most prominently Isaac Newton and Immanuel Kant.”¹³² The Kantian philosophy, which is said to be the basis of the ideology of modernity, divides reality into the genuinely objective and exterior, and the genuinely subjective and interior, which really hasn't got very much to do with one another other. The “axiomatic subject relates to other objects, who like the subject and its Cartesian theatrical stage are constructed first as noumenual and then as phenomenal, indivisible entities with solid substances, that is: as *individuals* and *atoms*.”¹³³

Next in line is *rationalism*. Rationalism is the conviction that human beings are endowed with a capability for reason, which is ultimately capable of uncovering and grasping the fundamental Truths of the universe. Where atomism holds that the information contained within the indivisible building blocks of phenomena is enough to describe the entirety of the phenomena, rationalism holds that human reasoning can actually gain access to this information in its entirety. There is nothing that can't be accurately explained by human reasoning, nothing that “in the least has to

132 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 356.

133 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 203.

appear as mystical or unexplainable to the mind.”¹³⁴ As such, a complete understanding of the physical world is very much possible; it is only a matter of collecting all the relevant empirical data. When our understanding is perfect, everything will be not only predictable and quantifiable, but also controllable. The same goes for societies and individual human beings. By studying ourselves and carefully measuring and quantifying what makes a society ordered, an individual happy and a culture successful, these data can then be used to create an objectively speaking perfect world for ourselves. This line of thought is the basis for instrumentalism as well as the school of moral philosophy called utilitarianism. Rationalism is also the nesting ground for totalitarianism.

The last, but not the least, of the cornerstones of modernity is *capitalism*. According to Syntheist thought, capitalism is characterized by “mass media, urbanization, accumulation of capital, mass education, industrialization and class struggles between the bourgeois and the workers.”¹³⁵ It is given the role as the engine that drives the progress of modernity. It utilizes the advances of the atomistic sciences ability to predict and control to exploit available resources, both natural and human, and then appeals to the rationalist instrumentalism, arguing that exploitation is for the betterment of mankind. When a forest is cut down or the salaries of the workers are kept low, this is legitimized by the generation of wealth, which will eventually benefit everybody. Perhaps most of all, it will benefit coming generation. Even if the workers *right now* won't benefit, the next generation will. “The geniality of capitalism lies first and foremost in the never-ending suspension of the reward, not only for the sadistic patriarchy of the bourgeois, but also for the masochist submission of the working class. *Your children will be better off than you.*”¹³⁶ This belief in progress, inherent in all aspects of modernity, is referred to as *meliorism*.

Meliorism states that there is an objectively development over time, that civilization moves forward and upwards objectively spoken. Not only is technology advancing by becoming increasingly more complex and can solve bigger and bigger problems more easily and with less cost. According to meliorism, even the Syntheist constant *mankind* progresses over time, moving forward and upwards. This means that *a sort of mystical refinement of mankind* is taking place throughout history.¹³⁷

Because capitalism relies on a narrative where human progress is based upon exploitation, it demands constant expansion. To uphold its status as guarantor of progress, it must constantly find new geographical, social and cultural areas to exploit, in a never-ending quest for expansion of wealth, at the expense of human beings as well as global ecology.

134 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 104.

135 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 64.

136 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 72.

137 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 237-238.

The Western welfare state, which is based upon just such an institutionalized wishful thinking of a strong and eternal economic growth, increasingly appears as a cynical pyramid scheme. Coming generations are greeted by enormous debts and severely eroded benefits. Not to speak of the escalating environmental problems that arises as a result of capitalism's unhindered overexploitation of the planet.¹³⁸

The unhindered exploitation and expansion is said to be due to that the fact within the modern paradigm, no other values than numerical are recognized. There is no room for moral, aesthetic or spiritual values, nor for emotion and intuition; it is the “tyranny of numerical slavery *par excellence*”. The subject has been severed and isolated from the world by atomism and individualism, the world has been deprived of qualitative values as only the quantitative is recognized, which ultimately leads to the individual being completely impotent to mount any resistance when the capitalist powers exploits and corrupt everything in its path.

The deeper we delve into its exploitative nature, ideologically as well as historically, the obsessive fixation capitalism has to mathematize all human thoughts and activities to a sum of dollars, a number of votes or a series of orgasms, appears increasingly clearer. Nothing illustrates this better than the American political economist and Nobel Prize winner Garry Becker, who in his work reduces every human activity to some sort of always ongoing rational cost-benefit calculation ... What Becker does exposes regarding his own ideological base is that rationalism, individualism, utilitarianism and the in every way calculating and profit maximizing capitalism really is one and the same. Becker simply takes the Kantian paradigm with its isolated, obsessively colonizing, patriarchal subject to its logical conclusion. And what he finds, is nothing more than a for ever grinding, empty calculating machine.¹³⁹

There is only one area left that hasn't yet been exploited by capitalism: theology. Only through theology can we still create an alternative story of mankind to contest the modern narrative, and Syntheism seeks to accomplish just that, by consolidating theology with “the revolutionary trio of interactivity, quantum physics and the chemical liberation”.¹⁴⁰ By merging these concepts and giving them a deep, existential meaning through theological activity, Syntheism will act as the jumping board breaking the isolation of the self, and once again ascribe value and meaning to the cosmos.

Thus, the atomistic paradigm of science is being replaced by the *relationalism* pioneered in quantum physics. Instead of being perceived as a vast but limited number of isolated atoms, reality consists of interrelated fields and probabilities. The findings of quantum physics suggests that in the sub-atomic world, there aren't really any “building blocks” in the atomistic sense at all, but waves.

138 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 72.

139 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 244.

140 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 244.

What we see as particles are really just the potential convergences of such waves. By the convergence of an infinite number of “monochrome wave motion”, the wave motions give rise to particles as “super positions” of these motions. Particles are but a manifestation of the interaction between the quantum wave motions, thus making our entire world of phenomena a snapshot of these motions. What we experience as the atoms, objects and beings of the material world are really nothing but “eternalisations” of the underlying, constantly changing flow of reality. An eternalisation can be explained as the normalisation of a demarcated section of a ongoing process. For reasons of evolutionary adaptation, humans tend to imagine the world in eternalisations. Our perception gives priority to demarcated objects to eat, demarcated objects to flee from, and demarcated objects to mate with, but totally ignores most of what goes on. “The perception must be incredibly selective in order to process information at the same time as it registers changes in the ever fleeing now”. However, this does not mean that what we perceive represents the ontological nature of the universe, but is rather the “*necessary contraction of information in the mobilistic existence.*”¹⁴¹ We see the world as an eternalized, demarcated object simply because the motions of reality at the super-atomic level flows far too slow for us to have any use of noticing its fluctuations. In the same way that objects are eternalizations of the world, the individual is an eternalization of the subjective experience, and God is an eternalization of our collective dreams and wishes. We find no objective core beneath the ever changing nature of a person, or the goals that are strived towards by a community, but we need to imagine such cores to understand them in a meaningful way. But just as human beings are in a state of constant change and development, so is the Universe. It is mobilistic and monadic, rather than eternalistic and atomistic, consisting of motions upon motions, where everything is interconnected, just as the grand cosmological metaphor of the network.

The network is not only a useful metaphor for understanding social relations, the Universe is in itself one big physical network, where every *phenomena* ... are universally interlaced with each other. *The interlaces* are fundamental, not the illusory objects. Nothing happens independently of anything else. The result is a physics and a universe made up of fields, probabilities, energies and relations, without any on beforehand established laws or delineated objects. Thereby, all support for Kant's fantasy of *the holy object* localized in a deterministic universe regulated by laws disappears. Kant, Newton and Einstein: all these have now been outsailed.¹⁴²

As reality can not be seen as being made up of isolated objects, neither can it be rationally quantified and mathematized. Mathematics is based upon the addition of identical quantities; by adding one of something to an identical one we will get a two. But as reality is always in constant

141 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 133.

142 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 46.

motion, and every phenomena is dependent on every other phenomena, there can never arise two identical objects that can be symmetrically added to each other. Mathematics is, just like our perception, only a simplifying eternalisation. The “phenomena of existence not only has floating boundaries, but are also completely unique, which has the consequence that all our generalisations ... can never be more accurate than arbitrary approximations.”¹⁴³ Because of this, instead of rationalism, Syntheism operates with *transrationalism*, meaning the acceptance of the limits of human rationality. Our rational reason might work sufficiently when applied in some areas, but it is not universal, and when its limits are reach, we have “no more reliable source than *the intuitive reason*, the ideal of the Renaissance and Romanticism.”¹⁴⁴ Syntheism thus places the intuitive reason above the rational, especially as a way of relating to being in the world. The intuitive qualities of reality are just as true, or rather even more true than the rational quantities, because it is quality that produces meaning and coherence.¹⁴⁵ As such, art and beauty express a transrational truth. “*Art is, as Syntheism in itself, implicit rather than explicit, ambiguous rather than monotone, reasonable rather than rational*” and “truer towards life than life itself.”¹⁴⁶ The transrationality of art lies in its anti-reductive tendencies, in its ability to express a multitude of meanings rather than just a single one, to unite the qualities of our subjective existence rather than divide them. There can never be a “because” to art, just as there can be no because to love or to religion. They all represent the qualitative meaning in life that must be kept beyond petty cost-benefit calculation for the sake of capitalist exploitation.

Syntheism thus sets out to be not only a religion, but a force that can oppose the capitalist power structures of the late-modern society. By acknowledging and prioritizing the value of intuition and qualitative meaning over rationality and numerical, economic value, it seeks to undermine the authority of the capitalist hegemony. That is not to say that the Syntheists will engage in any direct form of struggle against the capitalist power, neither in a militant nor in a political fashion. The opposition against capitalism will be made by a “discreet subtraction”; simply by turning away from the corruptive and alienating tendencies of modern society, and instead starting to build a better, parallel world. Instead of bloody revolution, the Syntheists will establish “temporal autonomous zones”, such eco-villages or participatory festivals, where more sustainable ways of lives can be

143 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 267-268

144 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 254.

145 One might object that the term "true" is a flat concept, which either is or isn't, and thus cannot be used comparatively to denote what is more or less true. The Syntheist system of thought, however, is aimed at creating the base of an understanding of the individual as a meaningful and active agent. Therefore, "truth" is more of an existential concept rather than a descriptive one, very much in likeness with general New Age thought. This clearly ties Syntheism to the broader New Age discourse, as will be further demonstrated in sections *The Science of Ontic Indeterminacy* (5.2) and *A Newer New Age* (6.1).

146 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 317-318.

developed and then spread. In doing this, the Syntheist new world order will be ripe to pick up the pieces of the old world, as it crumbles eroded by its own exploitative tendencies. “The Syntheist mission is therefore to build *temples as participatory art manifestations* and *monasteries as revolutionary cells* in the midst of the global empire's initial and most hectic chaos.”¹⁴⁷

4.4. Morality and Ethics

Morals are considered to be something external, and essentially oppressive. Adhering to morality is basically to submit oneself to an externally and ultimately arbitrarily given law established by God, the state, a leader or any other authoritative figure. “The presumption is that the subject that acts needs to be disciplined, tamed and subjected to authority rather than acting freely according to the own will. To be moral is primarily about *following laws* without questioning them.”¹⁴⁸ Laws are seen as a form of “anthropotechniques”, that is mankind's way of domesticating herself through the employment of systematized techniques. Through the adherence to law, our lives are said to be dominated by the “anthropotechniques and the accompanying *asceticism*”.¹⁴⁹ People must be controlled and deprived of what they crave in order for them to agree to be exploited, and in order to achieve this, morality is born. Because of this, the powers in charge are always keen to produce moral imperatives for their subjects to adhere to. Moral laws are always absolute, can never be questioned, and their function are always to bend the subjects to the needs of those in power. “Christianity for example has grown the strongest and exercised the most power when its preaching against sin and the sinners has been the most aggressive...”¹⁵⁰

Therefore, Syntheism rejects morality and moralism, and its followers seek instead to be *ethical*. “Ethics” are understood as our internal process of evaluation, our inner conviction of what is right and what is wrong.¹⁵¹ Instead of blindly following the orders of an external power, the Syntheist should act out of her own convictions. “To be an ethical being is to go through life with the right and in all aspects fair intentions. Thus, ethics are about what choice is right or wrong to the actor himself.”¹⁵² *Intention* is a key word here. It is the intention behind an act that decides whether it was an ethical decision or not, not any of its potential outcomes. An act must be based on the intention that it is wholeheartedly in line with a person's beliefs, and not upon any form of “speculative appeasement”, or the possibility of personal gain through that act. “The *ethos* of Syntheism is an act

147 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 334.

148 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 213.

149 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 99.

150 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 95.

151 This meaning of the term is quite different from the one that is given to it within academic practical philosophy.

There, "moral" is defined the normative values that exists in and govern any given society, while "ethics" are the attempts to systematically derive what decisions are the right ones to make based on these values.

152 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 212.

of will, an identification with the act, *I'm doing this only because I'm the one that should be doing this*, without the least trace of the alternately appeasing and calculating ulterior motives of traditional religion.”¹⁵³ This brings us to the other key aspect of Syntheist ethics, namely *acting*. As was discussed under “Networks of Dividuals”, the defining quality of being is not merely existing, which isn't anything special at all, but interactivity. As human beings in the age of information, we strive to not only connect to networks of other human being, but also to be part of these network by interacting in them. It is the *activity* of sharing of information, of commenting on information and of modifying information that gives us value in the network, not simply being there. Likewise, for our ethical standpoints to have value, they must not simply be held but acted upon. Syntheism thus discriminates between the *reactive* attitude and the *active* attitude, terms borrowed from the philosophy of Nietzsche. The reactive attitude is one of anti-agency, to wilfully subject and annihilate one's authentic self. This attitude results in a *slave mentality*, where the subject, in identifying with the passive victim, “flees *the authentic intimacy* by fear of losing the masochistic pleasure in which it has found its existential safeness.”¹⁵⁴ The active attitude is, rather than a passive observer that of an acting agent, it “seeks an impression, an effect upon the world, a confirmation of the agent's interplay with the surroundings, in order to achieve existential affirmation, a realization of the own substance.”¹⁵⁵ This emphasis upon agency must be underlined in order to understand the role of ethics within Syntheism. Ethics exist as the basis for authentically acting in the world, for it is only through interaction that one can become a part of it. Therefore the Syntheist agent should *identify* with her intentions, and act accordingly to these intentions, because in doing this it is her authentic self that is manifested in the world. In this, Syntheism salvages the possibility of living authentically in a world where the individual is dead. One might not be able to become an authentic individual, but one can act as an authentic subject. “It's about making *the Syntheist agent and her desires and drives* into an existential hero rather than a pathetic victim. The Syntheist agent is in other words identical with the *nietzschean ubermensch*.”¹⁵⁶ This amounts to what is referred to as *truth as an act*, when truth is defined as arising from acting out ones inner desires, and not depriving oneself because of the demands of an external power. Life is about the joy and ecstasy of being in and interacting with the world, not chastising oneself for the ascetic demands of a king, a state or a god, and this is what Syntheism seeks to amount to. “*Be your desire, be your drives, ignore everything else, that way you'll be living life to the fullest!*”¹⁵⁷

153 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 126.

154 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 216.

155 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 215.

156 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 216.

157 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 225.

As evident by the present section, Bard & Söderqvist's interpretations of canonical figures and concepts of Western philosophy differs from those commonly held by scholars of philosophy to say the least. Some readers might even ask themselves whether Bard & Söderqvist have actually fully comprehended their sources, or if the accounts given in *Creating God in the Internet Age* are actually just a mix-up of misunderstandings. Before drawing such conclusions, I urge the reader to be somewhat cautious. As scholars, our analytical task should not lie in rating or criticizing the internal coherency of any given system of thought, but to provide answers as to why does a religious movement make the truth claims that it does, even if and perhaps especially when these truth claims are seemingly incoherent, contradictory or evidently false. As will be further demonstrated in the section *A Newer New Age* (6.2), the Syntheist ethical system is actually a way of tying the movement to the discourse of individual spirituality that was accounted for in section *Esoteric Currents I: Late-modernity and the Power of the Individual* (3.2) even after having officially denounced philosophical individualism, and not simply a bricolage of intellectual confusion.

4.5. The Psychedelic Practice of the Infinite Now

As mentioned above, Syntheism recognizes that no less than three dramatical revolutions are taking place as the world enters the age of information. The first two, the internetisation of the planet Earth and the relational paradigm shift within science as well as philosophy, has already been covered. The last one is the “*chemical liberalisation within physiology*”.¹⁵⁸ The chemical liberalisation is based on the stand point that the inner life as well as external body of a person, from her looks to her emotions to the very way she perceives reality, is due to her chemical and hormonal make up. Chemical compounds have the ability to change a people's mood, alter their bodies in dramatical ways, and even disrupt cognitive categories such as time and space. In the old paradigm of modernity, such alterations were seen as inauthentic, perverse or even dangerous due to the belief in the sanctity of the genuine individual. An authentic individual was a sober one. Because Syntheism utterly and finally rejects individualism, it also rejects sobriety as something false and constructed. “The human brain is a perpetual battle field for the conflicts of many different hormones and chemicals. There is no sober I. Abstaining from alcohol or any other external stimuli does not mean that there is a chemical equilibrium in our brain...”¹⁵⁹ The Syntheist individual will thus not be ashamed of turning to the aid of chemicals in order to develop and enhance herself. Hormones can be used to alter ones sex, and drugs for enhanced mental focus or increased sexual pleasure, all for

158 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 40.

159 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 325.

the sake of “modify and develop her creative multitude of personalities.”¹⁶⁰

The most important purpose of the chemical liberation however, at least for the purposes of this essay, is naturally the potential that psychedelic drugs has to trigger intense spiritual experiences. As should be apparent at this point, that the meaning “religion” is given within Syntheism is that of community. The *religious* experience thus refers to experiencing oneself as part of a whole that is larger than the subjective self, free from the isolating cynicism and alienation of individuality. What is much more private, though, is the *spiritual* experience, the personal, internal counter with the divine.¹⁶¹ Spirituality, it is claimed, can be neither intellectualized nor communicated. It can only be felt, and at best be described metaphorically afterwards; in essence, it is “an *inner* and *transcendental* experience”, and said to be fundamental for the Syntheist subject.¹⁶² Basically, spirituality is given the meaning of mysticism, and it is characterized of feelings of infinity and oceanity.

What characterizes the spiritual experience is first and foremost its production of the infinity in the now, which makes it transcend the quantitative, put the quality before the quantity, and thereby enables the existential and thereby ethical priority of life and enjoyment before death and pain. The *infinite now* overcomes the extended and perhaps even lifelong suffering not just in the moment that it is concretely felt, but even more as the *identity producing memory* that generates the *ethical substance*, something that arises first afterwards, in the processing and *integration of the event* in the fantasy of life, where it lives on as an always identity generating abstraction.¹⁶³

Borrowing the terminology of Sigmund Freud, the infinite now is said to be characterized of feelings of oceanity, the blissful state of being within one's mother's womb where all is connected as one, “the mother, the child and everything else united in a cosmos free from confusing differences”.¹⁶⁴ It is a state where the subject transcends its individual boundaries, experiencing itself as merging with the most extensive network imaginable, the Universe. Transcendence in the Syntheist meaning does in no way entail any actual journey to or contact with some form of “higher” or “spiritual” world or existence. It is simply a way of describing the oceanic feeling of unity. The Syntheist transcendence is ultimately immanent.

The eternity in time and infinity in space aren't any forms of extensions in some form of Platonic space-time, but poetically titled compact concentrations of passionate presence ... The eternity in time and the

160 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 325.

161 Actually, the words "religious" and "spiritual" are used somewhat synonymously except for the rare occasions when they are intentionally explained. My separation of the two words should be read as a way of elucidating how the personal mystical experience is believed to enable the feeling of being one with the community.

162 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 320.

163 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 154.

164 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 138.

infinity in space can only meet in the *infinite now*, in the minimized freezing of temporality, rather than some form of maximized extension. Thus we aren't eternal beings because we are immortal, but because *we can think and experience eternity* as a logical as well as emotional representation of the infinite, concentrated to the present moment. This in turn means that *the Syntheistic transcendence* is localized within rather than without the immanence.¹⁶⁵

Transcendence is to the Syntheist no more and no less than a psychological activity, an existential experience of connecting to the world.¹⁶⁶ By giving this meaning to the mystical experience, that of oceanic feelings and dissolution of the ego, the spiritual experience is actually merged with the religious one. After having experienced the infinite now, with its feelings of love and unity, one but has to realize the fallacy and futility of living as an isolated individual. The memory of the infinite now, as something “identity producing”, will inevitably make the Syntheist to seek out other forms for experiencing such love and connectedness to the world, such as the warm embrace of a welcoming community. As such, one should not confuse the Syntheist ethos of “be your desires, be your drives” with petty hedonism, for the ethical imperative is to “transcend into something much bigger than the personal subject”.¹⁶⁷ Through the experience of the infinite now, the desire to be more than just an individual and instead part of something bigger than oneself will awaken as one's innermost desire. To become an “existential hero” does in no way mean acting selfishly, but rather the opposite. “Instead *the Syntheist hero* give up herself, anonymously and without reservation, in a brother/sisterlike unification with the community.”¹⁶⁸ The goal that Syntheists strives towards may be unity and connectedness with other, but they start out within their own selves. The oceanic feeling is not only an immensely ecstatic experience, but “the necessary logical antithesis of individualism, the only way for the thinking to resolve and once and for all leave the philosophical prison of the mendacious Cartesian theatre.”¹⁶⁹

That Syntheism place an emphasis on psychedelic drugs is perhaps not unexpected, not least because Alexander Bard has been an active proponent of recreational drug use in the debate regarding narcotics in Sweden.¹⁷⁰ In *The Global Empire*, an entire chapter is dedicated to the liberalisation of drug use.¹⁷¹ That being said, explicit calls to “turn on, tune in and drop out”, to use Timothy Leary's expression, are quite rare throughout the book. There is no doubt that psychedelic practices are encouraged, LSD, mescaline MDMA and psilocybin are described as being “chemicals

165 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 270.

166 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 275.

167 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 127.

168 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 341.

169 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 275.

170 Aftonbladet, "Folk knarkar för att det är kul", <http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/article12348531.ab>

171 The Global Empire.

of fraternization” used to enforce sacralisation,¹⁷² but for the most part, it is the character and relevance of the infinite now that is discussed, not so much the ways of reaching this state. This likely reflect an awareness of the illegal status of the substances involved, something that is framed as outright religious oppression. “The criminalization of the entheogenic substances must be viewed as the biggest and most tragic religious mass persecution in history”.¹⁷³ The counter cultural slogan “*Drug control is thought control*” is quoted in one place, making the identification with Leary and the 60s apparent.¹⁷⁴ Syntheism therefore seeks, it is said, “for mankind to finally enjoy the ultimate *freedom of religion*. It would be in about time.”¹⁷⁵

4.6. An Ironic Polytheism

The Syntheist cosmology deals with four separate gods. Each of these gods are said to represent a different aspect of reality, and their relation to each other is illustrated in the form of a pyramid. At the bottom three corners, we find *Atheos*, *Pantheos* and *Entheos* as the principles of creation, existence and agency. At the top of the pyramid, hovering over the other three, is *Syntheos*, the principle of the utopia, binding the other three together as that which everything strive towards.

First of is *Atheos*, “the god that doesn't exist”. *Atheos* is the concept of nothingness, emptiness, the vacuum. The physical universe consists, for the most part, of vacuum. Distances between the bodies in space are vast, unfathomable, in fact the only word fit to describe them would be “astronomical”. While stars and galaxies in them self are both so gigantic and numerable that the human psyche has a hard time to imagine them, they are but pebbles compared to the gaps of nothingness that lies between them. And when we look really close, we find that even the atoms of which matter consist of is mostly made up of emptiness; a tiny nucleus, orbited by an even tinier electron, separated by a great big nothing. The human existential condition is also very much framed by nothingness. We appear to come into being from nothing at all, we spend our entire lives in desperately clinging to our being as a small pocket of existence in an ocean of emptiness, but eventually all that awaits us and everyone we hold dear is utter and final oblivion. However, just because there is nothing, doesn't mean there isn't something. Even the vacuum, supposedly devoid of everything, exhibits an amount of activity, as shown by the Planck length. “A vacuum is always something and never nothing; it is filled with unceasing fluctuations, and there is never a state of non-being anywhere ... Beneath the Planck length there is pure chaos, above the Planck length

172 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 343.

173 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 329.

174 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 327.

175 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 329.

organized cosmologies arises.”¹⁷⁶ Rather than simply non-existence, the emptiness of the vacuum contains the potentiality for existence to come into being. The order in the universe arises from the chaotic nothingness beneath it. This is also why the human consciousness is directed towards emptiness; it is really from the lack of essence that actual essence arises.

Everything that is beautiful and meaningful in our existence arises from mental voids. When asked to define why we love somebody or something, that very thing in the loved one that we *de facto* love will always escape description. This is because it is precisely *Atheos*, the void, the unknown, the utopia in that which we love, that we love and which become so much more desirable since it can never be pinned down or even formulated in an exhausting sense.¹⁷⁷

Thus, *Atheos* represents not only emptiness and nothingness, but also the potentiality and creativity that arises from Nothing. This might best be illustrated, as so much else in Syntheist thought, by the idea of the network. A network is no “thing”, not an autonomous being that has an existence of its own. That does not mean the network does not exist. “The network” might be just our way of objectifying an immaterial process, but from this process emerges something that is greater than the sum of its parts, more than just its individual nodes.

So what Syntheism does is to place *God*, *mankind* and *the network* next to each other and say: We know that these illusions have never existed in any physical sense. Nevertheless have we pragmatically learned from history that we cannot live without them ... The consequence is that we chose to include the three black holes – God, mankind and the network, at the same time in our new conception of the world, just as the black holes they really are, that is: as *culturally productive voids*.¹⁷⁸

Atheos is celebrated at midwinter, as the “celebration of the existential necessity of the Universe, the celebration of the origin of being and existence.”¹⁷⁹

Next comes *Pantheos*. *Pantheos* is the understanding of the totality of the Universe as something living and divine. God does not exist besides existence, but is existence. Everything that happens, from microscopic quantum fluctuations, to the immense powers generated by the blazing stars, to mundane conversations between friends, are acts of the god *Pantheos*, as they all happen within this divinity. That is not to say that the Universe in any meaning has a will, a purpose or even a consciousness, at least not in any human sense. These are all attributes that humanity has been endowed with in order to survive in an environment that seems to do its best to do away with them. Consciousness, intelligence and intentions are all signs of imperfection and feebleness. The

176 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 309.

177 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 120.

178 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 54.

179 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 120.

Universe, on the other hand, is by definition perfect. “In contrast to human beings the Universe isn't in any sense mortal. This means that the Universe *is* and *does* a whole lots of things, but the *Universe doesn't want anything as such* because *it doesn't need to want anything in order for it to exist* in the way it does.”¹⁸⁰ Expecting that a divine entity should think, or care about us for that matter, is nothing but projecting our own shortcomings upon it. Pantheos has no such shortcomings, but represents the vastness and enormity of existence that go far beyond any human concept. Pantheos also stands for a monist view of the cosmos, that everything that exists are expressions of one and the same substance, simply referred to as “the one”. “Pantheos is infinite multitude beyond infinite multitude, the multiplicity of multiplicities as *the one*”¹⁸¹ Pantheos is celebrated at midsummer.

The third divinity is called *Entheos*, “the god from within”. The term is borrowed from “entheogen”, and symbolizes the human potential for thinking and experiencing the divine. It is from Entheos that the feelings of wonder for existence arises, as well as the impulse for creativity, beauty and art. It is the divinity of the subjective experience and the transcendent, oceanic state of psychedelic consciousness. To “devote oneself to Entheos is to worship the brain and the body's ability to conduct mental journeys and emotionally experience the sacred, to allow oneself to transcend to a new and qualitatively different subject.”¹⁸² However, we should not confuse Entheos with any form of “divine spark” inherent in man, or that it is in any way a gateway to God. This would imply that there exists a divide between the world and the divine, but as has already been explained, this is not the case in Syntheism. The cosmos in itself makes up the divine, and acting within the cosmos is simply to engage with its different modalities, not in any way to unite with it as one is already inevitably part of it. Thus “the Syntheist transcendence is a completely subjective experience, it has nothing to do with some sort of Platonic dualism or Kantian transcendentalism.”¹⁸³ It is the god of change and motion, that which let us act and thus take part of creation. If Pantheos is the god of infinite multiplicity and unity, Entheos is the divinity of the difference within the multiplicity, and the “duration, as well as contingency, oscillation, plurality, transcendence, ecstasy, melancholy, transformation and emergence” that takes place in the Universe.¹⁸⁴ Entheos is celebrated at the spring equinox, in honour of the “enormous and irreducible *diversity* of existence, and therefore also the celebration of our own human *dividuality*.”¹⁸⁵

180 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 140.

181 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 120.

182 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 122.

183 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 122.

184 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 121.

185 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 122.

The last member of the Syntheist pantheon is the one that the movement has taken its name from, *Syntheos*. Where the other three divinities represents that which is in existence, *Syntheos* represents that which might be in the future. It is the God of humanity's dreams, wishes and desires, the utopian thought. It is through *Syntheos* that meaning can be restored, as it is the divinization of the ultimate ground for meaning, utopia. "A human being without desires is a dead human being. In the same way, a society without a utopian thought is a dead society. Syntheism therefore holds that it is not the content of the utopia but the *utopia in itself* that is the divine. *The need for the divine is ... divine in itself.*"¹⁸⁶ If *Entheos* is the God of the dividual subject, *Syntheos* is the God of the collective subject, because it is in being together with and, most importantly, dreaming together with other people that genuine meaning is created. The alienation of modernity is broken by working together for a common goal, and this communal strive is personified by *Syntheos*. It is the final piece of the existential puzzle, the top of the Syntheist pyramid that binds the other concepts together to a coherent whole. *Syntheos* is celebrated at the autumn equinox as the divine quality of the community, but also as the celebration of how everything must return to its source, as "*death in the horizon as the creator of meaning for everything that lives.*"¹⁸⁷

4.7. Enchanted Atheism

The reader should take note of how, time and again, it is stressed that neither of the four above mentioned divinities are considered to exist in an ontic sense. They are not enteties, netiher material or transcendent ones, and have no objective existence in themselves. It is fully admitted that they are beings of imagination, created for the purpose of giving the universe a personal touch.

Atheos, Pentheos, Entheos and Syntheos are creative eternalisations of the void, the cosmos, the differential and the utopia. We use them as foundational and powerful eternalisations to build a functional, relevant and in the deepest meaning of the word *plausible*¹⁸⁸ metaphysic for the internet age. Because they are ontological eternalisations, we don't have to look for them or prove their external ontic existence within nature; the crews of the space stations will never find our gods above the clouds. They are all four a sort of chimera, but very much purposefully created and creative ones.¹⁸⁹

The rejection of gods in any realist sense makes Syntheism a form of atheist religion. Any form of belief in *actual* gods or god-like entities are harshly denounced in much the same manner as is

186 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 123.

187 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 123.

188 The term used in the swedish edition is "tro-värdig", which when translated word for word reads "belief-worthy".

The "deepest meaning" of the word thus hints at a dual meaning where what is plausible is not reserved only for that which we concieve of as rational, logical or factual, but in a transrational sense that which is actually worthy of our belief by merit of being able to generate a meaningful world view.

189 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 119.

commonly done by atheists. Of “objective pantheism”, that is such pantheism that believe in the actual existence of divinities, as found in buddhism, hinduism, sufism and new age, is said that to “hunt for a cosmic consciousness outside man's, as these ideologies do, is nothing but a childish, misguided projection of anthropocentric, inter-narcissistic fantasies”.¹⁹⁰ The atheists have been right all along in that there is no higher reality, and no purpose to existence other than that which we ourselves give it. However, what atheism is *not* right about is that just because something does not exist empirically, does this necessarily has to be meaningless. Syntheism is not concerned with verifying truth claims regarding the character or existence of the divine, but instead with the function of those concepts in experiencing life and existence as meaningful, coherent and connected, something that makes the atheist stance insufficient. The fundamental problem with atheism, or rather “classic atheism”, is that due to being defined purely as a negation, it can never create anything, only denounce. It is completely unfit to build the metaphysics of the information age upon, as its has no real essence but absence.

The acute lack of essence explains why atheists never succeed in building any cathedrals or anything whatsoever except for vane paper monuments regarding their own excellence. It's like a philosophical abstinence group: you meet and you are sober together, completely unaware of the ecstatic party that is going on somewhere else ... It comforts no one and explains nothing.¹⁹¹

Syntheism seeks to remedy what is perceived of as classic atheism's lack of “understanding for mankind's most justifiable *amazement of existence*.”¹⁹² Atheism does has been necessary, in that it shattered our illusions about higher powers, but it is not enough for a meaningful existence. It is the “atheist acid test” which enables us to move from traditional religion to Syntheism. It is “thus no reaction against atheism, but its logical conclusion, its historical and intellectual deepening of”.¹⁹³ Syntheism thus speaks of a *deepened* atheism as opposed to classic atheism, as well as a *deepened* or *subjective* pantheism as opposed to objective pantheism. Subjective pantheism is the belief that gods *do* exist as part of the Universe, not in the objective sense but as projections of our wishes, desires and Utopias. Deepened atheism is the belief that the fact that these divinities are made up by humans doesn't entail that they do not exist. Each and everybody's notion of self are also made up simply for the sense of creating a purpose; our imagined gods are no more but also no less real than our made up egos.

There is nothing wrong with or even very way-out to speak of of God as an actual phenomena, as long as we consider God as an adopted illusion in the existential equation in the same way and of the same power

190 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 208.

191 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 44.

192 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 261

193 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 260.

as the self ... This is how we ultimately create meaning: we make it up, we create fictions from which we spin significant stories, who then acts as a base for all human values.¹⁹⁴

This is why we need religion, and this is why the atheism that only seeks to deny this need is so unsatisfactory. The meaning we give to our existence, our Utopia, must be personified as a divinity to be experienced as valid. Denying God is thus denying our Utopia, resulting in nothing but a downward spiral of cynicism and alienation. The Syntheist theology is therefore engaged with the search for meaning, not externally as the theologies of old, but internally.¹⁹⁵

4.8. Summary

Syntheism comes off as a starkly anti-modern ideology. Bard & Söderqvist quite clearly identifies with the Romantic tradition of thought, rather than the Enlightenment one. Intuition is premiered over rationality, quality is put before quantity, and the purpose of being is to become and live as an authentic subject, much in line with post-romantic existentialism. The fundamental nature of the cosmos is imagined as that of a relational, emergent network; quantum waves converges into matter, matter self-organizes into complex forms of chemical compounds, chemical compounds form biological organisms, and by way of interaction these organisms produce consciousness. All of this amounts to a living Universe where all phenomena are interconnected, whose whole is bigger than its individual parts. The role of religion in all of this is to create meaning in life, to make people feel connected with each other and with the Universe as a whole, thus breaking the alienation and isolation that is created by the modern society. Religion is ultimately an imaginative, man-made construct, but this does not make it false in any way. As religion makes up the human existential foundation, it is actually very much true, but in the deeper, transrational sense of being the guide post through existence.

To the analytically minded reader many of the claims made in *Creating God in the Internet Age* might be hard to accept. A critic might hold the thoughts of Bard & Söderqvist to be contradictory at best, and confused or even delusional at worst. There many ambiguities in the text. For example, how can any notion of an authentic subjectivity be retained in what is basically a constructionist view of humans as social beings? And in which way do the authors believe that God “exists” in? On one level, the claim that God exists seems to be based on a purely functionalist definition; in that it is a concept that has actual consequences upon the material world. The fact that people relates their actions to “God” gives that the concept exists. This line of reasoning, most typically associated with Emile Durkheim, is altogether a functionalist one, and does not award “God” with any form of

194 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 258.

195 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 259.

agency, availability or material existence. But at the same time, “God” is thought of as being manifested in a very material sense in the form of the internet. Not only that, through the internet, “God” is thought of as not only having been given form, but as actually developing into an active being in its own right, as a collective consciousness that in every way is comparable to our own consciousness as an emergent super phenomena. However, we should be wary of treating Syntheism as simply being a contradictory philosophical system whose authors are simply inconsequential when discussing ontological matters. Instead, we should understand this as an example of contemporary religious irony, further discussed in *Ironically Speaking* (6.2). The fact that Bard & Söderqvist are making incoherent truth claims is not necessarily due to being philosophically ignorant, but because their readers actually consider both views to be equally important, and equally true, thus having no choice but to express themselves contradictory. The world in itself is, if you would ask them, quite contradictory anyway.

5. Legitimizing Syntheism

The following section will deal with Syntheism's claims to legitimacy, or how Creating God in the Internet Age seeks to portray Syntheism as a legitimate system of thought and a serious religious alternative. If the purpose of the previous section was to demonstrate how Syntheism ties into the esoteric discourses of contemporary New Age religion, this one is engaged with the ways that Syntheism uses to position itself within this spiritual landscape. As such, the focus of the following pages will lie with the “how” rather than the “what”. *How* is a statement used to position Syntheism as a legitimate religion in relation to alternative world views, and not so much *what* is said or *what* is meant with any given statement.

Although dealing with all three of the strategies of epistemology, the analysis below mostly emphasizes that of the appeal to tradition. This is because these appeals are the least visible in the review of the Syntheist ideology conducted in the previous section. The other two strategies, scientism and narratives of experience, have already covered fairly exhaustively, and will thus be presented merely as brief summaries of the points made in sections 4.2 – 4.5.

5.1. The Tradition of Mobilism

As should be apparent from the previous section, Syntheism sees the Universe as a perpetually ongoing process, a continuous flow of motion where nothing is ever truly fixated or static. It is a world of *mobilism*, rather than *eternalism*. According to Bard & Söderqvist, these opposing trains of thought have roots reaching back to the very beginning of Western intellectual history, the philosophy of ancient Greece. The mobilistic philosophy is associated with Heraclitus, most famous for saying that one cannot descend into the same river twice, alluding to the fundamental essence of the universe being that of constant change. The eternalist stance is associated with Plato, to whom the world of senses in which we all live was imperfect and secondary to the world of ideas, where everything exists in their most perfect, unaltered and eternal forms. The difference between the two is the difference between life and death; to strive for perfect symmetry and stability is to strive for death, while life must be thought of as chaotic and unpredictable. “Heraclitus accepts and embraces the open infiniteness of life and existence. Plato, on the other hand, hates both openness and infiniteness, and ... forces the chaotic world, which is impossible to fixate and exhaustively define, into one single predetermined totality.”¹⁹⁶ These two philosophical schools contested each other fiercely throughout the first part of antiquity, until the birth of Christianity when Paul, by placing the transcendent world of ideas beyond death, finally wins a crushing victory for the Platonic

196 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 88.

philosophy.¹⁹⁷ This is not least due to that the totalitarian aspects of the eternalist thought makes it well fit for the powerful to subjugate the masses, and so Platonic thought reigns unchallenged until the renaissance. Curiously enough, in spite of claiming to be a philosophy in the spirit of the renaissance, no major thinkers from this age are actually referred to. Instead, the next significant stand-off between mobilistic and eternalist philosophy comes in the early-modern period, and stands between Leibniz and Newton. Not only does Leibniz formulate the principle of sufficient reason,¹⁹⁸ but he also designed an ontology of monads; the cosmos is made up of monads, which are different expressions of the same basic substance. Together with Spinoza and Hume, Leibniz is considered a protorelationist, that opposed the mechanistic and totalitarian philosophies of Newton, Descartes and Kant.¹⁹⁹ But just as during late antiquity, the eternalist philosophy was the one best fit for the powers in charge, this time in the guise of capitalist corporate owners and university professors, and thus held on to its hegemony, until the arrival of the Romantic period, Hegel and the philosophy of Hegel and Nietzsche. Hegel is said to be the for atheist philosopher. He sees the objective world of Kant as secondary to the inner subjective sense of self, and all human thoughts and efforts, gods included, are merely steps in an ongoing process of self mirroring, of trying to understand own spirit by engaging with the world. Nietzsche on his hand is probably the most invoked philosopher in *Creating God in the Internet Age* besides Kant, whom the authors mostly scorn anyway. Nietzsche puts the Dionysian before the Apollonian as metaphors for desire and intuition before abstinence and reason, and makes the subject an active agent that seeks to exerts its will to power, rather than a passive observer as Kant did. The main fault of Hegel and Nietzsche is that they retained the correlationalism of Kant. Although the Romantics didn't see the objects of reality as absolute in any way, but as secondary to the subjective experience, they didn't question the existence of isolated objects and subjects in themselves. They simply turned the Kantian paradigm upside down, and instead of seeing the subject as existing in an objective world, instead the objective world was seen as existing within the subject. It was a philosophy of relativism instead of absolutism. As such, the relativist stance is based on an "interactive ontology."²⁰⁰ The final piece that was to do away with the eternalist correlationalism and finally pave the way for a mobilistic relationalism was Niels Bohr and quantum physics. Quantum physics does away with the existance of set objects altogether, and instead defines phenomena solely out of the relations

197 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 89.

198 This principle basically states that there must be a sufficient reason behind everything that happens or exists, thus suggesting an underlying causality. The word used in *Creating God in the Internet Age* is "förfu"t", which rather denominates the human reasoning, instead suggesting the ability for rationality. The authors does not explain their interpretation of what "sufficient reason" means, or in what way it is relevant to the Syntheist philosophy. Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 161.

199 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 141.

200 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 137.

between fields, waves and forces with no material substance. Rather than interactive, it is an *intraactive* ontology.

Thereby the Kantian representationalism is erased in three steps: in the first step by Hegel, in the second step by Nietzsche, and in the third step by Bohr. ... Ontology, epistemology and also phenomenology are merged into one relational complex. We see how the Syntheist metaphysic is solidly grounded in the contemporary physics.²⁰¹

As the validity of the mobilistic paradigm is finally confirmed in physics as well as philosophical thought, the world is entering a new age: the Age of Information. This is an age in which the individual is replaced with the dividual, the atom with the relation and originality with the network. This new age will be defined by the thought of two (or maybe four) major philosophers: Karen Barad and Quentin Meillassoux. Karen Barad's post-humanistic philosophy places the acts of humans as secondary, and the agency of the universe itself as the primary aspect of reality. Humans are only one aspect of this agency, an act that comes from how the Universe "*lives, thinks, speaks, creates, enjoys and procreates through us.*" Barad's book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, is even declared a "Syntheist manifest".²⁰² Meillassoux formulates the idea that God lies not in the past, but in the future as a virtual personification of justice. He is explicitly referred to as a Syntheist, and has coined the Syntheist patos "God is way too important to leave in the hands of the religious."²⁰³ The final two defining philosophers of the coming age are, of course, none other than Bard & Södqvist themselves, by unifying the separate philosophical strands to one, complex system of thought: Syntheism.

But the tradition of mobilism might go even further back than simply that of Western philosophy. The advent of not only the mobilistic thought but of genuine religion itself is ascribed to none other than Zoroaster, the only traditionally religious figure that is given any form of authority. Zoroaster was the original inventor of "religion in its literal sense", as that which ties people together, declaring it an "existential attitude" towards one's fellow human beings instead of "the appeasing of narcissistic and psychopathic gods."²⁰⁴ It also rejected moralism for ethics, only demanding of its subjects to live in harmony with the world. "Zoroaster wanted to see his descendants as enjoyers of life and self-affirming *mazdayasni* with a deep ethic build from their *intentions* ... his religion is the first that happens within people's minds rather than out in the endless cosmos."²⁰⁵ The Zoroastrian religion is thereby also the first that does not worship any Great God, as there is no need for such

201 Bard & Södqvist, *Syntheism*, 143-144.

202 Bard & Södqvist, *Syntheism*, 148.

203 Bard & Södqvist, *Syntheism*, 35.

204 Bard & Södqvist, *Syntheism*, 82.

205 Bard & Södqvist, *Syntheism*, 80.

worship. Divinity already exists in nature, and is manifested in the communal *saoshyanten*, just as Syntheism holds that the divine exists as Pantheos and is manifested in the communal Syntheos.²⁰⁶ It is a faith completely oriented towards living in harmony with nature, with one's community, and with oneself. "That Zoroastrianism already 3700 years ago practised modern inventions such as ecological sustainability, radical gender equality, collective ownership of resources and tolerance towards deviant human characteristics, is perfectly consequential when considering the ideology of Zoroaster."²⁰⁷

And so, the circle that begins with Zoroaster is completed with Meillassoux, and results in Syntheism.

5.2. The Science of Ontic Indeterminacy

The form of science that is appealed to within Syntheism is perhaps best summarized as what is referred to as one of the dramatic revolutions of today's world; the relationalist paradigm shift within philosophy and science. This began with the birth of quantum physics, and the principle of "ontic indeterminacy" suggested by Niels Bohr during the 1930s. Bohr, as the figure head of the early quantum physicists, was one of the first to break with old school of atomistic science, as he understood the world to be made up of interlaced "intraactive, fundamentally plural phenomena", rather than isolated, indivisible objects. This realization both proved that the scientist can never be a passive, neutral observer of objects as he is inevitably partaking in the phenomena he is set out to study, but on a more fundamental level that it is the relations and not the objects in phenomena that provides them with substance, and because of this it is the relations that are primary. Bohr's principle of ontic indeterminacy makes up the ultimate proof that the whole is indeed greater, more relevant and more interesting than its parts.²⁰⁸

As the Universe is essentially indeterminate, scientific theories can never be said to be neither complete nor really final. It is not only possible but even likely that the explanations given by science at a later stage will be considered unsatisfactory and proved wrong. Therefore, theories should at best be viewed as "explanatory closings". Instead of being considered absolute representations of reality, an explanatory closing is really an eternalisation of the mobilistic flow of reality that might be necessary in order for humans to understand it, but we must always keep in mind that it is nothing but a "clumsy digital approximation of a significantly more complex, analogue phenomena in expansive motion."²⁰⁹

206 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 81.

207 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 82.

208 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 145.

209 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 180.

Phenomena are the results of *emergent patterns* in reality. As there can be no predetermined laws in the Universe, as that would demand the laws to exist before and outside of the Universe, the cosmos acts after the principle of self organisation. It started out as infinitely simple, and then gains complexity by ordering itself into ever more complex structures as it expands. At certain points, the level of complexity causes a “tip over” effect, and a new phenomena emerges from the previous order. Chemistry is an emergence out of physics, biology is an emergence out of chemistry, and consciousness is an emergence out of biology. Although being wholly made up of the simpler structure, these new patterns are so complex that they can not be compared or reduced to the simpler structures. The emergences thus tell of an inherent activity and creativity inherent in the Universe; “there is nothing in built into chemistry that from the start says it should emerge and give rise to biology”, as the predeterministic atomistic science claim, but the emergences happens spontaneously as an activity of the cosmos.²¹⁰ This means that science must strive to develop anti-reductionist models of explanation. Existence is much more complex, and the Universe is so much more active than what the “reductionist illusion has made us believe”.²¹¹ “God” is thus not an entity that lies at the creation of the Universe, but rather as that which will emerge from our connected, collective imagination. While the Syntheists do admit that God is but an imagination, the relationalist, anti-reductionistic science entails that God actually *will* come to exist in a very scientific manner, as an entity emerging from the collective consciousness of the internet.

As such, Syntheism perceives science as a theological exercise, and the CERN research facility has been declared as holy ground by the movement. Of course this also works in reverse, in making the Syntheist religion a form of “scientistic pragmatism”.²¹² Science is ultimately, in the same spirit as true religion, an attempt to understand the cosmos in a meaningful way. Therefore, the best science is that which recognizes the deepest of human activities as the “playful approach towards the mysteries of existence”. It is by playfully inventing stories and explanations that meaning can be created, and therefore play must always come before the sternness of logic, not the other way around.²¹³ To conduct science is, transrationally speaking, to “play hide and seek with God”.²¹⁴

In one way or another, each of the stages of appropriation that Hammer has identified can be recognized throughout Creating God in the Internet Age. The Zoroastrian tradition, with its history of several thousand years, is reduced to a philosophy about feeling good and being nice towards your community. The same form of reduction can be said of most of the philosophers that are

210 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 306.

211 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 308.

212 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 253.

213 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 258.

214 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 253.

invoked, the most obvious example being Leibniz and the principle of sufficient reason, which the authors have quite frankly completely misunderstood. Synonymization takes place between, for example, the monads of Leibniz and the quantum waves of Bohr, even though the two are separated in time by approximately 300 years. As no quotes are ever used, Bard & Söderqvist are unhindered in speaking for each of these philosophers, and present their thoughts in a manner that confirms the Syntheist *philosophia perennis*. The foundational philosophers of the Western culture are reduced to simply two schools of thought, where one is inherently good and righteous and the other totalitarian and false. The last stage of appropriation, pattern recognition, is most obviously found in relation to the last of the strategies of epistemology, namely the narratives of experience.

5.3. The Experience of Oneness

As explained in section 4.5, the most profound religious experience of Syntheism is the psychedelic practice of the infinite now. This is a state where the experience of existence is infinitely intensified, and the boundaries of the subjective identity are dissolved in order for existence to be experienced as mobile and flowing, bereft of the eternalisations of the subjective perception. An emphasis is placed on the dissolution of the sense of the individual self. Letting go of the I is the ultimate goal of the psychedelic experience, the essence of the eternal now. The less vested interest the Syntheist brings to the religious ceremony, the stronger the religious experience will become. “It’s about letting go of the fixation of the I and let oneself be dissolved into the hierarchically higher collective emergence, where the community appears as something bigger than its constituent parts, as the most powerful of agents.”²¹⁵ As such, the eternal now is the ultimate religious experience, as it is the genuine experience of being more than just one’s individual self.

The psychedelic experience also sharply underlines the limits of human rationality, and the superiority of feeling as a ground for understanding. The immensity of the eternal now can not be verbalized or explained, only experienced directly. It cannot be pinned down and exhaustively defined through rationalized discourse, and therefore rationalized discourse must be incomplete. Rationality must be complemented by poetic intuition, as it the poetic language that enables us to express infinity. Finally, a universal aspect is assigned to the psychedelic experience. Whether achieved through dance, drugs or meditation, these practices will infallibly result in blissful ego dissolution. For example, it is claimed that the people having undergone ayahuasca- and iboga rituals, some of the “most powerful but also traditionally rich psychedelic practices developed by mankind” will time and again tell of the same thing: “The Universe ran me over and crushed me, with a colossal and indifferent massiveness, and this made me both religious and deeply grateful ...

215 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 312.

And apart from that there is nothing in the experience that can be verbalized.”²¹⁶

5.4. Summary

All in all, Syntheism seeks to be a philosophy in the tradition of the Renaissance and the Romanticism, opposed to the Enlightenment and modern traditions. It seeks to portray the world as holistic and intuitive rather than atomistic and rational. This is done by constructing a tradition of mobilism: a philosophic and religious tradition dating as far back as ancient Persia, where reality is seen as floating and interconnected, rather than static and isolated. This form of thought has since been repressed by institutions of power of the respective historical eras, but as the world enters the Age of Information, it is finally returning in full force, backed by the three dramatical revolutions of the relational paradigm shift in science, exemplified by quantum physics, the internetization of planet earth where more and more people gets connected to each other, and the chemical liberalisation. Quantum physics not only shows that the underlying aspect of reality is in fact the relations between waves, fields and forces rather than atomic objects, but also that there isn't such a sharp divide between matter and consciousness. Instead, these are both expressions of the same monadic substance, and one can't simply be reduced to the other. The chemical liberalisation is what allows human beings to free themselves from their perceptual limitations, not least by letting them experience the eternal now through psychedelic practices. This is a mental state where the Oneness of existence can actually be felt rather than merely thought of, an experience that will literary make people to break free from the isolating alienation of the modern world in order to seek an intimate community and fellowship with other human beings. To top it all off, the internetization of the planet earth provides Syntheism with the perfect metaphor of the cosmos as a complex, interconnected unity, where the whole is greater than the individual parts, and the individual parts derives their value from their position in the greater, overarching network.

216 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 328.

6. Discussion

6.1. A Newer New Age

Emerging from the above reading and analysis of Syntheism, is a religious system of thought whose shape much resembles that which is found in the New Age cultic milieu.

The appeal to tradition might actually be the factor that Syntheism is singled out by the most. Apart from Zoroastrianism, there are only fleeting references to religious figures such as Jesus or Mohammed. As for far eastern mystics and indigenous shamans, the typical tropes of New Age literature, few mentions are made at all. Instead, the reader of *Creating God in the Internet Age* is presented with a philosophical rather than religious tradition. Instead of religious insight, it is the intellectual efforts of Western philosophers, early-modern scientists and quantum physicists that reveal the holistic, mobilistic and unified nature of the Universe. This is perhaps not unsurprising considering the target audience of the book. As mentioned in the section *Syntheism* (1.3), the members of the Syntheist Facebook groups are mostly well educated academics, not unlikely to be of a sceptical persuasion as the group's sub title reads “The religion of spiritual atheism”. It is not unreasonable to assume that this audience carries with it an aversion towards the simplistic, naïve and sensational style most often found in New Age discourse, instead resonating with a more intellectualized style that nevertheless retains the same basic meaning. The world isn't merely holistic but “an intraactive ontic process”. Science isn't just incomplete but consists of “explanatory closings”. Consciousness isn't just an essential quality of the cosmos, but an “emergent super position”. Hammer rather condescendingly remarks that the esoteric tradition so far has been quite philosophically unsophisticated.²¹⁷ Perhaps Syntheism might be seen as a movement that tries to remedy this. This does not mean that I hold *Creating God in the Internet Age* to be a philosophically sound book, but it is undoubtedly clad in a philosophic discourse.

That being said, Bard & Söderqvist actually seems to be more concerned with heckling the negative Others of Syntheism, those that makes up the eternalist philosophy, than clearly delineating the mobilistic one. These are, almost in an outright mean spirited way, mocked and ridiculed throughout *Creating God in the Internet Age*. Einstein “pigheadedly” refused to give up his “beloved instruments of measurement” in front of the principle of indeterminacy, because of “his most beloved fetish: his deterministic block universe.”²¹⁸ Of Plato it is said that his “neurotic minimalism” is the worst possible guide to the modern physics.²¹⁹ Karen Barad is given the credit of

217 Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 339.

218 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 170-171.

219 Bard & Söderqvist, *Syntheism*, 182.

completely pulverizing the “transcendental *correlationalism* that has dominated the Western thought since Kant.”²²⁰ Kant himself, along with Descartes, are constantly accused of being autistic, totalitarian and quixotic. As mentioned above, there are also virtually no actual quotes provided in the text, so the reader has no choice but to take the authors' word for the validity of their account. There are few nuances to this quite antagonizing style of writing, and all in all, the reader is left with a very strong feeling that everything is wrong with the modern paradigm, but rather more vague ideas of where the fault actually lies, and exactly what the alternative looks like.

The psychedelic practice of the infinite now bears strong parallels with the contemporary esoteric discourse of entheogenic experiences, discussed in section 3.4. It is a state of mind in which one will experience unity, infinity and eternity. The boundaries of the self or the ego are dissolved, and the tripper becomes one with the the universe. This experience is seen as something universal that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, as evident from the references to the “old and culturally rich” traditions of ayahuasca and iboga-ceremonies. Just as Huxley, Syntheism holds that psychedelic substances disrupts the minds ability to filters experiences or eternalizing reality, thereby offering a state of consciousness that is in fact a more real representation of reality that that of the sober mind. As with Leary, drug legislation is seen as a form of religious oppression, and the psychedelic experience is believed to have such a transforming effect that the use of entheogens not only has the power to completely change an individual's outlook on life, but even the whole of society. And in likeness to McKenna, it is thought of as a shamanic activity that re-connects the Syntheist in contact with nature. This is most evident in the claim that the environmental movement is actually most potent in the places where the internet is most build out, and the psychedelic practices are most common.²²¹ Psychedelic shamanism goes hand in hand with re-enchanting the world and countering the exploitation of the earth. As such, the ties between Syntheism and the participatory festival culture appears clearly. The participants of the Burning Man Festival has professed that they see the event as a platform for creating a new awareness, an ideology to counter the corruptive forces of modern commercialism by creating and spreading alternative, genuine and authentic outlooks on life. Syntheism is a prime example of this vision.

Although fiercely rejecting individuality, denouncing personal authorship and describing people as dividuals that are defined by their position in their networks, at a structural level Syntheism is engaging in a religious discourse that is nothing but individualistic. For all its talk of the community building power of religion, of ending alienation and of selfishly giving without asking for anything in return, the ultimate authority is firmly located within the subject, although this subject happens to

220 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 146.

221 Bard & Södeqvist, *Syntheism*, 242.

be called a “dividual” rather than “individual”. The essential core of religious life is the mystical experience of the eternal now. All external authority is made out as oppressive and harmful., and an authentic life is lived by giving in to one's urges and desires, as demonstrated in the chapter *Morality and Ethics* (4.4). Inner, subjective authority is in no way problematized but put in the highest esteem and even made into the ethical imperative of “be your desires”. Syntheism even contains its own take on the miracle motif, by holding that anyone who has undergone the “Syntheist baptism” of the eternal now will inevitably start to act altruistically and seek to live in community with others to prolong the oceanic feeling. Nowhere is the possibility of somebody *not* exhibiting such a drastic change in behaviour as a result of a psychedelic experience even remotely discussed, or whether or not the ethical imperative of fully identifying with ones desires still holds true for a person that remains trapped in alienation. And for all its talk about being the opposing power against capitalism, Syntheists are urged *not* to do active battle against it, but rather to seclude themselves in small communities and, basically, just wait for it to go away. This does not mean that there are no causes worth fighting politically for. These are environmental issues, the free and open internet and legalisation of narcotic substances. While I do admit that the first of these is actually a cause that involves the entirety of mankind, that must be fought by all for all, the other two are wholly motivated by protecting the rights of individuals, and has no primarily communal intent.

The parallel between Syntheism and the New Age movement that is in some ways most obvious but also the one that eluded me the most, is their millenarianism. As discussed in section 2.2, the New Age historiography is U-shaped. The world has declined from a golden age of wisdom and spiritual awareness to one of materialism and exploitation, but is now finally rediscovering the enchanted qualities of being, and is on the verge of entering a new age of prosperity, the Age of Aquarius. In a similar manner, Syntheism instead constructs a narrative of an original mobilistic form of thought that was repressed by the totalitarian tendencies of the eternalistic philosophy, which was made to support feudal, papal, capitalist and academic power structures. But with the advent of on one hand quantum physics, and on the other the internet, the mobilistic world view is returning in full force, to usher an even newer New Age, the Age of Information. However, in contrast to the Age of Aquarius, the Age of Information is not necessarily entirely utopic. Rather, there is a risk that the new New Age will be characterized by segmentation, strife, increasing surveillance and a capitalism that is even more intense and exploitative than it is today. The only way to avoid this is to re-enchance the world with spiritual value, and to make people end their alienated isolation by becoming part of sincere communities, where love and compassion are valued higher than power and monetary gains. The only way to avoid that the Age of Information takes a

dystopic turn, is to create God. The new age needs Syntheism.

Syntheism can thus be seen as a form of New Age spirituality, or maybe a development of its content that incorporates the new information technologies into the cosmology, along with a highly intellectualized discourse and even an enchanted form of atheism. Syntheism really is the Newer New Age.

6.2. *Ironically Speaking*

There is, however, one key aspect of Syntheism's claim to legitimacy that the strategies of Hammer fail to cover. I'm talking about, of course, the use of irony as an immunizing discourse. Every one of the more exorbitant claims, that we can be one with the universe, that there are divine personifications of the cosmic principles, or that God will arise through the development of the internet, are in the end only poetic metaphors for the sake of ascribing meaning to the world. Not because meaning exists independently of humanity, but because humans desperately needs such meaning to function. The Syntheist religion might appeal to a philosophical tradition, to creative interpretations of quantum science or to mystical experiences of unity, but when it all comes down to it, its followers are encouraged to believe in it simply because it feels better to do it than not to. They proclaim to be fully aware of that religions, including their own, are nothing but more or less nice fantasies about the world, but that is quite beside the point. The important thing is that the gods and cosmologies that are made up bring meaning to their lives, not whether they are true in an absolute sense of the word. Syntheism can thus be understood as a form of “hipster religion”. The Syntheists adhere to gods that they already know are imagined, just as hipsters ironically wear clothes and listen to records they know are inauthentic products of culture, for it is only by accepting its inauthenticity that culture can still be enjoyed. Alexander Bard has stated that he all his life has suffered from an envy of religion. “I always thought those orthodox priests and those nuns and those monks looked really really cool, and I really wanted to be one of them, but as I didn't share their beliefs that was impossible for me. So I believed that until I was 50 years old, like two years ago. Then I went to Burning Man.”²²² Syntheism is what allows him to finally become one of the cool, religious persons, to appropriate their symbolic worlds without actually committing to them. Whatever they believe in might be false, but as it brings such meaning to ones life, this is a minor detail that must be overlooked, for everything we know will sooner or later be deemed false. He might as well enjoy himself as he goes along. As such, Syntheism represents a peculiar form of New Age:ified atheism, or an enchantment of atheism.

²²² "What if the internet is God? Alexander Bard at TEDxStockholm" YouTube video, 4:36, posted by TEDx Talks, November 4, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXA7TewF53w>.

Speaking of irony, we might think of it as extremely ironic that Syntheism takes such an antagonistic stance towards the New Age ideology even though it resembles it so closely. Throughout *Creating God in the Internet Age*, there are constant references to the New Age movement as shallow, nonsensical and superstitious. Alexander Bard has even admitted that “there is a contempt towards the New Age among Syntheists”, that they want to distance themselves from it since they are “for real”.²²³ If we recall the words of Martin section 3.4, individuality does not so much mean “autonomous” or “different” as it means “distinct”. This might be the best way to understand the Syntheist discourse, as a way *distinguishing* one self from the ideological content of the New Age with which it shares so much. They may discard crystal healing and channelling as superstitious, they might hold that the *actual* belief in gods and spirits is superficial and they might resort to philosophical name dropping rather than anecdotal narratives, but in the end both Syntheism and the New Age cultic milieu pertain to a perennial philosophy which views the cosmos as a holistic entity in which the boundaries between the material and spiritual are dissolved, and where the individual experience is seen as the highest point of authority for making sense of this world. This utter rejection of its own ideological home ground can very well be the confirmation of Syntheism as a very much individualistic religion.

Syntheism is a movement that takes a controversial approach to make quite controversial claims, not least in its treatment of philosophers. *Creating God in the Internet Age* is a book that shamelessly boasts about the intellectual brilliance of its authors, and yet at the same time does it by no means shy away from dishing out critique towards anybody that its authors do not agree with. Taken together with the fact that a lot of the claims contributed to influential intellectual figures in *Creating God in the Internet Age* are to say the least unorthodox interpretations of the thoughts of these persons, it is easy to see why Syntheism is a movement that might rub people the wrong way. It might be tempting for some to disregard Syntheism as merely an arbitrary mishmash of bad philosophy, too much drugs and megalomania. However, as scholars of religion, we should refrain from passing such judgement on the people that we study. Although scrutinizing the claims made by religious people can be part of our task, we should take caution as such critique runs the risk of obscuring that which should be the primary aim of the history of religion, namely to gain an understanding of our objects of study. If the result of our analysis is that our objects of study adhere to a world view that is inconsistent and flawed, we have at some level repudiated their possibility of being rational actors, thus ruling out our own ability to fully understand their perceived irrational ways. The perspective of religious irony might allow for us to avoid such fallacies. Instead of asking whether a line of thought is sound or unsound, a practice authentic or inauthentic, or a held

²²³ Karlsson, *Religion in the Making*, 18.

belief is genuine is superficial, by assuming that the truth claims made by a group are to some extent ironic, we can instead ask questions as regarding how those statements which we ourselves might perceive as incoherent and false are used to construct a world view that is actually experienced as coherent to the believer. Or, another way of putting it, what are the stories that are being told within a system of thought, and why are these stories being told? By posing such questions, we see that Syntheism actually delivers what it promises, namely a system of creating meaning in an increasingly digitized world aimed at people that knows too much to be able to actually believe in anything, yet still dearly longs for such belief. Syntheism might be a case of bad philosophy, but more than that it is a splendid case of irony.

7. Conclusion – Hyper Realities and Hipster Modalities

The purpose of this thesis was to study the reconfigurations of the religious thinking in the late-modern society that is due to the impact that digital information technologies. The recently founded new religious movement Syntheism was chosen as an example of such a reconfiguration of religious thought as it not only deifies information and the internet, but also portrays itself as being in opposition against the modern world view of individualism, capitalism and rationality. An analysis of the book Syntheism – Creating God in the Internet Age was made, seeking to delineate the strategies that discursively tries to legitimize its inherent ideology. The stated research question was: “How are the three strategies of *tradition*, *science* and *experience* employed within Syntheism in order to legitimate its system of thought?”

The results of the analysis show that the tradition that Syntheism construes primarily appeals to the defining figures of Western philosophy, as well as Zoroastrianism. These are employed to construct a history of a mobilistic world view, where the cosmos is seen as interconnected and holistic, rather than static and atomistic. This world view is then argued to be confirmed by certain interpretations of quantum science, which states the universe to be indeterminate, and consisting of the relations between waves rather than isolated particles. Lastly, this holistic and interconnected quality of reality can be experienced first handedly through the use of entheogenic substances, by which the individual ego is dissolved, and the subject can experience itself as being one with the living cosmos, no longer isolated and alienated from the world. The view of the cosmos as holistic and living, and the primacy of personal experience exhibits a clear likeness with cosmologies typically found within the New Age movement. The primary way in which Syntheism distinguishes itself from the conventional New Age discourse is through their appeal to tradition. Rather than appropriating indigenous and East Asian mystical symbolism, the movement constructs an intellectualized philosophical tradition, likely in order to appeal to an educated, sceptical audience that otherwise have a hard time to relate to the somewhat naïve and sensationalist style of the New Age.

The aspect where Syntheism truly sets itself apart is, however, its use of irony. Although recognizing several gods and phenomena that might be interpreted as supernatural, they openly admit that these are, in the end, imaginative beings that are invented simply for the sake of ascribing meaning to the world. The Syntheists believe in gods, but still not really. Thus, they retain the enticing mystery of an enchanted world view, while at the same time avoiding the awkwardness of being proved wrong, truly having the cake while eating it. In this thesis, I have referred to

Syntheism's ironic stance towards religion as “enchanted atheism”. Whether this is best viewed as an atheistic interpretation of New Age thought, or a New Age understanding of atheism remains a topic for discussion, but I do hold that it is an idea that is firmly established in certain circles, one that might even come to play an increasingly important part in future religiosity. As such, this is a topic that deserves further scholarly attention in order for us to understand how it plays a part in contemporary reconfiguration of religion.

I suggest that irony, understood as a strategy for maintaining ultimate meaning and authenticity in a world where ultimate concepts are perpetually rejected, can be used to understand a wide variety of religious expressions in the late-modern society. As the availability of information steadily increases, the exclusivity of any truth claim, be it religious or not, will increasingly be harder to maintain. Unless someone is willing to in a lesser or greater extent isolate themselves from the flow of information, it is very probable that sooner or later they will be exposed to information that contradicts or debunks their current world view, either by providing new, previously unheard of facts, or by providing images of the past that does not fit in with an ideologically slanted historiography. It is, quite simply, rather more difficult to be completely ignorant in the age of information. Irony could help us understand why people in spite of all evidence adhere to religious claims that stand on quite shaky epistemological grounds, such as crystal healing or New Age exorcism, or even admittedly made up, such as the case of Kopimism and Syntheism. It could also help us to understand the rise of hyper-real religious phenomena, religions based wholly on fiction. Likely, nobody in their right mind *actually believes* the events told in the Star Wars saga to be real in the conventional meaning of the word, but this does not stop adult individuals from not only developing Jediism, but also taking their practices and beliefs seriously. By being *ironically religious*, the meaning making possibilities of the religious imagination, together with the exhilarating aspects of the mysteries of myths and fellowship of a community of like-minded individuals, becomes available without the awkward and somewhat embarrassing possibility of actually being wrong about your beliefs; in the end, you were just being ironic. As such, this mode of being religious in the late-modern age is not so much about making *choices*, rational or not, but rather to altogether avoid the making of ultimate choices, as these will only disappoint one in the end.

What makes this thesis worthy of attention is not so much the answers that it provides, but rather the questions it poses. Whether or not Syntheism will ever establish itself as a significant religious alternative or is doomed to a life of obscurity is yet to be seen. Whether the movement represents a new development within New Age thought, or is just an anomaly in the spiritual landscape of the

contemporary West can not be sufficiently answered within the confines of this thesis. To provide such an answer, further time and thought would be required. Instead, this thesis attempts to pose questions regarding not only the changing nature of contemporary religion, but also of what type of questions are to be asked when trying to understand this change? By introducing irony as a frame for understanding contemporary religiosity, I seek to sketch out alternative perspectives for an academic field that must keep up with an ever changing, increasingly complex empirical reality. This brings me to my final note, where I would like to echo an observation made by Karlsson. The Syntheist view of religion quite closely resembles the definitions made in scholarly theories.²²⁴ Religion is seen as culturally constructed, as a communally constituting factor, as a meta narrative and a ground for meaning making. This puts the relation between the researcher and the researched, and of the possibility and even ideal of objectively studying but not manipulating ones researched objects, into question. Schriemer notes that there is a lack for “sociological visions for a society in which the cultural differences between generations are fading ... and in which the opposition between individuality and imitation seems to become ever more acute and reflexive.”²²⁵ I believe the same to be true for the study of religion. How are we to analyse religious actors that are increasingly being made aware of our analyses of religion as invented and embedded traditions, due to an ever increasing access to information? Is it even possible for the academic to maintain an analytical distance between himself and his object of study, or are the boundaries between scholarly theories and popularly held beliefs broken down as such theories are widely spread through an increasing number of highly educated citizens, the popularity of popular science and the fast distribution of ideas through blogs and social media? The people of the Newer New Age, that of information, will likely be increasingly aware of the world as an invented but also co-created placed, where there are no clear distinctions between originality and imitation, genuinity and inauthenticity, and belief and non-belief. To acknowledge the need for irony in such a would be the first step in developing analytical models for understanding religion in a digitized era.

224 Karlsson, Religion in the making, 36.

225 Schriemer, "Hipster Culture", 179.

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