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**'IT'S A GAME EVERYBODY'S ALREADY PLAYING'
THE CREATING-OUR-REALITY MOTIF
BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND SPIRITUALIZATION IN
CONTEMPORARY WESTERN POPULAR SPIRITUALITY**

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Abstract: The Creating-Our-Reality motif is one of the most central in contemporary Western popular spiritual discourse. The article presents and demonstrates three different versions of it – magical, secularized and metaphysical. Nevertheless, despite the clear differentiation between the spiritualization (or re-enchantment) and secularization (or disenchantment) trends, there is an obvious tendency not to leave the motif in its “pure” state, but rather to blend the versions together. Apparently, spiritual practitioners in the West do not wish to abandon Modern-scientific discourse, and yet continue to cling to magic. The melding of secular and spiritual/magical discourses is used as a catalyst for their likening, and for the readiness of those who perceive themselves as secular to buy into the legitimacy of magic. Thus, the attractiveness of spiritual discourse keeps growing, as its legitimization is established within the mainstream.

The article presents the characteristics of the Creating-Our-Reality motif in contemporary spiritual popular culture, while also discussing the theological-ethical-cultural implications embedded in its various designs (including the deification of the individual; the built-in paradoxes of individual and society, passiveness and proactivity; and optimism ethics).

Key words: popular religion, contemporary alternative spiritualities, New Age spirituality, modern magic, creation myth, cosmology, science and religion, secularization processes, rationalization and disenchantment, spiritualization and re-enchantment

What if you slept?
 And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed?
 And what if, in your dream, you went to heaven and
 there plucked a strange and beautiful flower?
 And what if, when you awoke, you had the flower in
 your hand?
 (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

In reality-creation, we affect one level of reality by way of another. For example, creating an ontological reality through epistemological actions, or changing our reality-experience by controlling consciousness. Traditional witchcraft focused on Physically/actually changing the world using magical words or artifacts, whose affect is simultaneously symbolic and material. How is the act of reality-creation currently designed?

Despite the abundance of movements, teachings, and opinions in the vast and diverse contemporary field of popular Western spiritualities, certain motifs are widely prevalent (Ruah-Midbar 2006), including the Creating-Our-Reality motif (Hanegraaff 1998). In this article, I shall present *the various ways this motif is designed*, whilst using contemporary popular products as examples (chapter 1). My central argument is twofold: first, *we can identify secularized as well as spiritualized designs of the Creating-Our-Reality motif*; and second, *a clear trend of blending secularization and spiritualization is prevalent* (chapter 2). After presenting *the characteristics of the Creating-Our-Reality motif in the field of contemporary spiritualities*, I will discuss *the theological-ethical-cultural implications embedded in its various designs* (chapter 3).

1. Versions and Trends in Designing the Creating-Our-Reality Motif

1.A. The Magical Version

The most straightforward way to describe reality-creation is witchcraft, namely, the magical outlook. A popular example for this design of the motif is the successful *Harry Potter* series (books/movies) by JK Rowling, which makes use of spells, potions, visualization, and magical animals and objects – to comprise a fantastic reality.

Is the resemblance between contemporary Western magic and “classical”/ “traditional” magic merely external and technical (expressed through similar practices/concepts/subjects), or is it also internal and essential (manifested by the rationale of magic)? Generally, magical cosmology portrays a causal chain leading from the magical act toward reality. A typical portrayal is that of an “Anima Mundi,” a sort of “thin substance,” which connects all the things in the universe by transferring qualities and influences from one thing to the next. Similarly, we have

“correspondences,” “resemblances,” and supernatural cosmologies, which connect a magical act/object (the Scorpio constellation; demons) with its effect (healing stings; unearthing treasure).

Such rationales appear in traditional magical movements, as well as their contemporary reincarnations, such as in this popular guidebook to the Modern magical religion of Wicca, which describes the “rules of witchcraft” (Amber 1990, 54-56):

[...E]verything can be said to consist of energy [...]. Because we are energy forms existing in an ocean of energy, we are generally unaware of the intensity and variety of the energy about us. [...] „Everything is connected [...] At each of the infinite number of points where the threads touch, a [...] sphere is attached [...and] reflects every other sphere within it. [...] When you know [that...] you have one of the keys to magick. [...] 'As above, so below.' Microcosm reflects macrocosm. Whatever exists on a greater scale of magnitude, or as a thought form on subtler planes of being, has its counterpart or equivalent on the human scale and in the material plane. [...]everything we can dream of will manifest somewhere, sometime.

Magic based on recruiting supernatural beings was less popular in Renaissance Europe, and its status has even worsened with contemporary spiritualities, which prefer attributing magical powers to the witch (ibid., 3): “Magick does not reside in ritual tools [...] unless and until they are charged by a magickian.” This individualization trend embodies the modernization processes magic has undergone, whose extent will be later examined herein. However, we shall imply that the nature of the magical power attributed to the wizards of the *Harry Potter* series is, in fact, mechanical (skill or technology-based), rather than occultist (based on supernatural power), and the few wizards who do make use of such powers are either ridiculed or censured. This is an expression of the technologization and rationalization of magic (Östling 2003), a matter we shall revisit later.

The above cases exemplify that, although the contemporary popular magical version of the Creating-Our-Reality motif is supposedly not novel, it actually has its own unique characteristics (see, e.g., Ruah-Midbar 2014). First, the nature of magic as solely-beneficiary is overstated. According to the Wiccan Rede, witches may do anything they want as long as “it harm none.” Moreover, imagination is often utilized, and attests to a diversion to the field of the internal and the private – the mind – as part of a trend in which magic/religion/spirituality are privatized and psychologized – matters we shall later explore further. Additionally, there is an evident

democratization of witchcraft. Examples of this are both criticism in the *Harry Potter* series of the derision of “Mudbloods” – wizards/witches of non-magical families – as well as the prevalence of auto-didactic occult books, which bypass issues of community and authority. It is important to keep these characteristics in mind toward chapter 2.

1.B. *The Secularized Trend*

The ability to create reality through magic is supposedly obvious, however, lesser attention has been given to the *secularized* or *rationalized* versions of reality-creation, which offer rational or (pseudo-)scientific explanations. However, such explanations are highly prevalent in contemporary spiritualities.

The scene is overflowing with manifestations of the belief that we can (and should) radically change the world: re-create the whole reality anew. We sometimes witness initiatives that aim to do just that, whilst describing a chain of events which has “secular” causality, such as simple deeds which may accumulate into a dramatic change. Sometimes the explanatory metaphor for the description of such deeds takes on a “scientific” form (Hammer 2001, Ch.5), such as addressing the “Butterfly Effect,” a Chaos Theory term, with the claim that small changes may later profoundly transform the system. The allegory of the butterfly wings that cause a tornado expresses a magic-like passion – to transform reality with the individual’s limited means – but with secularized wording.

One secularized way of depicting reality-creation recommends *behavioral changes*. One such example is the film *Pay it Forward*, whose protagonist, a boy, comes up with an idea for changing the world: he selects three people and helps them in a meaningful way, with something that they cannot do for themselves, and in turn asks them to do the same – to choose three people to help, and so on. The movie has inspired social-spiritual movements to call for an individual behavioral change as a way of reality-creation, such as the Israeli social game “Utopia” (Hod 2004):

Participants: everyone.

Instructions: choose a person, identify their need, provide them with sincere help, and ask them to pay it forward.

Victory: when everyone is playing Utopia.

Yet another secularized way of shaping the Creating-Our-Reality motif revolves about *adopting positive thought*. In a way, its goal contrasts the behavioral version: it does not seek to change the world, but suggest that we change ourselves – our attitude toward the world, so that we may experience it positively. Thus, we re-create reality by utilizing a positive approach, which then begets positive experiences. Namely, we create the experience of the world, and not the world itself (which eventually might culminate in real change). We may find one such example of this approach

in the movie *Groundhog Day*. The protagonist, a TV anchor, is frustrated when he is tasked with reporting an event he finds stupid. He cannot wait to leave the place, but he keeps waking-up *yesterday* morning, on the same accursed day, and is forced to relive it. Even when he tries to commit suicide – he still wakes-up yesterday. Over the course of the film, the protagonist learns that he can experience the day differently with a change of attitude, and the most horrible day of his life becomes his best.

A similar secularized version of this motif is *interpretation*. Interpretation becomes a ritualistic spiritual practice, which allows us to freely recreate our experience of reality, or reality itself (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro 2018). A clear exemplification of the power of interpretation to create reality is the practice taught in *I Am* workshops. Once, a participant complained to the instructor:

- I am so bored here. I hope things start to get better for me. I am not getting anything from this crap. [...] I hate what you say. [...] I really don't want to be here.

- This is the structure. What are you going to do [...] so that you can be pleasantly in effect of it?" [...] Whose interpretation is it that there is no fun here?

- Mine.

- [...] YOU are responsible for there being no fun here. You are also an asshole for doing this to you.

- [...] "Shit, but I am always doing this to myself [...] waiting for people to do things so that I won't be bored. I have just had an insight [...] It's not them, it is my thinking and evaluation of the circumstances, right?" (Grove 1998: 158-159).

The participant learns that reality is not enforced upon him, but that he chooses it via his interpretation of it. External circumstances do not change, but the experience of reality is entirely private. In light of the privatization of reality, anyone can experience the same events/circumstances as they wish, and create their own positive reality through interpretation.

A powerful metaphor which demonstrates the individual's power to shape reality at will, though it seems to have been pre-determined by outside factors, is *the virtual reality of video-games*. The implied supposition of this conceptual design likens our world to VR. This version claims that the gamer experiences a reality designed by a programmer, but that, within the given framework, they can still create different realities. For example, in the movie *eXzistenZ*, Gas describes how VR games changed his life. Another character asks him:

- What was your life like before [...] it was changed [...]?

- I operated a gas station.
 - You still operate a gas station, don't you?
 - Only on the most pathetic level of reality.
- Geller's work liberated me. [...] Did you ever play her game ArtGod [...]? 'Thou, the player of the game, art god.' Very spiritual. Funny too. God, the artist, the mechanic. [laughs, and turns to mechanics' accessories.]

Changing one's interpretation of day-to-day life is enough to turn it into an exciting, creative and even fun reality. We shall later revisit the connection between living, playing the "game," and becoming a god.

The technological-computerized version, that views the world as a kind of VR, is also evident in the successful movie, *The Matrix*. (In fact, this film belongs to the metaphysical trend discussed later, although we shall now present examples of a secular nature relevant to the current discussion. These characteristics have made it so successful.) A machine connects to the brain (which is identified with the mind) of the protagonist, Neo, and uploads martial arts knowledge. Within seconds, Neo declares in astonishment: "I know Kong-Fu." Later, when they are in virtual space, his guide explains to him: This is a sparring program, similar to the programmed reality of the Matrix.

It has the same basic rules [...]. [T]hese rules are no different from the rules of a computer system. Some of them can be bent; others can be broken.

Neo learns that the reality that he (and us, the viewers) knows, is no more than a VR game, and that his mind can affect reality and its laws. Should his faith prevail over the existing laws of the Matrix, he could create a reality that follows an entirely different set of rules.

In the scene where Neo sells his hackery-products, he removes from his library a box in the guise of a book, which contains computer-discs and cash. The box is made of the philosopher Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), thus symbolizing the matrix, a computerized simulation of our reality, which is not actually real. The scene is associated with the philosophical issue known as the "brain in a vat" dilemma: were our brains indeed connected to a machine which presented them with VR, could we detect the falsehood of that reality? Allegedly not, as the mind is our only way of knowing reality (e.g., Grau 2015; Hanley 2003; Putnum 2005). The movie implies that this is indeed our reality and calls us to struggle to break out of it.

Other secularized versions of this motif are aided by either a *scientific or pseudo-scientific explanation*. Spiritual-scientific interpretations of Quantum Theory emphasize the role of the experimentalist in influencing reality: supposedly, their expectations that the quantum should act as matter/wave are corroborated and realized in scientific experimentations.

Spiritual teachers use this insight when claiming that scientific findings support the assertion that our expectations truly affect physical reality (e.g., Capra 2000). Others propose a change of consciousness as a tool for physical healing. Chopra (1990, 2) writes:

[H]ealing is not primarily a physical process but a mental one. [...T]he physical mechanism is like a screen. Behind it [...] is something much more abstract, a form of know-how [...] a powerful force [...W]hen an advanced cancer suddenly and mysteriously vanishes, medical theory is baffled. [...] I didn't think they were miracles; I thought they were proof that the mind can go enough to change the very patterns that design the body [...] and destroy any disease.

Another controversial science, parapsychology, is also used in justifying the possibility of creating-our-reality. Spiritual discourse is prevalent with pseudo-scientific proof of the power of the mind to influence the physical world, namely, to create reality. A common image is that of psychic celebrity, Uri Geller's spoon-bending, which also appears in *The Matrix*, as proof of reality's absolute dependency on the mind (Žižek 2002: 8-9). A psychic child hands the hero a spoon and explains:

- Do not try to bend the spoon. That's impossible.
Instead, only try to realize the truth.
- What truth?
- There is no spoon.
- There is no spoon?!
- Then you'll see this is not the spoon that bends,
it is only yourself.

Over the past decades, popular spiritual mind-influenced reality-creation techniques have been developed, which lean on neuroscience and cognitive psychology, and are widespread throughout self-help culture. For example, the "Silva Mind Control Method" stresses that it "does not dwell in the occult," but meant to "demystify the understanding of the functioning of the human brain and the mind" (Drapeau 2016). Although the method shows how to dramatically change one's private-inner reality, it's pretension goes even further as it promises to influence realities beyond the boundaries of the mind (physical fitness) or the individual (sales achievements), or non-"secular" realities (intuition improvement). Which leads us to the following section.

1.C. The Metaphysical Version

Mind control techniques are portrayed in popular spiritualities discourse as influencing not only the individual/mind, but

external/physical reality as well. Some reality-creation objectives deviate from a possible secularized explanation, but lack any explicit reference to magic. A similar trend characterizes the Metaphysical movement which merges philosophical-rational-scientific arguments with a religious-spiritual approach, a movement whose influence on contemporary spirituality cannot be overstated (Melton 1992).

The Metaphysical movement was founded in the final quarter of the 19th century, on the basis of idealistic-solipsistic philosophical assumptions: that external-physical reality is an illusion of the mind, utterly dependent on our inner reality, mind, beliefs. The claims' wording leans towards the philosophical-secular – doubting the existence of reality outside our own consciousness. Accordingly, “natural laws” change in accordance with our beliefs.

The *metaphysical version* of the Creating-Our-Reality motif isn't wholly secular nor magical, or could actually be both. The difference between the metaphysical version and the secular one is that, while in the “brain in a vat” dilemma perceived reality is fed *into* the mind, in the metaphysical perception, reality is projected from *within* the mind. In both cases, the factuality/inevitability of the perceived reality is questioned. The “scientific” style, typical of this design of the motif, makes the perceived miracle or magical act look rational/logical and natural, turning us all unwitting magicians. This sets it apart from the magical version, whose cosmology includes irrational causality (Luhmann 1989, 276-279; Hanegraaff 2003, 370-371). In the metaphysical version, magical/supernatural reality is ordinary, rather than extraordinary, and does not require any special skills, unlike the magical description. “There is no order of difficulty in miracles. One is not ‘harder’ or ‘bigger’ than another” – argues the channeled book, *A Course in Miracles*, one of the most central books in contemporary spirituality (Kemp 2004, chapter 2). “Miracles are an example of right-thinking,” seeing as “a miracle is a correction introduced into false thinking.” Hence, “miracles are natural. When they do not occur, something has gone wrong,” so naturally, the miracle “reverses the physical laws,” through the use of thoughts, their correction, or prayer (Schucman and Thetford 2009, 7-8,11).

A great deal of popular spiritual activity leans on “the course,” such as Inner Peace Movement, workshops and books, which teach one how to espouse “power thoughts” or express affirmations in order to Create-Our-Reality. Louise Hay, a renowned spiritual guide, claims she got cured from cancer through a mental-emotional transformation. She explains (Hay 1987, 1-2):

The thoughts we think and the words we speak create our experiences. We create the situations, and then [...] blaming the other person for our frustration. No person, no place, and no thing has any power over us, for 'we' are the only thinkers in

our mind. [...] What we believe about ourselves and about life becomes true for us. *The Universe Totally Supports Us in Every Thought We Choose to Think and Believe*. [...] We have unlimited choices about what we can think.”

The movie *What Dreams May Come* expresses a metaphysical approach to the description of reality-creation. When the hero dies, he discovers that the afterlife is created of the deceased's thoughts, dreams, desires, and beliefs. He turns to a character he meets in paradise:

- Nice place you got here.
- Ho, no-no-no. Nice place you got here!
- Me?
- Sure, you're making all this. [...] You're creating a world, from your imagination, from anything you want.

Later, he receives a lesson in an informed creation-of-reality, over a cup of coffee, when his guide offers him one and says: “Drink it. Think it's coffee and it will be.” When Chris struggles with this, his guide explains: “Thought is real. Physical is the illusion. Ironic, huh?”

Similarly, in the best-selling novel *The Secret of Shambhala* (Redfield 2001), it is said that a constant “prayer-field” surrounds every person. The language which describes this phenomenon utilizes pseudo-scientific wording (ibid., 48):

Prayer is not a power that is realized only when we sit down and decide to pray [...]
 Our prayer is an energy or power that emanates out from us in all directions. In most people, who think in ordinary ways, this power is very weak and contradictory. But in others [...] who are very creative and successful, this field of energy is strong, although it is still usually unconscious [...]

Accordingly, the book makes an ethical demand, that we overcome our cognizance of existing reality and replace it with potential reality, so that the ontological becomes subordinate to the epistemological (ibid., 194):

Of course we have to see things the way they are, but after that we must immediately shift our expectations from what is to what could be. [...] You must return to that mental posture, always, no matter what you see.

The successful movie, *The Secret* (based on Byrne 2006), also expresses metaphysical ideas:

We're all working with one power, one law - It's attraction! [...] Everything that's coming into your life you are attracting into your life, and it's attracted to you by virtue of the images you're holding in your mind.

The combination of images and voices of spiritual personalities and scientists is prominent in the movie, which leads us to our discussion of the “merged-domains” characteristic.

2. Merged Domains – Secularization and Spiritualization

Although we have provided three clear versions of designing the Creating-Our-Reality motif, our argument in this article is that, in fact, the manifestations of this motif in popular spirituality are usually characterized by a tendency to *merge* versions (see also Ruah-Midbar 2014). In some of the above cases, we have already witnessed the dissolve of secularized versions into mystical ones on the one hand, as well as the validation of magical versions via rationalization on the other. The metaphysical version is essentially a blend of both worlds. Other studies of contemporary popular spirituality have also identified contrasting, simultaneous, or mixed processes of spiritualization and secularization. Puttick (2000), for example, pointed out the oppositional directions of secularization and spiritualization throughout the development of the Human Potential Movement. Hanegraaff (2000; 1998) indicated the ambivalent viewpoint of contemporary occultism, which adheres both to traditional Esotericism and Modern science, as well as a bidirectional characteristic of New Age – the psychologization of religion (describing religious matters in psychological terms) and the sanctification of psychology (describing it in religious terms).

Once again, we realize that *the blurring of boundaries between these oppositional domains is, in fact, an intentional, albeit oblivious, trend, typical of contemporary spiritualities*. They struggle with the separation between secular and spiritual rationales. The Creating-Our-Reality motif reflects trends of spiritualization and re-enchantment at the same time with rationalization, secularization, scientification, and dis-enchantment. Although these are seemingly contrasting trends, they are designed as mutually empowering and validating, as we shall now demonstrate.

The Matrix portrays this “oscillation” very well. Allegedly, the reality of the Matrix is subject to the power of the VR-characters’ minds’ determination. This description is essentially secular, in the spirit of the “brain in a vat” dilemma and the nature of VR. Indeed, scholarly reviews surfaced following the first film. For example, Žižek (2002: 245, 263) complained that “the film is NOT ‘crazy’ enough,” because “all these ‘miracles’ are possible only if we remain WITHIN the VR sustained by the

Matrix.” However, in the sequels, when Neo began manifesting abilities that affect the *physical* reality *beyond* the Matrix, his abilities were not given any “secular”-scientific explanation. Thus, after providing the rational basis for the magical acts *within* the matrix, magic infiltrates tangible reality, where magic shouldn't have existed according to these very explanations, thus spiritualizing our own world's cosmology as well.

While this last example provided a dissolve from a secularized description to a spiritualized one, we shall now exemplify the opposite trend – the secularization and rationalization of magical versions. The witchcraft of the *Harry Potter* series demonstrates this, by technologizing magic (Östling 2003). Images of witchcraft and futuristic technology become similar, even identical, thus completely undermining the popular Modern dichotomy between science-rationality-progress-technology and enchantment-faith-spirituality-magic.

Yet another means of undermining these dichotomies is psychologization. When external-objective and private-inner-subjective realities blend together, the focus on the mind as a *tool for perceiving* reality gets mixed-up with the mental perception as an *instrument for experiencing* reality. Thus, *reality is privatized, and magic – psychologized* (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro 2018). For example, in the book from which we provided explicit magical descriptions of reality-creation, it was also written (Amber 2000, 4, 8) that the changes brought about by the witchcraft practitioner are actually “changes in our own perceptions or consciousness,” and that superior magic is meant “for religious and/or psychotherapeutic purposes,” namely, “personal evolution.”

Sometimes, the concurrence of secularization and spiritualization trends is expressed through ambiguous terms, or by the removal/confiscation of terms from their original meaning/context. On the one hand, scientific terminology (“quantum,” “energy,” “frequency”) is used to legitimize religious/spiritual claims (Hammer 2001), while on the other hand, “God” is used in non-religious/traditional meanings and purposes. For example, some Modern witches refer to the goddess as a psychological archetype rather than metaphysical reality (Greenwood 2013). The secularized use of “God” is common in popular spirituality, like in the case of Gas from *eXzistenZ*, who becomes God following his creative experience playing that role in VR-games. Another example is the postmodern theology of Neale Donald Walsch, a renowned spiritual teacher, which presents God as the source of reality's non-absolute nature, so that people create reality by interpreting it (Walsch 2000, 173-174):

[P]eople try to find meaning in the events and experiences of their lives. Yet the fact is that nothing has any meaning at all. There is no intrinsic truth hidden in the encounters and experiences of life. *Who would hide it there? And why? [...] If god had something to tell, wouldn't it be a lot easier (to say*

nothing of kinder) to simply tell you, rather than make it a mystery that you had to solve?

The fact is, there is no meaning to anything, save the meaning you give it.

Life is meaningless.

[I]t is My [God's] greatest gift. By rendering life meaningless ,I give you the opportunity to decide what anything and everything means. [...W]hen a particular thing happens to you, don't ask yourself why it is happening. Choose why it is happening. [...M]ake it all up. You are anyway. [...] Yet most of the time you are doing this unconsciously. Now make up your mind (and your life) consciously!

The textual blending of secularization and spiritualization reflects the prevalent worldview in popular spirituality, which blurs the lines between secularized and spiritualized cosmology. One example of this are the words of well-known American witch, Starhawk, about her own beliefs/conceptual transformation. Her words teach us of the great appeal the various versions of the Creating-Our-Reality motif have, and their multitude of meanings, as well as the importance of vagueness in the description of the psychological-magical practice (from Kemp 1996, 6):

[O]ver all these years of practising ritual and magic, [...] I have actually come to believe it. [laughter] When I started I was really a rationalist, and it was all very wonderful but it was all very psychological, and I could have a lot of good explanations of the Goddess as [...] this archetype or that energy. [...] In some ways I was a more effective speaker at that point because [...] it would make sense and it would be not threatening. But over the years [...] my experience has been that if you work with the Goddess [...] something happens.

One technique utilized by spiritual spokespersons is the “estrangement effect.” As we immerse ourselves in the story's fantastic reality, we realize it is an allegory to our own reality. For example, before *The Matrix* was released, the trailer addressed audiences saying: “In 1999 – The Matrix has you.” Similarly, in *eXzistenZ*, one of the characters complains to the VR designer, Allegra, that the game is stressful and unenjoyable:

- I don't like it here. I don't know what's going on. We're both stumbling around together in this unformed world, whose rules and objectives are largely unknown, seemingly indecipherable or possibly nonexistent, always on the verge of being

killed by forces that we don't understand.

- That sounds like my game, all right.

- That sounds like a game that's not gonna be easy to market.

- But it's a game everybody's already playing.

Allegra is implying that all of us – viewers – have been playing the same VR-like game in our day-to-day lives.

In summation, the various versions of the Creating-Our-Reality motif in popular spirituality tend to *merge the secularization and spiritualization trends*, and are *usually not purely secular/magical*. This is achieved by various means, including the psychologization or scientization of the reality-creation manner, included in the magic-centered versions, of all things, or the re-enchantment and spiritualization in versions whose wording is fundamentally secularized, rationalistic, or scientific-like. Thus, *simultaneous appropriation of scientific prestige, plausibility, and preservation of magic are enabled*.

3. “Life is Meaningless”: Cultural Implications

In this section, we shall swiftly explore the ideational and ideological contexts in designing the Creating-Our-Reality motif, and their cultural implications.

3.A. *The Deification of the Individual and Creation Myths*

Contemporary spiritualities don't just deal with our creation-of-reality, but also beget new Creation myths (Hanegraaff 1998, 112-125, 304-306; Ruah-Midbar 2006, 360, 399-401). In fact, narratives of Creation are a shining example for the individual in their daily life, as they perceive each moment as re-creation, and as an opportunity. The omni-religious aspiration to abolish the past (Eliade 2005) finds myriad expressions in contemporary spiritualities – rebirth practices, the veneration of innovation, transformational aspirations, and so on – a topic which exceeds our discussion (Ruah-Midbar 2006, Chapter 3b).

When Creation myths become models for the individual as they create their world, they themselves assume the role of the Creator, of God. Indeed, the inclination for self-deification is prominent in popular spiritualities: each person is a god all their own, or holds the divine within them (Heelas 1996, 19). As the individual is attributed the power of creation, they become the unlimited master of their own fate, future, and even past. This responsibility is accompanied by magic – each of the individual's actions or failures are embedded with a secret or meaning only they may uncover.

3.B. *Individual and Society, Passiveness and Proactivity*

The Creating-Our-Reality motif sets theological tension – or a built-in paradox – between focus on the individual and interest in one's surroundings, society. Supposedly, alternative spiritualities possess a clear solipsistic perception: reality is utterly privatized; each person creates-their-own-reality themselves without any external limitations; surroundings are nothing but a mirror of the mind. Therefore, notorious spiritual narratives depict victims (of rape, parental abuse, accidents) as people who chose their own fate, who created it. However, in popular spiritualities this is a controversial topic: some spiritual trends emphasize that reality-creation is not private but rather collective (between all people, as well as God). Walsch, for example, ridicules New-Age's stance on privatizing reality as “afraid to say anything about anything unless they can glow [...] with positivity” (Walsch 2018).

The tension between the individual and society has to do with a different tension in contemporary spiritualities –between passiveness and proactivity. One common spiritual approach calls on the individual to create reality freely and creatively, proactively, with no consideration for circumstances. Other spiritual approaches call to shake-off the dissatisfaction with reality and engage in observing and exploring it and its generators, by letting go, relinquishing control, and surrendering to the situation.

So, what can be done: should we correct the surrounding circumstances to improve reality, or is it enough to correct our interpretation of it? The passive approach asks that we focus on the internal, assuming that external changes shall be reflected through our inner spiritual work, while the proactive version seeks change in the outside world, which reflects our internalness.

3.C. Optimism Ethics

Contemporary spiritual cosmology is highly-optimistic. Whether reality is capable of improvement and it is our job to make it happen, or whether reality is actually already better than we believe it to be and our job is merely to acknowledge that – these are different expressions of the belief that this world is essentially good, very good. Optimism is the working assumption of reality-creation, therefore creation practices are actually rituals that express optimism, much-like classic magical rituals (Malinowski 1954: 90).

This raises the question of the source of contemporary spiritual optimism: does it reflect the better living conditions from which typical contemporary practitioners enjoy, as they come from privileged classes? Or is their optimism unconnected to its practitioners' outward/socioeconomic-political reality, but is rather the result of an intentional-ideological oppression of negativity? Namely – is the source of the positive experience the reality, or an interpretive stance which opposes misery and self-victimization?

In fact, as we have witnessed, the Creating-Our-Reality motif is more than etiology, namely, a spiritual explanation of phenomena (if we are in hell – then we have created it), but also *Ethics*, namely, expectation/demand (if we are in hell – then we *should* change that by creating a paradise). These ethics necessitate optimism – we are the ones who should/must better our world. Popular spiritual rituals – such as Affirmations, or sharing in Listening Circles – provide individuals with the opportunity to affirm the positive nature of the world, the optimistic cosmology. In the words of Hay (1987, 2):

[I]t makes sense to choose 'Everyone is always helpful,' rather than 'people are out to get me.' *The Universal Power Never Judges or Criticizes Us*

New-Age optimism is contrary to how Eliade (2005) described the traditional omni-religious tendency to ‘normalize’ suffering, that is, to create theologies that give suffering meaning, thus making it tolerable. Where Christianity saw the victim as desirable and the martyr as holy, and while Buddhism is intensely preoccupied with suffering – New Age Spiritualities disapprove of such values. In their eyes, the normality of suffering makes it far too widespread.

The contemporary Creating-Our-Reality motif is a call to avoid suffering and sacrifice, and a demand/expectation for a pleasant, joyful and even pleasurable reality – assuming it is within our reach and requires no more than conscious choice (Simchai and Shoshana 2018). This choice necessitates persistent creativeness while internalizing radical self-mind-supervision, in the words of one character from Redfield’s novel (2001, 201): “Of course we must monitor every thought.” However, it focuses more on the great gains it foresees, rather than those attained, according to Eliade, by the normalization of suffering throughout various religions.

Weber (2008) has shown how Modernism began with the secularization of Christian ethics, in the guise of demanding hard work, faith in predestined divine choice, and a directive to seek-out signs of blessing in the individual’s success, as they lay-down their life on the altar of toil and hardship. The continuation of this process can be found in contemporary spiritual ethics (Heelas 2001), which preaches the *effortless* creation of reality, and attributes the *individual* with the divine liberty to choose, and to bestow grace.

3.D. Conclusion – Having it Both Ways

The Creating-Our-Reality motif is one of the most central in contemporary spiritual discourse. I have presented and demonstrated three different versions of it – magical, secularized and metaphysical. Yet, I claimed that despite the clear differentiation between spiritualization and secularization trends, there is an obvious tendency *not* to leave the motif in its “pure” state, which is probably why the metaphysical version

is so popular, seeing as it has it both ways. The latter version releases the tension that the others seeks to preserve – between Modern-scientific-secular and magical cosmology.

The simultaneous trend of secularization and spiritualization teaches us that spiritual practitioners in the West wish to avoid abandoning Modern-scientific discourse and to hold-on to the magic, at the same time. Although some lean more toward the magical or feel more comfortable in the secular-scientific domain, they all wish to create a discourse that allows them to merge both. Contemporary spiritualities express a discontent with Modern-Western culture, and its ideational and ideological options, religious and secular alike (See e.g., Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Ruah Midbar 2017). This discontent is expressed both through the commonness of the preoccupation with creating a *different* reality that would constitute a dramatic transformation in our world, as well as the simultaneous preservation of these supposedly mutually-exclusive secularized and spiritualized versions.

This exemplifies the erosion of secularization, or “secular” identity. *The melding of secular and spiritual/magical discourses is also used as a catalyst for their likening*, and the readiness of those who perceive themselves to be secular to buy into the legitimacy of magic. Thus, the attractiveness of spiritual discourse keeps growing, as its legitimization is established in the mainstream. *This type of spiritual discourse, which has no exclusive obligation towards magical/supernatural cosmology, and appears to be secular and “conventional,” has an especially-great potential to infiltrate mainstream discourse and win over the public’s heart* (Ruah-Midbar 2006, 291-292). In the words of Allegra from *eXzistenZ*, it sometimes seems that “it’s a game everybody is already playing.”

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