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Capitalism and New Age

Religion plays a major role in the way people act and think. In this way, it is of vital importance to understand the trends in the religious landscape and be able to see how things like economics and politics interact with religion and how they are influenced by religion. We currently live in a rapidly evolving globalized world where the religious landscape is quickly changing. It is a religious landscape where New Age spirituality remains popular while mainline religion is on the decline. During all this capitalism has continued to be ingrained in every facet of society as the default way of thinking about economics in the West. This trend away from mainline religion is a major part of the growth of secularism in the West. In this essay, I will show that our capitalist system maintains and fosters New Age spirituality. I will prove this by explaining how New Age religion is able to resolve the strain and dissonance between Christianity and capitalism by acting as a capitalism-friendly collection of spiritual beliefs. I will cover the mechanisms by which capitalism uses, maintains and promotes New Age spirituality. Lastly, I will connect New Age spirituality and capitalism to secularism and discuss whether New Age spirituality is able to withstand the forces of secularization in the West. I believe this is an especially important topic for Catholic Universities because if this is true how can Catholic Universities, which function as a capitalist corporations and have a vested interest in making a

profit, keep their Catholic identity while still operating under a system that runs contrary to that identity?

Before I can talk about New Age spirituality, I must define the term. I would define the “New Age spirituality” which I will talk about in this paper as a loose group of spiritual beliefs developed by Western cultures in the 1960s that are rooted in the Western esoteric tradition but draws heavily from indigenous American and Asian religious traditions as well. These Western cultures, like the ones in the Anglosphere and Europe, received much of those New Age beliefs from their colonies during the early to mid-1900s. The European Western esoteric tradition is centuries old, having developed in Europe as a group of mystical and occult traditions and beliefs that went contrary to mainline Christian orthodoxy (Hanegraaff, 2000). These beliefs were rooted in gnosis, or secret knowledge, and are highly critical of organized and hierarchical religious institutions. Western esotericism became much more mainstream during the late 1800s with the rise of Spiritualism which saw a revival in experimental and non-orthodox views on Western religious thought. This combined with the latent colonialist orientalism, the triumph of capitalism, the countercultural movement in the 1960s, which emphasized free love, criticism of authority, and rejection of hierarchy, all came together to form the New Age spirituality that we know of today.

New Age spirituality comes in many diverse forms that can trace their roots from many different traditions. These practices include meditation with a heavy focus on Buddhist and Hindu forms of mediation. Holistic self-help/alternative medication is another popular type of New Age belief that places forms of healthcare that focus on the spiritual, natural, and holistic above traditionally western, science-based, forms of healthcare. Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions play a big role in New Age spirituality, examples being yoga, yogins, karma, mantras,

etc (Bruce, 2017). Astrology, which has roots in western esotericism, has also become an increasingly popular form of New Age spirituality. Due to the decentralized individualized nature of New Age spirituality, the same practice can differ among people. New Age spirituality's decentralized nature comes from the way it operates. New Age rituals, spiritual items and practices are usually sold through classes, specialized teachers, or in specialty stores. This very decentralized nature of New Age belief makes it unique amongst many belief structures. New Age spiritualism and the idea of "spiritual but not religious" are very much connected. The idea of "spiritual but not religious" is that people will hold a spiritual belief system yet not maintain ties to mainline religious structures. While these spiritual belief system that people hold instead is not always New Age Spirituality, it is a large part as talked about in Pew Research survey that I mention in the next section (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Secularism is the trend away from affiliation to formal religion. Survey data has shown that this trend away from religion has not affected New Age spirituality which still continues to exist strong. Religious unaffiliation continues to increase in the West with a 6 point increase from 2007 to 2014 (Going, going, gone, 2017). That brings the percentage of religiously unaffiliated in the United States to 22.8 % with young people being the most religiously unaffiliated. This trend of religious unaffiliation is matched with people continuing to hold onto New Age type beliefs. Recent polling has found that six out of ten, believe in New Age beliefs including physical objects having spiritual energy, psychics, reincarnation and astrology (Pew Research Center, 2018). The group that polled highest in believing in New Age beliefs were those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" (Pew Research Center, 2018). This is evidence of the idea that as secularism grows, New Age spirituality is viewed as a favorable alternative to formal religious affiliation. This connects to my thesis that in a secular West, New Age

spirituality is seen as a favorable alternative because by switching to a New Age belief system people are able to resolve cognitive dissonance between mainline Christianity and capitalism. Following I will show how New Age spirituality capitulates to capitalistic ideals and in turn is used as a capitalism-friendly alternative to mainline religion, aiding in secularism's trend away from formal religion.

Capitalism breeds an individualistic mindset. This is due to capitalism's emphasis on placing individual goals over the collective good. In the laissez-faire view capital is best handled by individuals based on individualistic motives (Urbanti and Tom, 2015). This individualism conflicts with the claims of mainline Christian values of placing common good over the individual goods, the inherent human dignity of all, the inherent value in suffering, and placing others above themselves. It is not in the best interests of a CEO to donate company money to charitable groups or pay their employees a just wage because, in a capitalist economic system, that will cause the company to lose its edge against competitors. Individuals must be in constant conflict with other owners of capital. This is best said in the quote "anti-political individualism nurtures a realistic conception of justice that strips of all meaning the idea of a just society" (Urbanti and Tom, 2015). This conflict can lead to people to cognitive dissonance, as they attempt to succeed in a capitalist market while also keeping to Christian values of loving thy neighbor and charity. The idea of mainline Christianity coming into conflict with capitalism was expanded on by Beste when she says, "There is a widening split within the church between the messianic virtues of Christianity which are publicly proclaimed, prescribed, and believed in by the church ... and the actual value-structures and goals of the bourgeois way of life" (Beste, 2018). This cognitive dissonance can be resolved by abandoning those mainline Christian churches and going to a belief system that better matches capitalist values, New Age spirituality

(Houtman and Mascini, 2002). New Age spiritualism is generally a highly individualistic belief system mainly due to its emphasis on the self. Because of its emphasis on individualism, New Age spirituality puts up no fight against prevailing capitalist values (Farias and Lalljee, 2008). New age practices are so heavily individualistic, in part, because they are tailor-made and sold to aid in individual spiritual growth. Farias and Lalljee described this well when they said “New Age practices and beliefs are in harmony with the modern individualist emphasis on the self. ‘In the context of our culture, ... it is impossible to think of a self that is more autonomous or free, more in control or powerful, more responsible, more perfect, more internalized, more expressivistic than that presented in various New Age discourses’” (Farias and Lalljee, 2008). An example of this would be the focus on self-help, self-care, and self-discovery. These practices are rooted in improvement coming not from the community, a sense of solidarity or unity, but strictly from interior satisfaction. This is reinforced by a form of radical tolerance and subjectivity where the consumer can form their own personal belief system (Gray, 2008). In New Age spirituality even, truth is subject to market forces. Individualism is taken to its ultimate conclusion in New Age spirituality. One spiritual belief can be true for one believer while at the same time a different belief can be true for another. An example would be how some who are anti-vaccine for New Age reasons may say that holistic non-medical treatments may be true for them while vaccines may be true for others at the same time. Steve Bruce explains this well when he says, “The individualism of the New Age goes much further than individualism in behavior in that it replaces an objective notion of truth with endless subjectivism” (Bruce, 2017). Ritual then is tailored towards the individual goal above all else. In a hyper-individualistic and disconnected society, “uniqueness”, and “identity” are placed in high regard, and new age beliefs can provide these (Waldron, 2005). Previously non-individualistic belief systems, many of the

belief systems New Age spirituality appropriated, can be turned individualistic through commodification, which I will talk about next. This connection between individualism and commodification is shown to be present in the Neopagan community: “one of the most significant aspects of the increased influence of commodification in the Neopagan movement is the changing structure of social relationships and sense of community that are concomitant with the embracing of an individualist and consumption-based approach to cultural property.” (Waldron, 2005). This all produces a belief system that not only submits to capitalist narratives but reinforces it.

Capitalism is inherently amoral, where the distribution of goods and capital is determined not by ethical and moral consideration but by competition and the free flow of capital. As I’ve previously said, this puts mainline Christianity in conflict with capitalist narratives. Another one of these conflicts is that the commodification of religious/spiritual beliefs/items destroys the sacred value placed those beliefs/items and mainline Christianity, places a high value on the sacred (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Commodification by definition makes something that is sellable and tradable for profit. By turning the sacred into a commodity, you remove it from the realm of the spiritual into the realm of the material. Mainline Christianity, for example, condemns the sin of simony, selling of sacred items or positions for this reason. Things that aren’t commodities are completely useless in terms of pure capital so it is within the interests of capitalists to commodify as much as they can, including religion, which causes a disconnect between the sacred in mainline Christianity and the materialism of capitalism. This disconnect leads to the weakening of Christian values in the West and the search for a capitalist-friendly alternative, with New Age spiritualism and prosperity gospel being two main examples (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Unlike mainline Christianity, New Age spirituality can be commodifiable. New Age spirituality’s

decentralized nature has allowed companies to easily sell New Age spirituality. The New Age Wiccan movement has experienced this phenomenon heavily; “Witchcraft as a religious movement is being defined in terms of its manifestation in purchasable products and its representations in popular culture and the mass media” (Waldron, 2005). This has led to the copyright and trademark of countless New Age practices and items and the formation of entire industries revolving around selling and profiting off New Age spirituality. This commodification of New Age spirituality can harm communities who originally had those religious beliefs. The Wiccan community has noted that the commodification of their practices has resulted in easier access to those practices but point out that commodification has changed the underlying meaning and value of their practices because the motives of those selling the practices may not be the same as the original practitioners (Waldron, 2005). Other examples include the trademark of certain forms of yoga and the promotion of capitalist values by certain gurus. Certain gurus such as Osho pioneered “New Age capitalism” where he synthesizes traditional Hindu and Buddhist practices with Western capitalism. In this new style of eastern spirituality, commodification is not only accepted but praised (Urban, 2015). Another heavily commodified New Age practice is astrology. Astrology is unique among many New Age practices for being extremely widespread and ingrained in Western culture. There is a whole industry of selling people astrology-related merchandise and has formed a whole online industry. As secularism causes people to lose faith in mainline Christianity people turn have to turn to other forms of belief that will provide some form of connection to the spiritual. One expert on the trends of astrology explains, “What emerges is an appreciation for magic and spirituality, the knowingly unreal, and the intangible aspects of our lives that defy big data and the ultra-transparency of the web.” (Beck, 2018). This is a way that secularism and capitalism work in tandem. Secularism strips the spiritual and sacred

away from daily life and capitalist alternatives like New Age spirituality are there to provide a connection to the spiritual while also making a profit. Without commodification, there would be no mechanism by which capitalism could profit off of people trying to find meaning and a sense of the spiritual in New Age practices. This is yet another way that New Age spirituality not only capitulates to capitalism but acts as its tool.

Many eastern philosophies and religious practices were co-opted during the colonization of Asia, Africa and American indigenous by Western populations. Indigenous/Tribal practices in the Americas were co-opted by European Americans while the colonization of India and Southeast Asia lead to the co-opting of Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, and Confucianist beliefs and practices. Western audiences co-opting these religious beliefs from disadvantaged people aided in the commodification of these beliefs fundamentally changing what they are (Urban, 2015). An example of a belief that is changed when it was co-opted by a Western audience is reincarnation; “In western hands, reincarnation has been inverted into a belief that the self is a fixed entity that repeatedly returns to life on earth. Where Hinduism diminishes the importance of the self, the westernized version elevates it.” (Bruce, 2017). The “eastern philosophies” that New Age purports to uphold are nothing but Western values dressed in the aesthetics of those they have historically oppressed. When these practices were co-opted by Westerns, they were sanitized and removed from their traditional religious context in order to make them presentable to a Western audience, these co-opted sanitized versions of these practices were then turned into commodities. This results in Westerns profiting off the robbery of practices and beliefs held by disadvantaged people which not only degrades disadvantaged people’s culture, religion, and beliefs but also makes it harder for them to practice their original practices due to trademark, copyright and other forms of commodification (Urban, 2015). When talking about the Osha Yoga movement, Hugh

Urban said “he is not only the most blatant example of the marking of the mystic Orient, but also a clear case of the co-option of spirituality by the logic of neoliberalism, transforming even the most radical elements of religious thought into convenient commodities to be purchased by middle-class Western consumers to fit their busy lifestyle” (Urban, 2015). This has been especially harmful to heavily oppressed communities like the North American natives. The phenomenon of “plastic medicine people” describes westerners appropriating native spirituality and claim to be Native American style medicine men or healers (Aldred, 2000). These “plastic medicine people” profit off native beliefs while natives experience higher poverty rates in reservations. Many aspects of New Age spirituality are rooted in the colonialism and orientalism of the early 1900s and through commodification has persisted until this day. This is yet another way that capitalism has facilitated the growth of New Age spirituality.

All of this comes together to make New Age spiritualism a form of religion that is completely brandable. This gives it an advantage over mainline Christianity because mainline Christianity has a problem with branding. Mainline Christianity in the West has a history of collaborating with reactionary or conservative movements which leads to a stigma of Christianity as a thing of the past or something that needs to get with the 21st century. The antagonism between mainline Christianity and the progressive movements was especially prevalent in Catholic countries (Bruce, 2017). This phenomenon took off in the 60s during the Countercultural Revolution, when past systems of thought and morality were scrutinized and reevaluated. This is also when New Age spirituality started becoming more widespread as an alternative to traditional religion and since then, New Age has had the stigma of being countercultural, revolutionary, and in vogue. New Age spirituality is easily brandable due to its commodification and taking in of capitalist values. This can be summarized by “New Age

emphasis on self-realization is in many ways a logical extension of this long-standing American ethos, today reimagined as the care and promotion of self through the logic of branding, ... This consolidation of religious and business practices allowed for the smooth accessibility of religion as a lifestyle, in that it emphasized the practice of religion rather than strict adherence to ritual.” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The branding of New Age spirituality allows those who profit off of the movement to claim to be countercultural when, in reality, it reinforces the capitalist values that prevail in our culture (Garver, 2011). Steve Bruce explains this well when he says, “Although it often presents itself as countercultural, New Age thinking shares with the political right an unfortunate tendency to overlook social-structural obstacles to material prosperity.” (Bruce, 2017). This can be seen as a form of “woke capitalism” where corporate entities will hijack popular and trendy social issues in order to form a friendly, hip, and young brand while at the same time pivot the public attention away from the fact that their primary goal will always be to make a profit and satisfy their shareholders, no matter what that takes. All of this put together ensures that New Age spirituality is as successful in the marketplace as possible. These companies can form “lifestyle brands” in which a set of beliefs is sellable and make a necessary part of the consumers daily routine. An example of this would be the certain gurus who sell a type of yoga that they claim is necessary for their success (Urban, 2015). New Age spirituality being brandable connects with both its colonial and capitalist facets. Capitalism is what drives the exploitation and commodification of practices of disadvantaged people into a packageable lifestyle brand. Banet-Weiser connects all three of these points when she says “the branding of spirituality is a process that exceeds Orientalism, as it is animated and enabled by advanced capitalist culture. It is a response, in particular ways, to the bullying powers of capitalism” (Banet-Weiser, 2012)

All this comes to show that New Age spirituality capitulates to and its growth is facilitated by capitalism but how does this connect to the more road trend of secularism? As secularism weakens the bond between the mainline Christianity and the mainstream culture, there is less cultural pressure to remain Christian. This allows the cultural dissonance present in between those who try to reconcile capitalism and mainline Christianity to better show itself. Without the cultural pressure of Christianity being normative (which was eliminated by secularism) there is little resistance against people resolving this dissonance by giving up on mainline Christianity. Any remaining pull towards the spiritual that used to be fulfilled by formal affiliation with a mainline Christian denomination can now be fulfilled by things like New Age spirituality. If New Age spirituality were sincerely countercultural and anti-capitalist, then people would not find an alternative in but since New Age spirituality only has the facade of being countercultural, people are able to comfortably reconcile their capitalist lifestyle with their spirituality. I agree with Steve Bruce when he says that New Age spirituality cannot effectively combat increasing secularism in the long term. If people turn to New Age spirituality because of convenience and then when increasingly secularism makes “spiritual but not religious” New Age spirituality taboo, then those people may give it up for convenience as well. The turn from mainline Christianity to New Age spiritualism is a move towards secularism in itself. This is because as previously shown, New Age spirituality in the West is a capitulation to Western materialist ideologies like capitalism. Bruce points this out when he says “that most of those [New Age movements] that survived more than a decade did so by becoming more, not less, secular, ..., while it is the case that eastern religious themes have proved attractive to some in the West, they have proved attractive to some in the West, they have changed in ways that look like capitulation to the secular culture of the West.” (Bruce, 2017). A combination of secularism and

capitalism leads to mainline Christianity being replaced with a form of spirituality that can could easy capitulate to both capitalistic and secular demands.

In conclusion, New Age spirituality is the religion of capitalism. It not only capitulates to capitalist narratives of radical individualism and the commodification of what is sacred to many other people but is spread and maintained by those narratives. From the beginning, New Age spirituality was rooted in the capitalist exploitation of colonized people and perpetuates a denigration of their religious beliefs. In the process, these religious beliefs are changed to make them fit Western capitalist values and sellable to a Western audience. This loose collection of spiritual beliefs is propped up by capitalism as a weak alternative to mainline Christianity in a secular West and not one that, I believe, will withstand the test of time. This ultimately presents a problem to Catholic institution who find themselves in the position to defend Catholic values in a culture that is propping up more secular and capitalist alternatives while also functioning as a capitalist organization. The question of whether it is even morally for a Catholic institution to operate under a system that runs contrary to the faith is another paper topic in itself but one that may connect with this topic as well. This is a problem that will only get worse as secularism becomes more ingrained and one that I believe will require more investigation in the future.

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