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Facing suffering and death

Alternative therapy as post-secular religious practice

Introduction

The idea of religious practice being 'post-secular' raises questions concerning secularisation, sacralisation and the various meanings of the prefix 'post'. In what follows, I will investigate a kind of practice that is ever increasing in late modern, Western societies and elsewhere; namely, the practice of alternative therapy and the conceptualisations and world-views pertaining to it. I will here focus on the themes of suffering and death in relation to alternative spirituality and therapy.

Alternative therapy is a highly debated, and illuminating, field of post-secular religious practice, both as a scholarly subject and as a topic of public debate which includes governmental responses in Norway, for example. I will not elaborate on the question of 'post-secular', however, but take as my vantage point the notion of alternative therapy as (among other things) an expression of late modern spirituality, where postmodern tendencies may or may not be present (as deconstructive tendencies within contested meta-narratives). I here present this field as a sacralised, cultural field, avoiding the discussion of whether there ever was a secularised situation from which 'we' now have departed. I do view the situation as one which is characterised as being 'in the making', where the term 'practice' hints at appropriate perspectives. I do not view the religious realities of the past as necessarily and qualitatively more coherent and monolithic than today's practices, though of course, that idea presents important challenges and issues in fields such as the science of religion and the study of folklore, among other scholarly fields, as well as being all the more recognised as a perspective within those branches of research that could be said to be part of a 'cultural scientific paradigm' as opposed to a 'phenomenological paradigm' (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2001: 34–5).

In this paper, I intend to give some answers to the following questions: is alternative therapy a kind of post-secular religious practice? If so, what kinds of answers or consolations does alternative therapy offer in the face of suffer-

ing and death? How do possible 'alternative theodicies' relate to holism as a paradigmatic principle? To what extent does, for example, 'reincarnationism' seem to function as explanatory model regarding suffering, evil and death?

The empirical basis of my study centres on alternative therapists in Norway, an analysis of which was offered as a PhD thesis entitled *Åndeleg helse. Ein kulturanalytisk studie av menneske- og livssyn hos alternative terapeuter* (Spiritual health: a cultural analysis of views of life among alternative therapists, Kalvig 2011). In this study, I conducted an in-depth analysis of responses from nine people; three men and six women, all working full-time as spiritually oriented alternative therapists in the south western area of Norway (the field-work was conducted between 2006 and 2008). They provided answers to the following questions: what 'is' the body, soul, spirit, sex/gender, sickness/illness and suffering, and what is, or could be, alternative therapy's role in providing an alternative future, or a paradigm shift, on a collective level? The thesis is for the main part an exploration of these answers, each given a chapter or more and analysed in relation to adjacent socio-cultural discourses that are explored through a range of materials, including alternative and non-alternative literature and media representations.

Alternative therapies as spiritual practice?

The labelling of alternative therapists as 'spiritually oriented' needs qualification. In my research, I wanted to investigate alternative therapists as participants in a late modern, spiritual discourse, an ongoing cultural process of producing and negotiating the intersections of spirituality, medicine/therapy and society. I did not and do not propose that all alternative practices regarding health, well-being and self-development are by definition spiritual. By 'alternative' I mean those practices that one normally does not encounter within the public health care sector—this in itself being a manoeuvre of designation which reveals rather blurred borders, since public medical care, 'school medicine' or 'biomedicine' is an ever changing field of practices and concepts, where, for example, acupuncture is becoming increasingly integrated, and where some specialists in general medical practice are known as belonging to both the conventional and alternative medical fields (Kalvig 2011: 8 ff.). Nursing as a scholarly field and nurses as a professional group have, over the years, shown themselves to be primary agents of change here, with a tendency to integrate alternative views of health, and alternative practices, such as acupuncture and therapeutic touch (TT). The nursing ethos of providing

care from a holistic understanding of the human nature and situation, characterised by the interconnectedness of the physical, psychological, social and *spiritual* dimensions of life, is of vital importance here (Johannessen 2006, Partridge 2006).

Although the health care field consists of different, but at times overlapping and intersecting concepts and practices, pointing to a vital field of *alternative* health care practices and therapies is possible and necessary. My understanding of the term 'spiritual', in this area, is to refer to ways of relating material and spiritual realms into a meaningful system, characterised by holism (interconnectedness); the 'spiritual' being those realms of a 'less solid' kind, conventionally called the supernatural, trans-empirical and the like. The spiritual realms, or dimensions, are often understood to be of a higher, more conscious, truer and/or more essential nature than the 'purely' material, although the interconnections between the spiritual and the material is of great, and unsettled, interest within this field. The terms spiritual and spirituality are, following the idea of holism and interconnectedness, easily both wide and/or empty and at the same time too narrow: within the field of alternative spirituality, the idea that the spiritual is part and parcel of our everyday lives, of our empirical, natural existence, points to a linguistic and epistemological paradox or challenge. In this respect, I hold that our definitions of religion or spirituality simply cannot be very precise, but only function as working definitions and vantage points. Both religion and spirituality I will henceforth employ as designations of what could be thought of as 'clusters of concepts and practices, in various combinations, referring to a spiritual reality of relevance for human beings and their relation to all that exists' (Kalvig 2011: 17–18).

So what of alternative therapies being spiritual, or spiritually oriented? My data consists of therapists and their therapies whose methods, techniques and practices are outside of conventional medicine, and which involve a holistic approach to human beings, sickness/illness and health. This means the therapists relate to spiritual as well as other dimensions in their various therapies, and the aspects of the *meaning* of sickness/illness, suffering, development and/or health can be integrated into their ways of relating to and interpreting the dimensions of reality and people seeking therapy. It is actually difficult to maintain certain and fixed dividing lines between more and less spiritual alternative therapies, claiming that for example reflexology, acupuncture or vitamin therapy are more pragmatic and 'physiological' practices, whereas healing, astrology or regression therapy represent the more spiritual practices. The preferences of the therapist (and client), their different ways

of interpreting whatever technique or method employed, and the tendency among most therapists (that I have met or heard of) of exploring and offering a whole range of different therapies, say from reflexology and neuro linguistic programming (NLP) to healing and regression therapy, makes this picture complex, dynamic, and changeable, as well as being a good illustration of holistic challenges in themselves.

Still, can alternative therapy be regarded a post-secular religious practice? Yes, indeed. It follows, though, from what has already been said, that this does not necessarily mean that the 50 per cent of the Norwegian population that actually make use of alternative therapy,¹ partake in spiritual practices. At times it is overtly spiritual, at other times the therapeutic situation is far from involving spiritual considerations. The field of alternative therapy is closely connected to and intertwined with various other fields that we meet and interact with throughout our daily lives. I do not consider the changed, religious landscapes of our late modern Western societies to be a spiritual revolution as in the terms suggested by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005), because this involves dualist conceptions, or notions, of religion versus spirituality that I do not find fruitful or compelling. Neither would we understand the meaning and relevance of the cultural and spiritual therapeutic expressions and practices, were we to consider them as representing the 'fag end' of the New Age or alternative spirituality (as discussed in Heelas 2008), or as only epitomising features of capitalism in a plural, basically secular, or secularising world (Bruce 2000, 2002).

I would rather view the spiritual traits of late modern life as 'occulture', following Christopher Partridge, where this means (paraphrasing A. D. Duncan, 1969, in his definition of the occult):

'not so much a religion or a system as a "general heading" under which a huge variety of speculation flourishes, a good deal of it directly contradictory'. Occulture is the new spiritual environment in the West; the reservoir feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities

1 Report from the National Centre for Information on Alternative Treatment (Nasjonalt informasjonssenter for alternativ behandling, NIFAB): with 48.7% responding positively to having used alternative therapy during the last year. Another major, national survey, 'Levekår 2008', indicates a far lower percentage, only 16, but in this survey only eight specific therapies and practices are included. http://nifab.no/om_alternativ_behandling/alternativ_behandling_i_norge/nifab_undersokelsen (accessed on 10 November 2011).

are growing. Things have changed. Spiritualities are not what they used to be—that's why they're flourishing. (Partridge 2004: 4.)

I will express some reservations about the claim that spiritualities are not what they used to be—another perspective may be that the spiritualities of the late modern era in fact resemble the situation of quite a few earlier epochs, at least if one focuses on the popular or folk aspects of today's situation. Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson (1998) have suggested, earlier than most, that the new religiosity could best be viewed as an integral part of late modern culture, a claim asserted by them from the mid-nineties and formulated as the 're-enchantment of culture', their research being part of a interdisciplinary study called 'Myth, Magic and Miracle Meeting the Modern' (1995–9). I also find their category 'multi-religious actors' (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2000) useful and enlightening, developed by them in response to the fact that many, maybe most, Norwegian alternative spiritual seekers or experimenters are members of the Norwegian state church (the Lutheran church, of which membership is held by approximately 80 per cent of the total population). Alternative therapists, alternative therapies and the clients seeking alternative therapy (including the therapists themselves), then, represent a substantial element in our late modern society, marked by occulture and enchantment, and people often appear to be multireligious actors, where involvement in spiritual activities can be of a changeable character, and with varying degrees of commitment.

Facing suffering and death

Alternative therapists are likely to meet people in distress and/or at various stages of crisis, as well as to interact with people using alternative therapies and techniques mainly to sustain a healthy way of life and experience spiritual self development (these groups of clients may overlap, of course). Considering the first group, what kinds of answers would alternative therapists provide them with? Would they present them, in addition to more bodily centred practices, with holistic cosmologies, including 'theodicies', that confirm or challenge cultural ideas of good and evil?

First, what would these 'cultural ideas' of ethics, morals and possible cosmic connections be? Acting in what could be termed a culturally Christian-dominated context, therapists and clients are familiar with theological notions of suffering and death being the result of a dual cosmos, where God's opponent, Satan, has some influence, where the human being, though fallen,

has been given the right to free will and where Jesus Christ has acted as our saviour, washing away original sin for all believers through His sacrifice on the cross. In times of real suffering, sickness, tragedy, and death, evil is nevertheless not likely to come into focus as an integrated part of our world in the Christian sense, giving an explanation for ill fortune and misery. A more commonly expressed view, if religious (Christian) views are employed at all, is that ‘the Lord acts in mysterious ways,’ implying that it is better not to try to make sense out of evil schemes within the frame of God’s omnipotence. Focus is more likely to be placed on God’s everlasting love and compassion for his suffering creatures, as well as the hope for a radically different world under the reign of God at the end of times. The secular, humanistic strain is more prominent among the Norwegian people than the religious one, partially inhibiting religious interpretations in the media and restraining religious explanatory models on a general cultural basis. In the humanist ethical universe, evil is simply a fact of life. There would be no higher meaning to ‘inexplicable misery’ than that ‘shit happens’ (and often for obvious, human, power-imbued reasons); all we can do is to take care of each other and stay human. Yet another saying or perspective is of the type ‘the best among us are the ones to go first’, or ‘s/he was too good for this world’, indicating that there might be some ‘craving’ for the most brilliant persons and their souls, from ‘the other side’, be this understood as Christian or as, in folkloric or more alternative spiritual schemas, a ‘spirit world’.

The therapists interviewed during my fieldwork, came up with a range of different explanations and arguments considering both individual and collective suffering and death. Initially, I only asked ‘what “is” sickness/illness?’² Sickness/illness could be summed up as an ‘imbalance’ (in intricate blends of perceived material and spiritual dimensions), but the reason for the imbalance, its consequences and its potential meaning, is what came to be discussed in relation to the notion of ‘suffering.’ Although radical solipsism—the notion of an idealist universe unfolding from every individual’s mental projections—is implied in some of the therapists’ utterances, it is far from unambiguous, as we shall also see later. ‘Suffering and sickness/illness: we must discriminate between them, suffering is how you relate to a condition—you have a choice; the moment you start to suffer, the pain will be tenfold’, said Kari, one of

2 Sickness/illness is contained by one single word in Norwegian, *sjukdom*, involving both the meanings of the two English words, that is to say, both factual sickness and the experience of sickness, which is more implied in the word illness, at least the way it is used in nursing and alternative literature.

my informants. Sickness/illness always has a potential in itself for facilitating growth, insight, release and relief, even in cases where the condition's inevitable result will be death: 'I've met people who have characterised their final days as being the most promising and fulfilling', as the therapist Turid told me.

But what of 'real' suffering; misery, children dying, whole groups and nations experiencing extremities of repeated catastrophe and with death lurking around every corner? Even though growth potential in the spiritual sense could be acknowledged in the situation of therapy-seeking, adult Westerners who have the opportunity to view sickness/illness in this way, would question that it would be an ethically viable way of viewing the death of innocent children, and the unevenly distributed misery and despair of the world. Here the therapists presented a range of explanations, or considerations, more correctly, for most of them could not or would not come up with definitive explanations here. It was also often I who urged them to consider how their individually derived explanations of suffering and the problem of evil/negative conditions would fit, if transmitted to the world as a whole. We also discussed to what extent their more cosmological and ethically challenging or thought-provoking stances would actually be transmitted to a client in a therapeutic situation. Most of them underlined a careful, empathetic and humble approach here, with a thorough consideration as to whether passing on these stances would do any good for a client in need of help. Nevertheless, even if their understanding of suffering and 'evil' would only to a minor degree be transmitted in therapeutic relations and situations, these world-views are part of the culture's total fabric of ideas, conceptions and perspectives, sometimes making their way through the secular or Christian 'official' layers of cultural understanding. At times, we see this harshly debated in the Norwegian general public arena, as responses to certain alternative actors' public utterances, to which we shall later return.

The therapists' considerations could be grouped into the thematic fields which explain suffering as the result of *unproductive thinking* (in a more general sense); of systemic and inherited '*bugs*' in the *holistic fabric of wholeness and love energy within specific families*:³ of souls needed on '*the other side*' in an *anthroposophical sense*; and the doxic status of the idea of *reincarnation functioning as a partly explanatory model*. Now these different considerations related to the suffering, misery and death not only of individuals within the clientele of the therapists, but of humanity as a whole, led to several possible

3 From 'family constellation' therapeutic thinking in the tradition following German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger (b. 1925).

systemisations. I consider these answers as ethical stances as well as cosmic explanations, and I employ in my thesis the notion of 'theodicy'. The notion of God (theodicy as the 'defence of God' in the encounter of evil) is to be understood in a 'New Age' or spiritual way, including but not confined to Biblical and traditional notions, and summed up, in addition to 'God', by the therapists as 'All There Is', 'Infinite Love and Truth', 'the Source' and the like.

Even though his *opus magnum*, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* was written 15 years ago, Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) still provides one of the most extensive surveys with which to contextualise my findings when it comes to structuring the therapists' various statements and referred practices into some kind of system. Instead of representing their views and ways of doing things as a mumbo-jumbo of easily-accessed techniques and conceptions chosen on an epistemological individualist basis, I wanted to search for structures that could possibly, but not necessarily, be present at some level. I found that holistic structures were indeed present, sometimes in paradoxical bits and pieces, but prevalent to an extent that had to be accounted for. As a further investigation of how suffering and the problems of evil and death are handled by the therapists, we shall turn to the next question, cited at the beginning of this article; namely, how possible 'alternative theodicies' relate to holism as a paradigmatic principle, and thereby have a somewhat closer look at some of the themes of consideration mentioned above.

Holistic 'theodicies'?

The concept of holism is often used, both by scholars and in the field, in an even less concrete and/or less grounded manner than the concept of New Age. Hanegraaff (1996: 119–58), on the other hand, gives a rather profound account of holism, organised into two main and two minor versions. The two main versions he labels 'the ultimate source of manifestation' and 'universal interrelatedness', the two minor ones are based on a universal dialectics between complementary polarities and on an analogy between the whole of existence, or important subsystems thereof, and organisms. These four forms, Hanegraaff claims, only have in common the urge to overcome non-holistic views, such as dualism and reductionism, seen as representing the 'bygone age' or the 'old culture'. There is a built-in ambivalence in much holistic reflection, between transcendence and immanence, between monism and pantheism, or between absolutism and 'generative source' thinking (which can be derived from the first version of holism). This ambivalence, however, cannot

necessarily be found as explicitly formulated world-views, as there is a difference between this, and what Hanegraaff terms 'metaphysical pathos' (1996: 127). The difference between a holism understood as an ultimate, perfect, transcendent whole and a holism understood as a generative source of all life, where we are co-creators, Hanegraaff finds illustrated by those two channelled giants, *A Course in Miracles* and *The Seth Material*. The second, main version of holism, the universal interrelatedness-holism, also appears in a range of different versions with different implications, as is also the case with the two minor versions of holism.

Now, I found those varying holisms throughout my material, underlying many different kinds of reflection—and not restricted to the intellectually unconvincing realms of metaphysical pathos—although this 'realm' of course also could be discerned. The challenges of holism for both practitioner and scholar become evident when related to the discussion of suffering. When the therapists were relating their practice to the problem of evil, or suffering as such, some of them were making a Gnostic-like association of the 'earth-plane' with negativity, whereas the spiritual dimensions, the higher plane or our Higher Selves are associated with positivity, dualist conceptions which of course in themselves point to a holistic paradox, of which there should not be made too strong an emphasis. Holism *can* be ethical, though this is an emic, and not etic, claim, according to Hanegraaff:

Suffering is not felt to be a pressing problem requiring an explanation, but is accepted as a necessary aspect of life and evolution. Although it is quite possible to construct a rational New Age theodicy on the basis of reincarnation, cosmic evolution and karma, the truth is that the very questions in answer to which theodicies have traditionally been constructed do not even arise in the New Age context. In short: suffering is not regarded as a moral problem at all; if anything, it is a psychological problem. (Hanegraaff 1996: 280.)

The therapists provided a range of different explanations and reflections on suffering, the problem of evil and death, where moral issues were central, as opposed to Hanegraaff's claim. I found for several of their reflections a fundamental focus on consciousness and intentions (being understood as more crucial than the seemingly obvious or immediate consequences of various actions). The focus on consciousness, less than material structures, actions and happenings, is often difficult to maintain consistently, however, when one is 'stuck on the earth-plane', and at any rate when talking to an interviewer

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focusing to some degree, on consequence analysis regarding the claims of this worldly level. Therapeutic methods and tools also partly appear to be a mode of action in response to evil, which Hanegraaff finds so weakly developed in his textual sources, in favour of a focus on unconditional love and forgiveness, for example—even though, in a holistic cosmos, where the boundaries between I and you have perished, this could be regarded as active, or actionist, in the last resort.

Some explanations of suffering and death: in the ether of the family

Most of my informants defy the assertion that suffering is a necessary aspect of life and evolution. Suffering was presented by them as meaningless, bad and counterproductive, whereas *pain* would better fit the above description from Hanegraaff. The informant Nina puts it this way:

Suffering and pain: we have to discern between the two. To be in a body, is tantamount to possibly experiencing pain. Suffering is where there is a lack of consciousness. When the consciousness of the heart, that ‘things could not be otherwise, given those premises’, is not present.

Nina then goes on to describe how a person can experience an ‘opening up’; where pain, sickness/illness and death can be seen in connection with a greater whole or web of existence. Though, when tragedy strikes children, for example, it is close to incomprehensible for us. Still, she holds:

But seen in relation to family structures—I work with family constellation therapy—then a child can take on disease in blind love. Disease that a grandfather perhaps died from. . .out of blind love and consciousness for the suffering of others; children do that, it lies in the ether, in the space around us.

According to the understanding of family constellation therapy, families are surrounded by a kind of systemic energy, a love energy, which follows its own, internal logic or law, through so-called ‘soul-movements’. When the ‘love balance’ is disturbed or distorted through traumatic events such as premature death, sickness, violence or other crimes, especially children in the family will try to restore the balance by ‘taking on’ destructive familial patterns, even ill-

ness, in a vain attempt to ease the parent's or other family member's pain. This explanation may be called systemic, but it is grounded on metaphysical or abstract principles, where 'ether', 'evolution' and 'love' somehow play their parts when suffering and evil conditions are transmitted through the generations.

Nina and another family constellation-oriented therapist from my material, Therese, actually express understandings of suffering that to some extent are concordant with the Christian notion of sin (note that the founder of family constellation therapy, Bert Hellinger, is a theologian in addition to being a psychotherapist). Says Therese: 'The more pain the parents suppress, the more their children will inherit it.' Within Christianity, the death of one man, Jesus Christ, gave redemption and life to all—a reversal of the one man's fall (Adam's), creating original sin, that subsequently transmitted through the generations (cf. Rom. 5:18–19). Nina and Therese are not supposed to sacrifice themselves, as therapists, but they assert an understanding and a doctrine that holds that the 'sin' of all, or our unacknowledged pain, *can* be abolished, for the 'redemption and life' for future generations. There is in this respect a certain Christian bent to reflect upon the transmission of sin, or, rather, suffering, through the generations, by unconsciously not being in the 'love-flow' and thereby creating or continuing pain, sickness and death. The point of difference is of course that the redemption here is not Jesus Christ, but the spark or capacity for life and love that lies within us all, or that we all are surrounded by (the 'ether'), and the possibility of realising this through family constellation therapeutic consciousness raising, thereby profoundly altering the relationship between parent and child. The line of thought, in a culturally Christian culture like ours, thus goes from the mystical focus on person (from Christianity's Adam–Christ-constellation) to the mystical focus on system (the constellation where the system [the ether, evolution], transmits suffering, but where consciousness about and active efforts in relation to the system, can do away with it). Although it can be argued that these thoughts ought to be labelled as gnostic or theosophically inspired, rather than Christian, the focus on family ties and heritage, rather than the isolated awakening of the individual through gnosis, makes the Christian influence more prominent.

Suffering, sudden death and higher meaning

The therapist Gunnar discussed suffering in relation to the catastrophe of the tsunami of 2004, where hundreds of thousands of people perished. This was a response to me putting this question to him (in italics):

*Several therapists posit suffering as being different things—as arising from a lack of consciousness; as a learning process; but I guess they have also pondered on why suffering then is concentrated in certain parts of the world, on children suffering: how would one place this meaningfully in a cosmos where spirit is omnipresent? Well, those of us who study Steiner and have done so for quite some time, we meet when there is a felt need to lift things into the light, to try to find meaning, to see cosmological perspectives. After the tsunami we met and tried to view this in a different manner. The dimension we encountered in the media—that we were all affected by the wave, that this could happen to Norwegians on holiday, Steiner raises this to a different level: when a great many, especially when there are children involved, travel [die] at the same time, in connection with a catastrophe for example, it is because there is an acute need for the qualities represented by these, on the other side. *Would you dare suggest that to somebody who had lost someone in the tsunami?* It depends on where they are in their development. I might do it if they showed an interest in finding meaning, if this could be a piece that fits into their understanding.*

Gunnar further answers my questions as to whether such ideas could easily be abused, since there would somehow be an instrumental ‘use’ of premature death according to this view, and says he has no problem seeing the ethically challenging consequences of these ideas, claiming them to be no more than ‘working hypotheses’. But the spirit world’s conceivable ‘craving’ for new souls to arrive, is to some extent in accordance with those culturally familiar sayings regarding premature death as ‘he was too good for this world’ and ‘the best are the ones to go first’. Interestingly, it is Gunnar himself who introduces this idea on a more collective level, by considering victims of catastrophe (the tsunami) as groups, instead of individual, untimely deaths. But when asked to consider this in relation to possible abuse, and to what extent he feels compelled to defend all aspects of the anthroposophical cosmology, he is reluctant and less enthusiastic: ‘such implications are not very meaningful for me. . . but I will always be a wonderer.’ At other times during the interviews we did, Gunnar discusses pain, suffering and crises in relation to the development of the individual, and holds that to practise spirituality is to take responsibility. From one incarnation to the next, the point is to develop ‘great, great love for humanity, great tolerance’.

The explanatory power and limitations of reincarnation

The paradigmatic status of the idea of reincarnation should, as indicated in the last citation from Gunnar, be included if we are to understand the alternative spiritual ways of relating to suffering and death. The two final therapists to be quoted, Torbjørn and Joakim, relate to this issue in different ways that elucidate the many aspects of ‘reincarnationism’:

Do you think we return to life on earth? Yes I do. And the issue of karma, that there is some kind of justice integrated into this system, I also believe this; that as ye sow, so shall ye reap. . . But how far one should push this, I do not know. If you face difficulties in life, it could be because your soul gave you challenges for the sake of growth. But then one probably is surrounded by other souls with their various agendas—if you’re a good soul, and other people’s life projects influence yours, how then to analyse individual suffering in a meaningful way? This is also my stance; the idea of creating your own reality, that you should blame yourself for whatever happens to you, this I find problematic and troubling. That you can blame yourself for quite a lot of what’s happening, however, I consider clearly evident.

It is Torbjørn who connects the idea of reincarnation with the idea of an integrated rationality or justice based on the logic of karma.⁴ How this logic is expressed, and how it is to be understood in relation to factual suffering for both individuals and groups, is problematic, however. Consequences of actions in the present are rather obvious, but crossing time and space, and considering everyone else’s actions, it all becomes quite complicated, and we see Torbjørn closes his line of thought with a rather prosaic statement. The idea of reincarnation (and possibly variations of karma logic) is nevertheless seen as meaningful to Torbjørn and a variety of 17–44 per cent of people in the Western world,⁵ and has thus become an integrated part of the culture.

4 As shown by Olav Hammer (2004: 456), there is not an inherent, logical connection between the doctrine of reincarnation and that of karma, but ‘it is simply a fact of the history of religions that these concepts have become almost inseparable in the literature.’

5 The statistics vary considerably in this field. See Hammer 2004: 455 for a survey of statistics from the 1990s. The ESV (European Value Survey) of 2008 reveals that Eastern European countries like Latvia and Lithuania have the highest numbers of believers in reincarnation (41.9 and 37.4 %), with the Russian Federation quite close, with 33 %. Iceland has the highest percentage of the Nordic countries, with 36.2 %

Gilhus discusses the concept of reincarnation in 'Sjelevandring – et nytt nykkelsymbol?' (Transmigration of souls: a new key symbol?, 1999). She points out that contrary to how the concept of reincarnation functions in India, where it provides a watertight explanation of suffering (Gilhus 1999: 44), in the Western sense this complex of ideas expresses the urge of late modern personhood to 'be its own root' (Gilhus 1999: 56). The idea of the transmigration of souls defies the self at the same time as it relativises the personality, and thereby it concerns 'the problem of the soul' as well as serving to redefine and relativise family relations and social hierarchies, reflected in the great, cosmic mirror made possible by the concept of reincarnation (Gilhus 1999: 52–3). When Gilhus holds that 'the cosmic value of family ties increases concurrently with the decrease of their intrinsic value' (1999: 53), it constitutes an interesting contrast to Courtney Bender (2007) and her material regarding beliefs about reincarnation. Here spiritual seekers find that their present, daily relations are deepened and strengthened as a result of a belief in multiple incarnations (Bender 2007: 609). Bender also claims that believers in reincarnation are intensely interested in their past lives, which is contrasted by my material, where all therapists believe in multiple lives, but where most of them, even regression therapists, call upon caution and sober-mindedness concerning what role past lives ought to play. In the view of the therapists, the concept of reincarnation serves as an axiomatic or ontological starting point, which can serve various therapeutic functions; but the concept still appears to be something into which one should not 'get lost'.

Gilhus delimits the ethically more outspoken aspects of reincarnationism to its Eastern context, whereas how it functions concerning the construction of Western identities and social relations within a cosmic, enchanted frame of meaning, is of greater interest to her. However, she touches upon the issue here:

Ultimately, you create your own life. In some cases you might have done something wrong in a past life, and you'll feel the need to repent and stage a punishment in a later life. In other words, a 'transmigrator of the soul' controls the future (Gilhus 1999: 53).

The problem of suffering and evil hence also gets incorporated into Western versions of the concept of reincarnation, though maybe in a less definitive

believing in reincarnation. Erlendur Haraldsson (2006) found that the Icelandic percentage was 41, and Lithuania on top with 44 % (ESV-numbers from 1999).

way. However, to what extent and how, for example, Hindus employ the doctrine of karma in their encounters with suffering and evil, is also complex, as is shown by Jørg Arne Jørgensen in his article 'Karmic Maps: Astrology and Horoscopes in India' (2006). In the case of Indian astrology, he shows how the doctrine of karma is modified by this and a range of competing, philosophical and magical-religious systems: 'Karma in its pure form, as a rigid, moral fatalism, is dismissed by astrological folk practices' (Jørgensen 2006: 13). Even though karma may function as a hegemonic model of explanation, the multiple folk practices contradict this as sole explanation. Torbjørn expresses ambivalence and doubt concerning the ontological status of reincarnationism, even though this was a fundamental principle for him to start with. Therapy in itself was problematised by several of the interviewed therapists as a somewhat competing, or contradictory, practice, related to their various views on sickness/illness and adversity, where your encounters with evil or bad things are seen as positive tools for development. This is concordant with the Indian astrologer functioning as a universal advisor within a karmically oriented paradigm. Therapy can, like reincarnationism, be seen as a pragmatic modification of a hegemonic conceptualisation, or it can be seen as a parallel system, characterised by other axiomatic principles than the 'karma-rationalist' principle; for example, relation oriented principles of mercy.

The shifting, doubtful, and polyphonic is also present in the reflections from the last therapist, Joakim, when he discusses the logic of reincarnation and the horror of suffering. Joakim had throughout the interviews shown himself to be one of the most prone to paint his points with a rather broad, cosmic brush, but in the following excerpts, we see that the loud and the humble gradually collide:

Yes, there is suffering. God has a very guilty conscience, because the suffering is so abundant. It's close to not being worth it. . . The suffering of the world is tremendous, especially when it comes to children, who don't have mature minds and cannot distance themselves from the suffering. . . But in our portion of the universe we are given free will, and the suffering is some of the consequences of our choices and our lives. It is our task to resolve this suffering. . . *Is this an all-loving God? Yes. But how can He accept suffering if He is [also] omnipotent?* But God suffers with us. Life is a movie, God created the movie, God plays and watches the movie, everything is a cosmic drama where God plays all the roles, our destiny is being God, but we have forgotten this. It is our task to awaken and realise this, that suffering will end as a result of this. This was the discovery of the

Buddha. . .Suffering is a pedagogical tool: if you have fallen down from the roof a couple of times, you've learned to respect gravity. *Ok, but what about alcoholic parents, abuse of children, a life filled with suffering—you can hardly label these pedagogic points?* But it is, life is about opening your heart, and God is willing to use all possible means to achieve this. *But what if you do have an open heart, then?* What you should learn, it is like what Jesus experienced, he came to celebrate Easter, and they nailed him to a cross! How could he forgive these people?

We notice here the tension between the duty placed on us, by Joakim, to 'solve this suffering', and the concept of suffering as pedagogical points. But then Joakim becomes less and less confident in the following passage, which is interesting, both in relation to different alternative spiritual doctrines' usefulness and stringency, and as an example of the late modern alternative spiritual actor's free and sovereign status concerning how he or she holds to, and lets go of, spiritual views. But it is also, and maybe predominantly, an example of an interviewer making some choices that can (over)rule what kind of information she gets, and to what extent this is scholarly constructive and ethically appealing, is an open question:

A lot could be said about this, but the soul has an agenda; one cannot know why one incarnates the way one does, why you get the destiny you get. You can't know, it could be murderers who've been terrible bastards in their former lives. . .*This is concordant with Hindu belief; you deserve your destiny, karma legitimates the caste system—wouldn't this now be a Western, privileged understanding, assuming a lot of bad people incarnate in the conflict areas of the world?* I just want to say, when it comes to creation, God's affairs, we don't have to have an opinion on all of it. I don't know the reasons why we are born or get the fates we do. We should not judge. We shall not play God. There's a crazy amount of suffering, I have no logical explanation for it, it's not my job to justify it. I have no consistent view of life, I just have some opinions, and it's just hobby philosophy. *I don't mean to press you, but you're more 'into' this than others?* Yeah, yeah, but in the end we're just hobby theologians, what I tell you is just my personal view which is a result from me reading all these New Age books, listening to enlightened teachers. But it's not something that I present as a package that I try to sell to people.

We see that my objections concerning the understanding of incarnations as payment of karmic debt (and Joakim elaborates this point quite sharply and unambiguously, not included above), to a great extent puncture Joakim's story. We see also that just before mentioning 'murderers', he actually says we cannot know why we incarnate the way we do. The interview has changed from being Joakim's relatively free and humorous account and testing out of different stances, thoughts and ideas, to becoming a far less fresh display of how Joakim, as an informed *bricoleur*, focuses on the ways in which spirituality and belief are shaped and modelled in the intersection of several cultural and spiritual impulses. When I claim no intention of 'pressing' him in the interview situation, it is of course too late; I already have done so, by displaying a slightly quivering, politically correct forefinger, which causes him as an informant, to resign and close himself off. More positively, my suspicion that some of his most audacious statements weren't too deeply rooted in his spiritual conscience, are proven right and are given the chance to demonstrate that for Joakim suffering is a set of pedagogical tools, and incarnations of suffering a timely punishment for bad karma—simultaneously with his wish not to condemn, systematise, or justify suffering, not play God, and his felt urge to 'solve' suffering, as an ethical imperative.

'Karmic cynicism' or spiritual actors as multidimensional

Following the tragedy of the Norwegian acts of terror on July 22, 2011, a few religious or spiritual respondents tried to find 'higher meaning' in the terrorist's outrageous deeds. The right wing, anti-Muslim and misogynist terrorist Anders Behring Breivik's slaughter of innocent youths participating in the Norwegian Labour Party's summer camp at Utøya, and his bombing of the governmental quarters in Oslo, ended with a total of 77 victims. Spiritual reflections, post-terror, mentioning higher meaning and/or karma, led to harsh criticism in the general public, and the Norwegian Association for Holists, *Holistisk Forbund*, coined the term *karmakynisme*, karmic cynicism, as a warning against the far too easy and not very empathetically or ethically convincing manoeuvre of claiming karmic logic for this (and other) tragedies.

The Norwegian princess Märtha Louise and her spiritual business partner Elisabeth Nordeng posted, as founders of the so-called 'Angel School', Astarte Education, similar ideas as those criticised above, on the school's Facebook page after the catastrophe of March 2011 in Japan. As is well known, the earthquake and tsunami then caused tremendous losses in terms of human

life as well as material damage, and the Angel School's first message was an appeal to their followers, to 'send angels' to Japan. This part of their posting was in itself not any claim of karmic or any other logic behind the tragedy, even though their angel appeal was harshly ridiculed and criticised in the media as well as by non-followers of the school, who took to trolling and spamming their pages. However, the Angel School's updates in response to the Japanese situation, also urged people to see the 'hidden blessing' in the horrific happenings. Here, as with terror being seen as conveying higher meaning, the holistic theodicies discussed at the beginning of this paper, clash thoroughly with many people's ideas of decency and perhaps *timing*.

The question remains, though: is this the whole story? Are Western spiritual seekers self-centred, politically passive and/or ignorant people, indulging themselves by giving a spiritual, higher meaning to the misery of the world from protected, privileged vantage points? True as this might be for certain people, as a general description it's flawed. The description fails to reveal whether spiritual seekers actually *are* engaged in different, political, activist or other action-based groups, dealing, in a broad sense, with the misery of the world and the will to change it by other means than elevated states of consciousness. Though *motivation* often seems to be of vital interest when alternative spiritual actors discuss the difference between good and bad actions—where suffering, as we have seen, can be explained away as pain understood or dealt with in a wrong or bad manner, as karmic lessons, or lessons from your own Higher Self poorly handled and so forth—practical lessons of love and compassion are more central when alternative therapy is viewed as post-secular religious practice. The will to help by providing therapy, whether 'the diagnosis' made by the therapist tends to focus on radical solipsism or not, points to practicality and action. The fact that money is involved in this spiritual business, does not alter this. Most alternative therapists do not get wealthy by doing what they are doing, and even if they did, there would still be a possibility that they actually do some good, for some people—that is, provide help that is seen as useful in some respect or other. Moreover, statistics indicate that people engaged in alternative spiritual practices have higher rates of reported participation in political protest activities and solidarity campaigns (Höllinger 2006; Kalvig 2011: 236–54).

Nevertheless, this field of post-secular religious practices is and should be open to debate and criticism as to how one faces suffering and death, as well as how other human issues are dealt with. We must, however, try to see people as possibly both multi-religious and multi-dimensional actors, when sorting out where to place them, academically and ethically speaking.

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