

## Abiding Atheism, Seeking Spirituality

### *Church apostasy and the reshaping of post-Christian identities in the Netherlands*

#### **Abstract:**

Social scientists have come up with contrasting ideas on how to interpret the ongoing process of dechristianization in contemporary Western societies. On the one hand it has been suggested that individuals abandon religious imagination all together and become secular, whereas on the other it has been proposed that individuals merely turn to privatized forms of religious and spiritual meaning. Surprisingly however, the factors that are thought to explain the two processes are the same, namely the processes of individualization and the pluralization of the life-world. In this article I will delve into this explanatory gap, which has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Via the systematic reconstruction of the life courses of Dutch apostates I aim to reveal what mechanisms lead individuals to move away from their ascribed Christian identity and subsequently turn to either atheism or the New Age spiritualities. A notable difference between these two trajectories is that individuals who eventually turned to atheism articulate an ideological critique of their faith, a type of critique which is a direct result from the strict, orthodox way in which the faith was professed in the nuclear family. Individuals raised in orthodox milieus have little room to discuss and question their ascribed identity or delve into complementing religions, which elicits a rather cognitive, intellectual process of searching. Individuals who turned to the New Age spiritualities departed from the Christian faith because of institutional reasons. Their criticism of the role of religious authorities and hypocrisy in their near social environment induced a quest for purification that led them to non-institutionalized forms of beliefs. The paramount factor that induces an institutional critique is the liberal way in which the faith was professed in their families: they had more access to explore complementing religious meaning system, and more room to usher questions and critique.

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## **Introduction**

The religious landscape in Western societies has changed profoundly in the last decades. A discontent towards traditional church religion, rooted in the counter-cultural milieu of the 1960s and 70s, has made its way into dominant society and developed into almost a cultural imperative. The consequence of this development is – according to a fair share of scholars - visible in the ongoing decline of church affiliation (e.g. Becker & De Hart, 2006; Bruce, 2002).

Although such statistics seem fairly straightforward, the academic quarrel over the proper interpretation is far from settled. In fact, the interpretation of in what way individuals reconstruct their religious identity after leaving the church has resulted in a variety of often mutually exclusive interpretations. A leading theoretization since the mid-1960s is the perception of the process of disaffiliation as one of individual secularization (Berger, 1967; 1969). Protagonists of this ‘decline of religion thesis’ point out that the developments in the religious landscape that occur at the individual, organizational, national and perhaps even at the supra-national level are all part of a general trend towards secularization (Bruce, 2002; 2011; Dobbelaere, 2002). Simultaneously, however, it has been articulated that church apostasy will not lead to the decline, but to the changing of religious identities: here scholars argued that individuals increasingly reshape their religious identity outside the scope of traditional religious authorities (Luckmann, 1967). These scholars emphasized the stubbornness of religious ideas, beliefs and practices by pointing at the emergence of Christian religious identities that are detached from the classic church-institutions (Davie, 1994), at the increase of New Age spiritualities (Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Van Otterloo et al, 2012), and at the emergence of new forms of Christianity (Cox, 1996) and secular frameworks of interpretation that are indebted to the New Age spiritualities (Campbell, 2007).

Clearly, the interpretations of the changing dynamics provided by the two theoretical positions differ greatly and are in many ways in direct opposition of each other. Yet both positions draw from substantive empirical evidence to back up their claims, making it probable that both trajectories of Post-Christian identity reshaping return in contemporary Western societies. As such, the essential sociological question becomes why different individuals reshape their religious identity in different ways. Indeed various attempts have been made to theoretically and empirically assess what factors induce an individual to reshape his or her religious identity in a particular way. Interestingly, however, a systematic

comparison of these studies learns that the factors that allegedly explain the reconstruction of one identity are brought to the fore to explain another as well. More concretely: ‘discontent with Christianity’, ‘anti-authoritarianism’ and ‘individualism’ are said to explain the individual’s turn to secular identities (Bruce, 2002, 2011; Smith, 2011; Streib & Klein, 2013), but also pave the way for the New Age spiritualities (Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Van Otterloo et al. 2012). Naturally, this does not automatically mean that scholars of either camp are wrong, yet it does indicate that pivotal factors explaining why individuals develop towards individual secularism or the spiritualities remain to be identified.

In this article I will, based on life course interviews with Dutch individuals of different socio-cultural backgrounds, contextualize and compare the trajectories of identity reshaping of individuals who moved away from their ascribed Christian identity towards either a secular or spiritual identity. I will assess what factors induced them to abandon their Christian identity and subsequently reshape their identity in a particular way. The research question is therefore: *Why do individuals defect from their ascribed Christian identity, and what factors influence their development towards secularism or the New Age spiritualities?*

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Church apostasy and post-Christian identities***

That individuals are turning away from their ascribed traditional Christian identity is widely acknowledged in Academia, yet how to understand the consequences of this exodus is subject of fierce debate. In the following section I will map out this theoretical debate, which has essentially evolved around two rivaling camps, namely between those who interpret the process of apostasy as one towards individual secularization, and those who perceive the process as one of religious change.

#### *Church apostasy: individual secularism*

The central assumption of the scholars arguing for individual secularization is that late-modern societies provide room for a plurality of ‘vastly different and often severely discrepant worlds of meaning and experience’ (Berger et al, 1973: 66). The confrontation with differing ideas and beliefs broadens the individual’s mind and induces a process in which individuals strives to ‘free’ themselves from ‘the influence of the originally superordinated religious values’ (Berger et al, 1973: 66; Berger, 1967). The flipside of this process is that it is increasingly difficult to establish a religious identity since the criticizing problematizes the

legitimacy, integrity and plausibility of every religion. What to believe and what not becomes a problematic issue now that the truth claims of a particular religion are neutralized by those of another (Berger, 1967: 152; Bruce, 2002). Individuals ‘recognize’ that their worldview construes ‘just one among many alternatives’, which effectively makes it impossible to maintain commitment to the religious identity they once took for granted (Bruce, 2002: 233). Notably, this dynamic is especially problematic for religions claiming a monopoly of truth, such as Christianity, because these are ‘exposed’ as an ‘ordinary religion’ that ‘just happens to be the received tradition’ of Western culture (Wilson, 1976: 92).

Initially scholars assumed that the plausibility problem and deconstruction of the different religious meaning systems would render individuals unable to reshape their religious identity in a meaningful way. It was therefore considered to be inevitable that the bankruptcy of the Christian theodicy would plunge individuals into a state of despair, ‘mental homelessness’, and nihilism (Berger et al, 1973; Campbell, 2007; Gane, 2002). In this reading post-Christianity is essentially a ‘negative identity’: an identity defined by what it denies. This dystopian interpretation of post-Christian secularism is complemented by recent studies in which scholars point out the rise of secular identities that do provide individuals with meaning and a set of moral values, independently from religious beliefs. Such identities are rooted in humanistic enlightenment thought, of which they profess either a radical outlook (i.e. atheism, arguing that all religious claims are false) or more restrained affirmation (i.e. agnosticism, maintaining that it is impossible to establish the tenability of religious claims) (Le Poidevin, 2006; Martin, 2007; Rosenkranz, 2007).

#### *Church apostasy: religious change*

The idea that the moving away from Christianity inevitably results in individual secularism has been critiqued by scholars who argue secularization theorists wrongfully converge disaffiliation from institutionalized religion with disbelief (Davie, 1994). Religion, it is argued, is as vital as before but has merely changed its appearance. Rather than ‘losing faith’ altogether, individuals residing in contemporary Western societies are revitalizing their religious identity outside the mainline churches. As such, these scholars find it more accurate to refer to the process as one of ‘dechristianization’ instead of secularization, since the former label does not preclude the ‘possibility of religious change’ (Van Otterloo et al, 2012; Van Rooden, 2004).

One of the first scholars to argue that church apostasy does not automatically denote a trend towards individual disbelief, was Thomas Luckmann. In his book 'The Invisible Religion' (1967) Luckmann proposed that religion was not dissolving, but merely 'escaping' the 'radars of sociological inquiry'. Rather than adhering to 'objective' truth claims as proclaimed by 'official religious authorities', individuals would turn to their 'subjective', 'intuitive self' and privately sacralize 'this-worldly' affairs such as 'self-expression', 'self-realization', 'sexuality', and 'familism' (Luckmann, 1967: 113-6).

The New Age spiritualities are widely regarded as exemplifying this process (Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Luckmann, 1990). Central in the New Age spiritualities is the idea that 'mainstream society' indoctrinates individuals with values of 'materialism and competitiveness' (Heelas, 1996: 18). In contemporary Western societies, so New Agers articulate, individuals are forced to play roles that effectively alienate them from their 'true', 'real', and 'higher' selves, and the only way to restore the balance is to 'reconnect' with one's authentic self through the 'sincere' introspection into one's 'deeper' layers (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). To do so, individuals combine insights of for instance Eastern traditions, Jungian psychology, Western Esotericism, Paganism, and Human Potential Teachings (Heelas, 1996: 29; Hanegraaff, 1996).

In effect, advocates of the religious change thesis tend to perceive the process of religious revitalization and innovation as entailing much more than merely a shift towards the New Age spiritualities. Campbell (2007) and Heelas & Woodhead (2005) suggest that in contemporary Western societies, the ideals of 'discovering' one's 'true', 'authentic' Self and the indulging in personalized religious experiences are adopted by traditional religion as well. A clear example is the New Theology of the 1970s and 80s, in which a private interpretation of the Scriptures and personal integration of ideas and beliefs stemming from various traditions – most notable from Eastern philosophies and Western Esoteric thought – into one's own Christian identity are core elements (Campbell, 2007; see also: Hick, 1984; Vattimo, 1999). In addition, the (numerical) growth of conservative, fundamentalist types of religion such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity (Juergensmeyer, 2003), and Islam (Peek, 2005) in Western societies are examples of religious change as well.

### ***Trajectories to post-Christian identities: an explanatory gap***

#### *Assessing the \$64.000 dollar question*

Although it is clear that individuals can, after departing from their ascribed Christian identity, reshape their post-Christian identity in a variety of ways, ranging from a development towards

secular atheism to the New Age spiritualities to even a re-formulated Christian identity. A paramount sociological question is hence why different individuals reconstruct their religious identity in different ways. In this section I will critically assess the academic answering of what one can label as the ‘\$64.000 dollar question’ of the sociology of religion, and do this by focusing on the trajectories towards individual secularism and New Age spirituality specifically. The selection of these ‘cases’, rather than exhaustively delving into the multitude of possible religious identities, is informed by both practical and theoretical considerations. In a practical sense the including all types of religious trajectories would be too large a task within the space of this article, because I will not only theorize upon the trajectories, but empirically study and compare them as well. The theoretical reason to henceforth focus on New Age rather than another religious position follows from the point made by Luckmann (1990) that the New Age spiritualities are the strongest proof of why religion is not fading out but retains significance in contemporary Western societies. Among others, Campbell (2007) and Houtman (2008; see also: Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000) noted that that the New Age spiritualities have profoundly penetrated Western culture, and thus provide a strong counter force against individual secularism. I consider the New Age spiritualities as an excellent representative by which the theoretical explanations of the religious change thesis can be assessed.

#### *Emergence of an explanatory gap*

An elementary part of the explanation for the trajectory towards individual secularism is the emergence of a pluralistic context in which a multitude of plausibility structures are engaged in a fierce competition that unintentionally demonopolizes the taken-for-granted systems of meaning (Berger, 1967: 151). Processes of social differentiation (to which Giddens (1991: 16) refers as the ‘separation of time and space’), expanding social and geographical mobility (the ‘urbanization of consciousness’), and development of mass communication commodities alter the nature of social relations between the individual and his or her social environment. These developments induce the rise of an individualist ethos which makes individuals unaccepting of authorities and ‘superordinated’ religious values (Berger, 1967: 166-7; Giddens, 1991). Combined with the increasing access to a plurality of different (religious) identities and lifestyles individuals are free to autonomously establish a meaningful (religious) self-identity. Consequently, rather than being confined to an ascribed, fixed religious identity, individuals become consumers who can choose the religious-identity that they ‘prefer’ without being ‘constrained to buy’ (Berger, 1969: 3; 1967: 133, 138). The flipside of this self-determination,

however, is that it becomes virtually impossible for a particular religious system to distinguish itself from its numerous competitors. Indeed, in a pluralistic context every religious system loses its plausibility, which ultimately results in the rejecting of all religious identities by the individual (Berger, 1969; Bruce, 2002: 233; 2011). Altogether: the societal secularization of individual identities is considered inescapable.

Significantly, these processes of pluralization and individualization are fully acknowledged by scholars emphasizing the revitalizing of religion. As Beckford points out, advocates of this thesis agree with the secularization theorists to the point that the ‘pluralistic competition between various models of religion’ will undermine the ‘official’ statuses of religion, but take a different route when they suggest that this not does not necessarily ‘preclude the possibility that a new form of religion might replace them’ (Beckford, 2003: 85). The diagnosis that processes of societal differentiation weaken Christianity’s power to shape individual consciousness, and shrink its relevance for the ‘integration’ and ‘legitimation’ of individual everyday life is widely acknowledged among religious change theorists (Luckmann, 1967: 95; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

However, at the same time individualist ethos of an ‘autonomous self’ that is not obstructed by ‘external moral rules and regulations’ does not necessarily lead to individual disbelief: it returns as a primary element of attraction of the New Age spiritualities as well (Heelas, 1996: 162; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005: 120). Like their secular counterparts, spiritual individuals are increasingly ‘hostile to being preached at’, and critique traditional church institutions on their alleged effort to preserve dusty traditions and the little power that they have left, instead of catering the personal religious experiences of their flock (Ibid, 2005: 124; Van Otterloo et al, 2012: 246-7; Van ‘t Hul, 2009). Rather than becoming secular nihilists, individuals seek metaphysical answers to existential questions outside the scope of authorities.

The finding that scholars studying either the growth in secular identities or New Age spiritualities utilize the same explanations is most clearly illustrated in the conclusion of the aforementioned study by Houtman and Mascini (2002). The authors confirm the assertion by Luckmann (1967) and Heelas (1996) that the increase of a ‘moral individualism’ has ‘seriously undermined the moral basis of the Christian tradition’ and hence stimulated the growth of the New Age. However, they subsequently note:

*“New Agers and nonreligious persons differ hardly or not at all with respect to either age or individualism. [...] [The] rising level of individualism since the 1960s has reduced support for the Christian tradition considerably, while it combines just as easily with nonreligiosity as with New Age.”* (Houtman & Mascini, 2002: 466).

That moral individualism is a driving force behind either trajectory is undoubtedly true, but is simultaneously indicates that ‘individualization’ is a container-term carrying a diversity of mechanisms that are played out differently in different social contexts. Henceforth to close this theoretical explanatory gap scholars ought to explore the underlying factors that, to draw from Luckmann (1967), ‘escaped the radars of sociological inquiry’. At this point, the majority of the research on religious change uses quantitative census data to assess such processes, but these data do not provide insight about the nuances and currently unacknowledged details that encapsulate the mechanisms leading up to either trajectory. Therefore, a method of research that is sensitive to these nuances by contextualizing individual trajectories is called for.

## **Research method and sampling**

### ***Research method***

To uncover the mechanisms that influence the individual’s development from Christianity towards either secularism or the New Age I utilize the ‘oral histories’ interviewing technique. This technique is characterized by a low degree of structuration (Thompson, 1998; Van Rooden, 2004), which reduces the risk of imposing my own ideas on the respondent, and increases the indispensable sensitivity to the experiences, events and issues that the interviewees themselves find significant. In the interviews interviewees were asked to narrate about their current identity and reconstruct the trajectory of reshaping that led to this identity. Although emphasis was put on the religious aspects of their life courses, I did ask questions on adjacent topics in order to obtain a more complete understanding of their lives.

Here I should emphasize that the oral histories interviewing technique has been criticized for the tendency of respondents to perceive their past through the eyes of the present (Van Otterloo et al, 2012; Thompson, 1998). This reinterpretation of past experiences happens more or less unconscious, but it is not unthinkable that accounts are influenced by the individual’s attempt to demarcate and justify one’s trajectory and current identity towards oneself and the larger audience. As such, the data gained through life course interviewing conveys *cultural meanings* of the respondents, rather than ‘objective’ historical ‘facts’. This,



one could argue, may hamper the disentangling of the factors that motivated the religious trajectories.

I acknowledge this bias, but argue that it is not an insurmountable problem to this project. Quite the contrary, exactly *because* changes in their religious identity are likely to be magnified it is much easier for me to establish what trajectories have occurred and disentangle the factors that motivated these trajectories. Nonetheless, to validate the information provided in the interviews I strive to contextualize information whenever possible with written content such as diaries and academic sources about this period (Thompson, 1998). Together this systematic comparison between the life course accounts and written sources enables me to attain an accurate understanding of the mechanisms behind the changing religious identities.

### ***Sample***

I selected respondents while taking into account three theoretically vital prerequisites.

The first requirement was that the potential interviewees had had a Christian upbringing from which they distanced themselves in the course of their lives. In doing so this study aligns in a long line of researches on religious change that took Christianity as starting point from which individuals depart, a choice which is not surprising considering its dominant position in Post-war Western societies (cf. Berger, 1967; 1969; Bruce, 2002; 2011; Houtman & Mascini, 2002). Since my aim is to solve the persisting explanatory gap between the routes toward either secularism or the new age spiritualities I selected individuals who followed the ‘classic’ route of having been raised as Christians, but who now neither believe in, nor belong to a traditional church religion.

The second prerequisite, the period of birth of the interviewee, relates to the first and utilizes a similar argumentation. I selected interviewees who were born in the period between 1940 and 1960, which implies that respondents were teenagers and adolescents in the 1960s and 1970s. This is significant, for the 60s and 70s are widely perceived as decades of great cultural and societal change (Campbell, 2007; Heelas, 1996). Theoretical arguments that are still paramount in the sociology of religion are based on empirical material gathered in these decades, and using data that overlap with this period enables me to relate directly to these studies. Furthermore, this selection criteria allows me to record richer accounts per respondent, and guarantees that the accounts of the various life courses can be compared: by selecting individuals who have lived their lives in a similar societal context, and who were thus exposed to similar (changing) conditions, I am able to compare narratives and get a hold of the details and nuances in the individual trajectories.

The third requirement was that individuals were Dutch and had lived in the Netherlands for the most part of their lives. Cross-cultural studies by Inglehart (1997) and Hofstee (1995) showed that the rise of a moral individualism is rather strong in the Netherlands, but is certainly not confined only to the Dutch context. This makes the Netherlands an especially eligible case to study, because not only is it likely that the results of this study can be translated beyond the Dutch borders, it also makes it relatively easy to discern possible differences in how this moral individualism influences individuals during the life course.

Interviewees were found mostly via informal channels and the internet. To ensure a heterogeneous<sup>1</sup> sample of narratives I abstained from ‘snowballing’ as much as possible, but turned ‘weak tie’ contacts such as colleagues, acquaintances and other people with whom I did not have a strong, affective relationship. Moreover, I gained permission to post a call for respondents on a Dutch online discussion board on secularism and free thought, which resulted in a batch of valuable respondents. I was however careful not to interview solely participants of this discussion board, as it soon appeared that the atheist narratives of these interviewees were quite similar.<sup>2</sup>

The result of these efforts is a sample of 16 interviews that were conducted in the late spring of 2012. The interviews lasted between 2.5 and 4 hours, and were conducted with participants of various cultural backgrounds who lived all across the Netherlands. Of the 16 interviewees nine were of Protestant descent and seven were of Catholic breed.<sup>3</sup> My analysis is based mainly on the interviews, but regarding the atheist and other non-religious identities I was able to compare my findings to the life-history accounts provided on the online discussion board about secularism and free thought.

## **Post-Christian identities: abiding atheism, seeking spirituality**

### ***Distilling secular and spiritual identities***

Based on the respondents’ narratives a spectrum denoting the extent to which individual identities entail supernatural or metaphysical imaginations can be drawn out, which ranges

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<sup>1</sup> Heterogeneous in the sense of a variety of cultural backgrounds and different social environments.

<sup>2</sup> This is not surprising given the fact that most of the respondents were prominent members of the discussion board participating in the same discussion topics. A reading of various discussion threads learned that – despite numerous differences in insight – there was indeed a commonly shared sense of identity and discourse. Exemplary are the returning evolutionary argumentations and emphasis on consistent reasoning.

<sup>3</sup> An additional of 3 respondents were of non-religious descent, these individuals were obviously not used for the exploration and explanation of the different trajectories, but provided interesting information for the typology of identities.

from the ideal typical position in which such imaginations are completely absent on the one end, to a position which is completely imbued with spiritual beliefs on the other.

Atheist individuals can be located on the former end point since religious and spiritual beliefs are absent in their narratives. They are fiercest in their strive to ward off the ‘flawed claims’ of organized church religion. In the words of Thomas, an atheist of Catholic background:

*“I call myself a ‘materialist’: only the material exists, and there is nothing outside the material (physical) world until someone can prove that there is something.”<sup>4</sup>*

Atheists note that it is very unlikely that there is anything outside the empirically observable world and consider religious imagination as an intellectual genuflection for people who are not (yet) able to ‘dauntlessly face the facts of life’ and wholeheartedly choose for the ‘passion of sobriety’ (cf. Philipse, 2004: 52; Le Poidevin, 1996). The universe is considered ‘stupid’ in the sense that it has no meaning in- and of itself: it is simply there, and it is up to the individual to deal with this knowledge and establish a meaningful life. The atheist stance towards events and disasters illustrates this, as David stresses:

*“I think life is a beautiful accident, so you’d better make the best of it. [...] Think about it: a man of my age has a daughter aged 25-30 who was hit by a stroke, and she’s become a shadow of the person she used to be. Do we need an explanation for this? No. It’s just bloody bad luck. Physical, blunt bad luck. It’s like: here are three straws, you didn’t pick the right one, you’re screwed.”*

Indeed, atheists perceive no higher, divine reason or purpose in the tragedies of life: these happen by mere chance and it is up to the individual to deal with them in the best way possible.

Historically, the atheist arrows are aimed mainly at the ‘objective truth claims’ of Christianity (Dawkins, 2006; Harris, 2004; Philipse, 2004), but increasingly critiques are directed at the New Age spiritualities as well (Harris, *forthcoming*). This change in the objects of critique is perfectly understandable, because atheism is a highly relational identity that ‘defines itself in terms of that which it is denying’. This means that ‘there will be as many

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<sup>4</sup> Note: The names of the respondents used in this article are pseudonyms to safeguard their privacy.

varieties of atheism as there are varieties of theism, for atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a *particular* form of theism' (Hyman, 2007: 28-9, italics in original). Scientific rationalism, empirical facts, and logical thought are the three main imperatives by which atheists assess religious truth claims and by which they interpret the world. Jacob is most pro-active in this sense: he voluntarily keeps up an encyclopedic website which aims to warn the public against all kinds of (quackery) devices used in the alternative healthcare scene.

The atheist world-view is in many ways opposed by those that are part of the New Age spiritualities. Here, the presence of a divine force, or spiritual entity that in some way or another influences their lives is strongly felt. This is illustrated by Mary, when she narrates about her mother's untimely death:

*"[...] then you think: why did she have to go? My mother was always kind, always helping people out, putting herself last. But nonetheless, she's the one who becomes ill. That's hard to swallow, but I would never say: 'this is God's will'. No, there is another reason why she got ill. [...] She was probably ready in this life and didn't have to learn anymore. That's how I see it: I think we are here to learn, and that misery is a test."*

In line with earlier studies on the New Age spiritualities, these individuals emphasize the importance of intuition as a guiding moral source and stress the importance of developing one's authentic, spiritual self. An important aspect is their view on the afterlife, which entails some form of reincarnation of the soul. Such is illustrated by referring to encounters in which they felt to 'already know a person they met for the first time'; of having 'very detailed memories' of eras long before theirs; and the existence of miracle children with extraordinary (musical) skills for which the only explanation can be that they have 'old souls' (cf. Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

The picture sketched thus far corresponds with ideal typical division between individual secularism and New Age spiritualities. Nevertheless, a closer look at the various narratives shows that a variety of additional identities can be distinguished that cannot easily be assigned to either position. These identities separate themselves from both atheism and the New Age spiritualities in their lack of an outspoken, clear cut and consistent set of ideas and beliefs

regarding the truth of the divine. Partly borrowing from Hijmans (1994), these somewhat impalpable identities can be divided into two ideal typical identities.

The first type lies somewhat closer to atheism as it contains those identities that - like atheism and unlike the New Age spiritualities – entail no belief in the metaphysical, but do – unlike atheism and like the New Age – articulate a benevolent stance towards religious imagination. Rather than confining them to bold truth claims these individuals maintain a position of non-decisiveness because they hold that no ultimate conclusions on the metaphysical-world can be made through the empirical means of this-world. Marc, a 57 year old musician who was raised in a ‘free-and-easy branch of Dutch Reformed Protestantism illustrates this:

*“Well of course I have my question marks. But I have no idea where these will lead me. I must say that I find it an unimportant thing to think about. [...] I’m not really looking for new answers right now. It’s not something of big importance to me at the moment. I’m letting go of my Christian background, rather than seeking to embrace something else.”*

This position comes close what the late Bertrand Russell has labeled as agnosticism, the position which ‘thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters of God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. Or, if not impossible, at least impossible at the present time’ (1953: 1). Rosenkranz continues: ‘True Agnosticism about a given range of statements emerges as the view that we are not at present in a position to know the truth-value of these statements’ (2007: 15-6). Although most agnostics do reflect upon their position vis-à-vis religious imagination or atheist disbelief, the thinking and reading about existential questions and philosophical critiques is not as pervasive as it is for atheists (or spiritual) individuals.

The second type of identity contains those who do not entail an ideologically consistent identity, but whose identity is a hotchpotch of elements from secular and religious identities. These individuals effectively ‘breach’ the secular-spiritual dividing line, mostly because they are unwilling (or maybe even unable) to close off every notion of transcendence. A strong illustration of how the secular-spiritual divide is ‘breached’ is provided by Peter, an active participant on an online discussion board on atheism and free thought, who labels himself as atheist ‘in the sense that there are no Gods’, but simultaneously tells about visiting paranormal-events and about combining a belief in reincarnation with insights from the

natural sciences (Relativity theory which proclaims that energy is never lost, but merely redirected) and computer-technology (memory is stored in a ‘cloud’ instead of a fixed location). This resembles what Hijmans has labeled as the ‘Mosaic’, and ‘Conglomerate’ type of identities. Rather than having an integrated core as a basis for their moral outlook, individuals tend to draw upon commonly held religious and humanist norms, values, stereotypes and clichés. As such, it is difficult to assess to what extent such individuals adhere to metaphysical ideas and beliefs as and how they position themselves vis-à-vis other identities. Yet what is shared is that these individuals tend to live their life in a pragmatic way, whilst combining the plurality of ideas and insights that they come across (cf. Hijmans, 1994: 188).

Having provided a tentative mapping of these post-Christian identities I can turn to the core question of this article and explain why these individuals leave their ascribed Christian identity behind and why they develop their subsequent identities in different ways. It is notable that in the subsequent part I will address this issue while focusing on atheism and the New Age spiritualities. The reason to leave the ‘in-between’ identities behind is that focusing on the two clearly opposing identities enables a more thorough understanding of the nuances and particular factors leading up to either position. Atheism and the New Age spiritualities can be perceived as providing the ideal typical representations of the thesis of individual secularization on the one hand and individual religious change on the other. By comparing the two trajectories – which are explained by the same theoretical factors – I argue that I can make a direct contribution to the closing of the explanatory gap.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The trajectory towards atheism***

#### *An orthodox Christian milieu*

The familial background of the would-be atheists was rather traditional and in line with the moral codes of the Christian doctrine in those days: their mothers took care of domestic tasks such as cleaning the household, cooking and catering the children, whereas their father would be breadwinner, working as unschooled laborer, as teacher (ranging from elementary school level to Higher Vocational Education), or in the public service. The size of their families was all too often a result of the encouragements by either the local Catholic *padre* or the Protestant parson: on the whole families consisted of three or four children, with a maximum of 10

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<sup>5</sup> The analysis of the trajectories is based on the interviews with 7 atheists and 5 New Age spirituals.

children in the Catholic family of the now 72 year old Thomas. Thomas, who grew up in the hey days of Dutch pillarization and started working at his uncle's butcher's shop at the age of thirteen, recalls that in his social environment Christian norms and practices were ubiquitous:

*“Your parents were Catholic, your grand-parents were Catholic, your neighbors were Catholic, your school was Catholic, and your leisure was Catholic – because you were put on a Catholic soccer or tennis association. [...] There were protestant children living on the other end of the street, but we were not really encouraged to play with them.”*

The ‘faith was just there’ is a phrase that returned in virtually all interviews. Respondents of both Catholic and Protestant plumage recall a youth in which church attendance was mandatory (with a maximum of three times per Sunday), and everyday life was ‘loaded’ with Christian rituals. Luke, a physician raised in in a Reformed protestant family remembers how his father would improvise a private religious service during holidays if no viable church could be found (a problem that occurred especially in Italy) and notes that saying grace before and after dinner, bible reading, and praying before going to bed were part of the daily routine. In a similar way does Jonathan, a musician, English teacher and active atheist who stems from a Baptist family, note:

*“Every day my father would read excerpts from the Bible. Dinner would be preceded by saying grace and concluded with prayer, and my mother would tuck us in with a small prayer as well. I attended a Christian school, and every day they would read the bible for an hour. But it wasn't a burden or anything like that! It was just part of life.”*

Within this context of strictness the way this strictness was professed diverts between Protestant and Catholic families. In protestant families like those of Luke and Jonathan, parents were rather active in rethinking their religious identity and relating their moral viewpoints to the broader societal context. All of course within the frame of Protestant thought. Luke expresses lively memories of the fierce discussions between his orthodox reformed parents and their friends and family on topics of ‘church, state and society’. In Catholic families like those of Matt, a now nearly pensioned system administrator of a major public service organization, religion played an equal restrictive, prominent role. Yet it did so

without the any further conversing about the faith: ‘my father worked as a coalman and later on ran a snackbar together with my uncle. Their conversations would only be about human, worldly things.’ In these families the truth of the Scripture was beyond doubt, and individuals were expected to fully participate in the various rituals and traditions. This difference in professing the Christian faith between Protestant and Catholic families resonates with an observation which already present in Durkheim’s study on suicide. Protestant individuals he articulated are “*far more the author of [their] faith. [...] The very structure of the reformed cult stresses this state of religious individualism*”, which fosters a “*spirit of free inquiry that animates this religion*” (ibid.). Catholic individuals, however, “*accept [their] faith ready made, without scrutiny. [They] may not even submit it to historical examination since the original texts that serve as its basis are proscribed.*” (1951[1897]: 158). Nonetheless, in anticipation of subsequent sections, these noticeable differences did not determine the individual’s trajectory towards either atheism or the New Age. Indeed, it was not so much the *content* of one’s ascribed religion that proved to be a the paramount predictor, but the *strictness* (or: *firmness*) by which the rules and regulations were imposed on the individual within his or her nuclear family and larger social environment.

#### *Initial doubts and manifesting critiques*

All atheists-to-be articulated that they had an enormous curiosity to read and learn new things. Although this curiosity was not necessarily directed towards religious affairs or existential questions, the respondents describe themselves as being actively engaged in religious topics and enjoyed hearing these stories at school.

However, the range of topics that they could read about in their orthodox milieu was limited. Regarding religious matters respondents living in orthodox Protestant circles were confined to the Scripture and books by approved theologian, and a strict surveillance limited the scope of books that could be broad home from the local library. This, as a consequence, virtually disabled the chance of reading or hearing about differing philosophies or religious ideas and beliefs. Such barring of differing religious identities resonates what Berger labeled as the ‘entrenching’ of religious systems as a strategy to cope with the pluralistic situation (Berger, 1967: 153): rather than opening up and accommodating themselves to the ‘pluralistic game of religious free enterprise’ the families and larger social environment (e.g. school, church) of these respondents maintained their absolute, dichotomous stance in matters of right or wrong, truth or falseness. In this situation respondents note that, beside approved



(Christian) novels and some (decent) women's magazines, they were merely allowed to read about human history, nature, and the natural sciences.

Interestingly, the 'danger' came from within, for it was exactly this literature which initiated the first doubts, as Thomas notes:

*“As a child I had an enormous reading-hunger and read everything I could get my hands on. [...] At a certain point my older sister was member of the ‘University of self-study’ and we got this book about geology and evolution. And then things went very fast, because for the first time I heard that the world is much older than 6000 or 10.000 years. [...] For the first time I questioned the truth of the Bible, and noticed its illogicalness!”*

Similarly, Matt – who was raised Catholic as well – records how during his early adolescence he almost coincidentally came across a book by the Russian-born psychiatrist Velikovsky in which Biblical events were explained by relating them to the forces of nature. This book turned his worldview upside down and made him doubt the existence of God for the first time: because here it was argued that not God, but 'normal', natural occurring phenomena had caused the various disasters in the book of Genesis. That this newly acquired information had such impact can be understood if we consider how unexpected the 'blow' really was. The respondents mention that until they read this material they had held the Scripture to provide a factual account of the world's history, but not only did it appear that there were other facts that they hadn't heard about before, these newly discovered facts were also in direct opposition with their old 'facts'.

The process of reading new insights and questioning the ascribed Christian identity developed at a slow pace at first instance, because respondents were well warned against the Devil's many unholy tricks to lead them astray. Various interviewees articulated to feel that 'the Devil was whispering all those questions and doubts in their ears', thus indicating that they had to overcome strong internalized fears. Also, in their strict milieus individuals had little possibilities to satisfy their appetite to learn and understand: they were mostly in their teenage or adolescent years when their first questions appeared, and were thus still deeply ingrained in traditional religious circle of the nuclear family. Their questions – if they dared to usher those - were received with little understanding, disapproval, or plain indifference. Still, these fears

were gradually pushed aside by their ‘hunger’. Here respondents note that their initial aim was not so much to get rid of their ascribed Christian identity, but rather to establish a balance between their Christian faith and the newly acquired insights. Nevertheless, the only thing they thus achieved was an increasingly ‘abstract faith’, for the literal beliefs of their youth proved to be increasingly incompatible with the ‘new facts’: the avalanche had just only just begun.

### *Ideological critiques*

It should be pointed out here that the doubts and critiques of the would-be atheists are all developed towards the *ideological* aspects of their faith. The main criticisms these individuals have are about internal consistencies of the Scripture, factual mistakes in the doctrine and the bold, and essentialist claims on for instance the sinfulness of human nature. Especially theological inconsistencies are considered to be highly problematic, but the strife to iron out these difficulties proved to be difficult, as the Baptist Jonathan shows:

*“I considered myself to believe only in love and didn’t want to hear about punishments and judgments. But this is impossible in the Christian faith: in Christianity judgment and love, punishment and forgiveness, retaliation and rewarding [are inseparable]. You cannot leave one out and keep the others. Nonetheless, there was absolutely no way that I could live with the morbid dark side of Christian ideas”*

When asked what they found problematic about Christianity, atheists immediately recall passages from the bible that they consider to be simply impossible and untrue. Thomas, for instance makes lengthy comparisons between archeological evidence, and the story of the migration of the Jews out of Egypt as narrated in the Book of Exodus. In a general sense, atheists more often make historic-sociological analyses on the function of religion for people in oppressed situations, and provide philological explanations for the various inconsistencies.

Apart from a direct attack on their ascribed identity by scientific topics, questions and critiques could also be initiated by the sudden confrontation with differing (in this case: historical) religious ideas and beliefs. The protestant Luke asserts:

*“I went to grammar school, and there I learned that in antiquity people thought about religion in a very different way. You learn about the Greeks and Roman, Zeus*

*and the other Gods. There my travel began, because more and more I began to question whether it was really true that there is only one God. And what about this Jesus figure who is God and man at the same time? [...] And how can anyone become pregnant without the presence of a man?"*

Here the plausibility of one's ideas and beliefs were problematized by the knowledge of contradicting ideas and beliefs. The respondents realized that they had been brought up as Christians because Christianity happened to be the premier religion of Dutch society: the notion that other religions made competing truth claims effectively relativized their Christian identity. Yet again, the relativization of truth claims resulting from the pluralist confrontation is a result of cognitive thought and rationalized logics.<sup>6</sup>

The paramount factor of why individuals develop an ideological critique is being raised in a strict, orthodox religious regime. This effectively provides the basis of two related mechanisms. First, it makes the process of questioning a solitary, cognitive affair as respondents choose to keep the questions and doubts to themselves. Rather than openly expressing their doubts, respondents can only privately continue reading and develop and sharpen their thoughts. Second, the strictness of their family and social environment greatly influences the route that the process of identity-reconstruction would take. To put it bluntly, their upbringing develops around the dichotomous idea of believing in the true form of Christianity or not doing so, and as such individuals have at least until their adolescence virtually no access to the content of different religious systems of meaning. This means that their arrows can only be directed at Christianity as a possible target of critique.

### *Breaking loose*

Reading books and solitary thinking does not automatically make an atheist, and the trajectory from questioning to rejecting their ascribed Christian identity was greatly influenced by life events. Moving out to study, getting married, travelling and starting a household were moments that the respondents recall as important moments that gave an impulse to reflect and

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<sup>6</sup> Naturally, the two types of ideological critique (i.e. the doubts regarding the tenability of the Christian theodicy, and the relativization of religious truth claims resulting from the pluralist confrontation) are not the sole dissatisfactions respondents experienced: the dullness of services and sermons, and hypocrisy of the clergy and fellow believers are mentioned too. Nonetheless, the dissatisfaction with *ideas and beliefs* however, was paramount in the narratives of atheists, and it is this which sparked the religious crisis that eventually led to their atheism.

think about one's ideas and beliefs. These moments proved how profoundly they had already changed, and hence forced them to assess to what extent they still adhered to the Christian faith. Nonetheless, such reflections did not immediately result in the rejection of Christian rituals and imagination. Particularly out of consideration with their parents and their (parents') social environment did respondents choose to involve Christian rituals in life events such as marriage and baptizing their newborn children. Beside the piety with external parties respondents postulate that internal motivations were of almost equal importance. This is exemplified by Thomas. In the interview, his wife – also of a Catholic background - who had been listening to the conversation added an insightful illustration by referring to the occasion in which she was recovering in the hospital after having given birth to their first child.

*“He went to the groceries, and when he returned he plainly said that he had dropped by at the presbytery, because the baby had to be baptized. [silence] I was stunned! How could he? [...] So you see, he still had this fanaticism.”*

Thomas: *“Yeah, that's the strange thing in this transition period: then you have these moments of thinking 'nah I don't believe it', but then suddenly it all boomerangs back at you. This indoctrination is so deep apparently. You don't lose that overnight, it takes years!”*

These relapses were not uncommon and they show how 'deep' the primary socialization into Christianity, and how emotionally intense the process of breaking loose from one's ascribed religious identity was. Jonathan, for instance, has described his apostasy as a process of 'losing a friend', whereas the once-reformed Eve articulated to feel 'wistful' sometimes because she was no longer able to 'simply believe'.

### *Abiding Atheism*

The strong emotional intensity of the process of turning away from Christianity provides part of the explanation of why these individuals turned to disbelief, rather than adopting another religious identity. It appears that the emotional loyalty to one's Christian identity is so strong, that the struggle to break loose takes up all energy and leaves little room for the adoption of another. John's recollection is illustrative of how this works:

*“I was raised in a context in which any other explanation [of the Scripture, LvH] than a literal was unthinkable. I considered a non-literal, more liberal explanation*

*as incomprehensible [...] for it has the important pitfall that it is difficult to assess what parts of the Bible are factual and what parts are metaphorical. In the end you can believe anything you want! [...] As such, I never considered the liberal position as a viable option for my faith-problem.”*

The process of questioning and critiquing commenced as a cognitive, intellectual process, meaning that individuals over the course of their development individuals ascribed and refined an increasing arsenal of arguments against the Christian theodicy. A side effect was that when respondents came across other sets of religious ideas and beliefs, the critiques were applied to those ideas and beliefs as well. This is illustrated by Luke who was able to learn about Eastern philosophies and Buddhism from first hand because of the several journeys he made to Asia to work as physician and cardiologist:

*“Although I do think Buddhism has some good elements, I do argue that this religion suffers from something you see in all religions, namely eschatological thinking: doing good things solely to be reward later on [in the afterlife, lvh]. I find that problematic, because it is a way to keep people down. [...] You’ll find that with Islam too, and I experienced this in the Protestantism of my youth as well: keeping the common people down and promising them the heavens in order to exploit them here on earth. This structural inequality provided the fertile soil for the social revolution. I expect that sooner or later you will see a similar uprising in Islam, for the role of the Imams and whole clergy of the Islam in legitimizing the grave inequalities is similar to that of the bishops and pope in the Middle Ages.”*

This way of arguing, in which different religions are used interchangeably to illustrate how religion is the cause of social problems and individual misconduct.

Although the process of critiquing and questioning was predominantly a solitary process, the role of significant others in the adopting of an atheist identity should not be underestimated. In line with studies on processes of identity (re)shaping (e.g. Aupers, 2004; Becker, 1953; Luhmann, 1991; Smith, 2011) I find that conversations with the spouse, friends, study-friends and colleagues were essential in the gradual process of becoming an atheist. Conversations with both believers and non-believers provided a steppingstone to transform doubts and critiques into firm, concrete arguments against the Christian faith. Family-

members and colleagues who maintained a Christian identity proved to be great sparring-partners to the respondents to see what aspects the individual could or could no longer adhere to. Through the (often increasingly problematic) conversations with their spouses or parents the respondent came to acknowledge that s/he was increasingly drifting away from his or her once taken-for-granted Christian identity. In addition, contact with non-believers and atheists on for instance the internet or on the workplace the individual gradually learns to ‘walk the walk, and talk the talk’: By sharing information on what books to read, and sharing their experiences with other atheists who were (once) going through the same process of identity reshaping, individuals become accustomed to the ‘scientific’ discourse and legitimations of the atheist position. Through reading and conversing the individuals gradually becomes an expert on the subject, and slowly but surely adopts a new mode of referring to his or her life-world. Simon, a once-raised Dutch Reformed psychologist in his mid-forties, recalls how a friend of his, a fanatical atheist who would forcefully argue against the conception of God, invited him to visit the website of the ‘Brights’.<sup>7</sup> In combination with their fierce discussions, this greatly altered Simon’s self-perception:

*“[...] and here I was put on the spot and discovered that I had been an atheist without realizing it. Until then I had had this hesitation to call myself an atheist because I still had that gleam of faith and thought of myself as an agnostic: I didn’t want to be overly harsh.”*

Other respondents have similar examples of how discussion with friends or the reading of personal accounts on online discussion boards would lead them to ‘realize’ that they were atheists themselves. Both functioned as the lever to the affirmation of an atheist identity as they provided individuals with the ‘necessity’ to position themselves as atheists.

### ***The trajectory towards spirituality***

#### *A liberal Christian milieu*

The social background of the would-be spiritual individuals is, compared to the would-be atheists, less traditional in its moral and social outlook. This is exemplified by a less rigid division of labor regarding working and caring tasks. Again, their fathers took on most of the paid labor and their mothers most of the (child) caring, but their mothers would fulfill

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<sup>7</sup> The Brights are social movement promoting the public understanding and acknowledgement of the naturalistic worldview. Website: <http://www.the-brights.net/>, last accessed September 26,2012.

functions outside the household as well: either on a voluntary basis or as a (part-time) paid job. Although their mothers were ‘before all housewives’, they would maintain meaningful activities that ranged from being a church elder, to singing in the church choir, to even having a ‘manual therapy’ practice at home.

This liberalism was reflected in the way the Christian faith was professed as well. Where atheists note that not attending church was out of the question in their youth, the New Age spirituals stress that their parents would indeed loyally attend each Sunday, but wouldn’t mind staying at home once in a while either. The Dutch Reformed Sarah recalls that despite her mother’s appointment as a church elder they often wouldn’t go to church if her mother was not on duty – a remark which is especially true for her father.<sup>8</sup> That the fathers were not the most devout believers returns in the recollection of various spiritual respondents. Deborah, also of Dutch Reformed descent, notes that her father, who worked as a pilot on international flights, was in no way interested in religion. Mary – a Catholic raised middle-aged woman from the eastern part of the Netherlands – mentions that on the occasions her father did show up in church, he tended to ‘lose attention within half an hour and started joking around.’ This behavior was very much unlike her mother’s, who would ‘pray for almost everything’ and took intrinsic pleasure out of attending church. Such differences in attitude and professing within a single family is characteristic for the families of spiritual individuals, and clearly contrasts with the narratives of atheists individuals where even in the families in which reflection was uncommon parents such (almost blasphemous) behavior would not occur. Of course there were families in which both parents were equally engaged in the congregation and take active interest in church quarrels and debates. However, their fanaticism was often accompanied by a relativizing of these quarrels and seldom taken as matter of life and death.

This does not mean that Christianity was less prominent within these liberal families. Church attendance, catechism, saying grace at dinnertime and praying before going to bed were established parts of the (daily) routine. Respondents recall to have enjoyed hearing Biblical stories and singing psalms and hymns. Deborah notes:

*“I loved biblical history! I’m still glad that I was taught those stories and still derive great pleasure out of them. They spent a lot of time on those stories at my school*

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<sup>8</sup> It is notable that some respondents reshaped their identity more than once. Sarah and Simon are good examples: both turned away from Christianity, got involved/ interested in the New Age spiritualities (Simon more than Sarah) but ended up as atheists. Naturally, their accounts of the first part of their trajectory are suitable to understand the turn to spiritual identities.

*during the morning prayers. I loved all the singing [...] and there are still recordings of me as a little girl dedicatedly singing 'In excelsis Deo'.*"

Nonetheless, the enthusiasm for the Biblical stories and singing of Psalms and hymns did not last, at least not as parts of a Christian identity. From the early teenage years on the joy was increasingly overshadowed by doubts and critiques. As with the atheists, the first doubts commenced as seemingly independent observations that were slowly but surely developed into a firm set of critiques.

### *Institutional critiques*

Contrary to the atheists however, the doubts and critiques were directed at *institutional*, rather than ideological facets. Their critiques can be divided into two different types of institutional critique.

First, there are the 'critiques against authorities', which essentially come down to an alleged discontent with the boring practices of the faith (e.g. church sermons) and the misplaced behavior by the clergy and/or teachers (e.g. misuse of power, condescending behavior). As Simon illustrates:

*"We had this teacher in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade that would come once a week to read from the Bible. On one occasion we talked about miracles and I asked her how it is possible that we no longer see any miracles like those in the Bible. Like the snake that changes and a sea that parts. 'Well', she said, 'you shouldn't look at it like that, for miracles do happen. If you, for instance, go home and you arrive safely, than that's really a miracle!' At that point I realized that there's just so much nonsense going on. It was really a turning point, and it marked the end of the Church for me."*

That it was a turning point could of course only be concluded on hindsight, for it was virtually impossible for a ten year old bloke to just defy Christianity as it dominated most of his social environment. It nonetheless shows how an initial curiosity could turn in to the commencing of serious doubts as a result of the insipid answers by (religious) authorities. The dubious role of authorities is also a red thread in Sarah's development towards apostasy. Besides the boredom she experienced during the lengthy preaching, and her disgust with 'this old gnarl of a vicar' who was continuously struggling to 'stick his lock of hair to his bald skull', she recalls her discontent with a congregational study in which her parents played a prominent role:



*“My parents had a really strong opinion about this, I even think that they were pioneers of one of the groups. They still are. [...] It really turned into a witch hunt and I was perplexed: ‘what are they doing? Is this how it’s supposed to be?’ It really put me off, thinking: ‘well, if this is what believing is about...’”*

The affair which directly led to her formal apostasy from the church was the letter she received from a local congregation when she moved to Nijmegen to study at the city’s university. Apart from being perplexed that her home-church appeared to know about her whereabouts and share this information with other congregations, she was infuriated by the letter’s content:

*“It was just a letter saying ‘please donate!’ [...] this really made me angry. Instead of sending someone to say ‘Hello, this is who we are, here is where you can find us and if you like, you’re more than welcome to join our congregation’, they would just send in a payment check. That really got to me, and I didn’t accept it! I went to the municipality right away to de-subscribe from the Protestant church. Very resolute!”*

The second type of institutional critique is related to the perceived hypocrisy of one’s social environment – especially of the parents. All too often, spiritual individuals noticed a gap between the proclaimed religious attitude and actual behavior, which to the respondents’ idea made a religious identity little more than an empty shell: façade put up to satisfy the public at large. The Catholic-born Mary recalls how her defiance against Christianity was fired by the her father’s bad behavior in church: being bored by the preaching he would start teasing his children, rather than dutifully pay attention. ‘Apparently’, she notes, ‘he just came for the picture, in some sort of attempt to act pious for my mum. I really doubt whether he was a true believer.’ Her observation that people would not act up in line with the Christian ideals in their daily lives, and were attending church either out of habit or because they felt obliged to furthered her discontent. A similar hypocrisy is pointed out by Deborah:

*“When my parents intended to send me to catechism, I really revolted. They hadn’t sent me to Sunday school, but they did want me to attend catechism? And that got us into this fight in which they would argue: ‘you have to go because we promised to give you a Christian upbringing when you were baptized.’ I was infuriated, stating:*

*'How's that? Christian upbringing? We only attend church at Christmas and Easter. Christianity does not in the least play a role in our lives!' So you see, it was all merely form, [...] completely hollow.'*

Such observations withheld Mary and her boyfriend to marry in church, because it increasingly felt as a place in which people would put up a show, sitting there 'all dressed up as if they were saying: 'Look! We're still going to church as a family!'''. She continues:

*"That's why I didn't want to marry in church: I had stopped attending church and didn't want to perform an act just for the picture. [...] And it's not only for me, it's also that the church is meant for people who really believe, one shouldn't take up their space."*

Ruth, a part-time pedagogue born to a protestant family in the 1950s, did marry in church, but under the condition of being allowed to adapt rituals to her preferences. Notably, the theme of the wedding sermon was 'doubt'. For those respondents who decided not to marry in church or baptize their children, this decision marked the end of an increasingly problematic relation with religious institutions, but not with religious imagination as such. Interestingly, that these individuals stem from families that were rather liberal in their profession of the faith is reflected in the relatively low amount of tension that was involved in the breaking loose from Christianity. Mary maintains that she was allowed to choose whether she wanted to continue going to church when attending secondary school, whereas Deborah could quite easily evade obligations by pointing out the halfhearted way in which her parents (especially her father) would affirm Christianity.

### *Seeking spirituality*

To understand why the respondents gradually turned to the New Age spiritualities, rather than sheer disbelief it is instructive to analyze the characteristics of their critiques. The fact that their doubts and critiques are primarily directed towards institutional aspects and human fallacies is pivotal, because this leaves the 'ideal' of religion intact. The division enabled respondents to maintain a sympathetic, affirmative stance toward religious (and spiritual) ideas and beliefs.<sup>9</sup> This then, induced individuals to look for forms of religion or spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> Atheists do not make this division between the ideal of religion on the one hand, and human practices on the other. The two tend to be regarded as coinciding, and the latter an inescapable result of the former. The

beliefs that were not tainted by human misconduct. This strive – to which Roeland et al (2010) refer as the ‘quest for religious purity’ – provided the fertile ground for the New Age spiritualities in which the ideal of a liberated Self that is not contaminated by bureaucratic rules and regulations coincides perfectly with that of these respondents (cf. Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996). The coinciding of the personal critiques with the ideas of the New Age makes it not surprising that for the respondents, moving away from Christianity went hand in hand with the turn towards the New Age spiritualities. The felt discontent was both concretized and affirmed by books and workshops related to the spiritual milieu.

In line with Aupers (2004) and Van ‘t Hul’s (2009) findings on cyberpaganism and modern Witchcraft, the role of one’s social environment is pivotal in the process of turning to the New Age spiritualities: for virtually all respondents it is the interaction with family, friends and colleagues that directed them to the spiritual path. Simon, for instance, recalls how his mother’s interest in homeopathy and discontent with the regular medical health care got him involved in themes and topics related to the alternative practices. Deborah notes that her interest in psychology combined with the professional interest of helping people to give meaning to their lives led her to read books on parapsychology and visit workshops on ‘Self-orientation’, Whereas Mary notes how her husband, who had had no Christian upbringing, was very interested in religious and spiritual topics. She recollects that he visited a psychic to deal with life problems:

*“We got acquainted with this man via his mother who worked for a homeopath. She got in touch with other people and that’s how the ball got rolling. [...] He would read a lot of books about these topics and occasionally, and since these were lying there I started reading some of those too. I was interested but wouldn’t actively search for information: it just came to me.”*

This points at an important difference vis-à-vis the development towards atheism: where the latter was predominantly a solitary process in which the role of significant others was decisive only in the last stage of the trajectory (i.e. the last push in establishing one’s atheism as an

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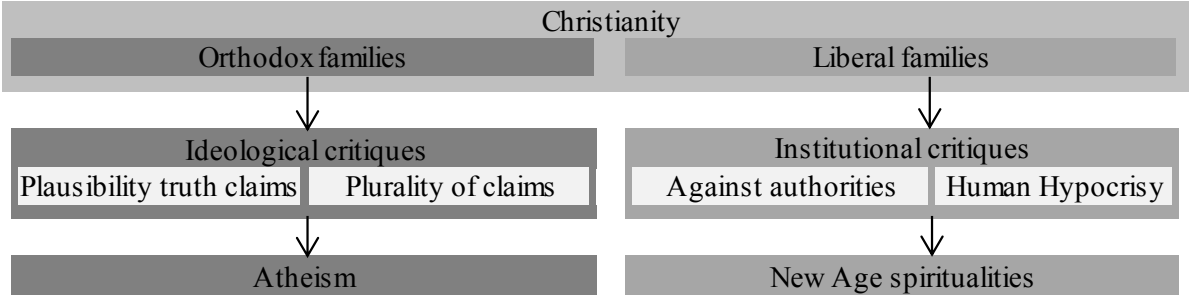
difference can be illustrated by perception on fundamentalist violence. Spiritual individuals would regard fundamentalism as the hijacking of religion by a bunch of insane fanatics who have misinterpreted the Bible or Quran (i.e. wrongfully neglected the religions loving, compassionate core). Atheists, on the other hand, argue that violence and bloodshed are as much part of the Bible as love and compassion are. Fundamentalist violence and charity are hence considered to be equally logical consequences of religion.

autonomous identity), the development towards the spiritualities was a joint endeavor with one’s family, spouse and friends throughout the process. Yet again, the way the faith was professed made up the critical factor in the development of these institutional critiques: apart from providing room to develop and usher doubts and critiques, the liberal climate in the nuclear family made respondents more aware of the existence of a variety of other religious identities. This in fact allowed individuals to explore alternative routes of meaning giving and provided them with a more affirmative stance towards other religious ideas and beliefs as well.

**Conclusion: closing the explanatory gap**

The result of the comparison between the trajectory of identity reshaping towards atheism and the New Age spiritualities is visualized in figure 1.

**Figure 1:** visualization of the mechanisms of post-Christian identity reconstruction



The main contribution of this article is that it closes the explanatory gap that has risen between the interpretation of church apostasy as one of individual secularization on the one hand, and one of religious change and spiritualization on the other. A review of the research of the opposing camps learned that regardless of their contradicting diagnoses, both camps propose the rise of moral individualism and pluralization of the life-world as explaining their respective trajectory. That these factors explain both the trajectory towards atheist disbelief and the New Age spiritualities may very well be true, but it simultaneously indicates that these terms function as a ‘black box’ and that underlying mechanisms have yet to be revealed. From the life course interviews in this article I was able to close the theoretical gap.

The factor that ultimately explains why individuals reshape their post-Christian identity either towards atheism or the New Age is the way in which the Christian faith was professed in the nuclear family. To be more precise: it is the degree of strictness, or orthodoxy of one’s primary socialization in Christianity that directs the subsequent development of one’s

post-Christian identity, a result which confirms Smith's proposition that atheists from strict religious backgrounds were most outspoken in their feelings of acrimony towards religion (2011: 233).

The mechanism behind this factor is that individuals raised in orthodox Christian environments are left little room to explore differing religious ideas since access to differing religious ideas and beliefs is virtually absent. Their social environment is rather rejective towards attempts to explore beliefs beyond the set borders of the doctrine, which means that the process of thinking and critiquing is a comparatively solitary, cognitive process. Also, the ideas and beliefs of their orthodox milieu are rather dichotomous: only the home congregation holds true whilst all other religions (and science) are misguided. The result is that issues are solely framed as affirming or disaffirming the ascribed Christian identity.

Together these elements give impulse for an *ideological* critique. As a result of their private studying and questioning individuals realize that the Scripture contains strong internal inconsistencies and makes claims that are evidently improbable. This increasingly induces them to question the plausibility of Christianity's truth claims. In addition, through their search for answers, individuals come across an increasing amount of contradictory (scientific) answers and meaning systems, and hence learn that Christianity's claim to the universal, absolute truth is untenable. Because of the strong primary socialization into the Christian theodicy, the process to break loose proves to be a heavy emotional struggle. Also, where critiques are originally only directed at Christianity are soon transferred to other religious forms as well: when individuals do have room to seriously delve into differing religious and spiritual beliefs (for instance because they moved out of their parent's house, which tempered the parental surveillance), their refined logical arguments effectively bar the possibility of adopting another religious identity, leaving only the way to atheism open.

Individuals raised in liberal milieus provide a mirror image. Here social (i.e. parental) surveillance is less strict and thus provides room to oppose the ascribed Christian identity, and explore competing religious ideas and beliefs. It is notable that opposition is mainly directed at *institutional* aspects of the faith, focusing on discontent with religious authorities (who are accused of catering more to their own desires than the needs of the multitude), and disgust with human hypocrisy (fellow believers who preach one thing and do another). Also, because of the liberal background, individuals are from quite early age on aware of different meaning systems and are provided more space to develop their own ideas. The discontent provides

fertile ground for the New Age spiritualities, which' anti-institutional ethos fits perfectly with the institutional critiques of these individuals. It is notable that the respondents' institutional critiques in fact construe critiques on human fallacies thus leaving the ideal of religion intact. This type of critique resonates with the structure of critiques central to the New Age spiritualities (cf. Luckmann, 1967; Heelas, 1996; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005), which makes the turn to the spiritual milieu only a small step.

### **Discussion: openings for future research**

The analysis presented in this article does not plainly favor one interpretation of the changing religious landscape in Dutch society (or Western society writ-large) over the other.

On the one hand, advocates of the religious change thesis such as Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Campbell (2007) can align the outcome to their theoretical ideas, arguing that the spreading of a moral individualism has diminished space for the strict, orthodox type of religions. With the ideological pillars no longer in place, the orthodox religious authorities have effectively lost their 'formative power' in the shaping of individual identities. Nowadays cultural norms on how to bring up children have changed from a repressive, authoritative type (Dutch: *bevelshuishouding*) to a type which leaves more room for children to negotiate and self-determine their lives (Dutch: *onderhandelingshuishouding*) (cf. De Swaan, 1997). This trend, so one can argue, has effectively taken out the urge to depart from one's ascribed identity. Moreover, communication-commodities such as the internet provide access to a plurality of worldviews, making individuals more aware and affirmative of differing ideas and beliefs from an early age on.

This reading, however, neglects on the other hand the fact that processes of orthodoxy and social control will inevitably reappear in new forms (Houtman et al, 2011). Indeed, as Nadesan (1999), Aupers (2004) and Van 't Hul (2009) showed for the New Age spiritualities, and Cox (1996) for Christian identities such as Pentecostalism showed, strong coercive norms that direct individual attitudes and behavior remain even in ideas and beliefs that are widely regarded as open and inclusive. The decline of traditional Christianity has not removed orthodoxy and fundamentalism in its wake: these merely return in different shapes. It is more accurate to state that in contemporary society strictness and orthodoxy are covered by a 'veil of tolerance', but are in fact no less oppressive than the paternalistic Christian doctrines of old (Žižek, 2009: 76-7; 2001). In that sense the fertile soil for individual secularism (i.e. atheism) remains, making this route of identity reshaping as viable as the one leading up to the New Age spiritualities.

An interesting point that is in need of further (empirical) exploration is the area of tension between the way the faith was professed in the primary years and the *content* of one's ascribed identity as predictors of subsequent trajectories of identity reshaping. In this study differences between a Catholic and Protestant upbringing did appear but were in the end not of decisive influence. It is notable that this seemingly contradicts earlier studies on for instance suicide-rates (Durkheim, 1951[1897]) or rationalization processes (Weber, in: Gane, 2002; Berger, 1967: 111-4) where the particularities of either the Catholic or Protestant denomination were thought to be of paramount importance. Aware that this issue deserves more room than the final lines it has been granted in this article's discussion, I would like to stress a preliminary hypothesis for why I do not find proof for this classic notion and henceforth suggest how future research can further explore the topic.

It cannot be ruled out that the results are influenced by my choice to select individuals who were raised during the heydays of Dutch pillarization. In this period Catholicism and Protestantism were – at the grassroots-level that is – engaged in a strife secure and maintain the symbolic and social boundaries between their flock and (roughly put) everyone else (Zijderveld, 1998). The unintended consequence of this figuration of competition was that it gave impulse for an 'institutional isomorphism' (see: DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which means that patterns of orthodoxy and liberalism appeared on both sides. As such, my findings may hold truth for this particular generation and socio-historical context, but cannot plainly be generalized to for instance succeeding generations. A repetition of this research among younger generations is called for to see whether the mechanisms revealed in this study hold. Moreover, an additional way to settle this issue is to quantitatively assess whether strictness of the way religion is professed in the individual's family predicts a route towards either atheism or the New Age spiritualities, rather than one's denominational descent. Variables indicating a scale of orthodoxy/liberalism in the professing of the faith during the respondent's formative years can easily be added to census research. Apart from enabling a further exploration of the trajectories leading up to the 'in-between' identities, a quantitative testing makes a cross-cultural comparison to see whether the mechanisms discovered in the Dutch context apply to individuals living in other countries possible.

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