Believe in the net: Implicit religion and the internet hype, 1994-2001

Pärna, K.

Believing in the Net

Leiden University Press

Cover illustration: Visual representation of the Internet. The Opte Project.
http://opte.org/
Cover design: Maedium, Utrecht
Lay out: Florian Duijsens

Believing in the Net

Implicit Religion and the Internet Hype, 1994-2001

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus prof.mr. P.F. van der Heijden,

volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties

te verdedigen op donderdag 28 januari 2010

klokke 15.00 uur

door

Karen Pärna

geboren te Tallinn, Estland

in 1977

Promotor: Prof. dr. M.B. ter Borg

Commissieleden: Prof. dr. E.G.E. van der Wall
                 Prof. dr. W.B. Drees
                 Prof. dr. D. Houtman (EUR)
                 Prof. dr. S. Wyatt (UM/KNAW)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

MODERNITY, MEANING AND THE INTERNET

> In the great vacuum of meaning, in the silence of unspoken values, in the vacancy of something large to stand for, something bigger than oneself, technology – for better or worse – will shape our society.
>
> Because values and meaning are scarce today, technology will make our decisions for us. We'll listen to technology because our modern ears listen to little else. In the absence of other firm beliefs, we'll let technology steer. No other force is as powerful in shaping our destiny. By imagining what technology wants we can imagine the course of our culture. (Kelly 1998: 160)

0.1 A VACUUM OF MEANING?

In this passage from the concluding pages of one of the quintessential books of the Internet boom of the 1990s – *New Rules for the New Economy. 10 Radical Strategies for a Connected World* (1998) – the American journalist and information communications technology guru Kevin Kelly speaks of what he perceives as a "vacuum of meaning", a lack of true beliefs and reliable values in the world today. He touches upon two matters that have been of great importance to the social sciences: the changes in culture and life-worlds that mark modern technological societies and the fate of meaning and values in the secular West. Kelly's quote fits well in a scholarly tradition that adheres to the idea that life in our times is marked by a serious crisis of meaning. Without employing the term itself, he is in fact pointing at modernity as the source of the problems that he sketches.

The discontinuity between modernity and the long history that preceded it has been a prime concern of those who study life in our times from the perspective of sociology. Although a label for many different phenomena, the term 'modernity' is often used in reference to the far-reaching changes in the economy, social structures and intellectual climate of the Western world roughly since the seventeenth century. The transformations linked to it have been interpreted with mixed emotions. To the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the later positivist school modernity's hallmarks – secular reason, empirical enquiry and systematic knowledge – were above all associated with progress and the continuing betterment of the human

condition. The break with the past that modernity represents was welcomed as a positive development.

But to many others, this historical fracture represents above all a problem. For instance, in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) the British sociologist Anthony Giddens posits that the world today is confusing and bedazzling to its inhabitants; it is a place that we fail to fully grasp and where we are lost (Giddens: 2-3). He attributes this sense of bewilderment to the ever-diminishing role of traditional social relationships, religion and many other age-old customs in the lives of modern Western individuals. As Giddens puts it, these frames of reference have been "disembedded" from their conventional settings; they have been uncoupled from tradition and have since lost their one-time monopoly (Giddens: 21).

In a similar vein, *The Homeless Mind* (1973) by the German-American sociologist Peter Berger and his co-authors Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner puts forward the melancholy thesis of metaphysical homelessness (Berger et al. 1973: 185). They posit that the minds of contemporary individuals no longer have a fixed dwelling in tradition and long-established (religious) beliefs, certainties that provided guidance in matters relating to human fragility and finitude in earlier times. The meaning of the world at large and the purpose of humans in it have lost their self-evidence. The explanations and solace offered by religion in particular, so goes their argument, can no longer hold their ground. As Berger and the others put it, modernity has "seriously weaken[ed] those definitions of reality that previously made the human condition easier to bear" (Berger, et al. 1973: 185). Furthermore, if we agree with Berger then there is little else that can replace religion adequately; the secular substitutes that have emerged are seldom seen as satisfactory answers to essential questions of life (Seidman 1990: 226). As Berger sees it, such phenomena as secular ideologies have, contrary to their promises, failed in providing means of dealing with the human condition. In fact, they appear to have intensified the sort of 'metaphysical homelessness' of which he and his co-authors speak (Berger, et al. 1973).

Berger and the others underline Max Weber's notion of an all-encompassing disenchantment of the world. In the essay 'Science as a Vocation' (1989 [1918]) Weber refers to the overall rationalisation of the Western worldview as the cause behind the eventual disappearance of the sacred, magical and mysterious from the world (Weber 1989: 13). On the whole, Weber regretted this disenchantment of the world. As he saw it, the characteristically modern scientific-intellectual mindset was bringing with it great emptiness for mankind, rendering it helpless in answering the key questions of human existence: how does one's world 'work', what is its

meaning and how should one lead one's life (Weber 1989: 13-18). According to Weber, the exact sciences in particular deplete the world of purpose and meaning; they "tend to make the belief that there is something like a 'meaning' of the world die out at its very roots" (Weber 1989: 17).

In short, when it comes to making sense of the world, giving meaning to individual lives and finding answers to basic existential questions, the modern condition seems to have become an intense problem that is intimately linked to two related developments: the de-mystification of our worldview and the loosening grip of (religious) traditions. But are modern Western societies on the whole really suffering from such a crisis of meaning? In this study, I shall argue that this is not the case. Contemporary societies are full of meaning: ideologies, philosophies, lifestyle choices, science and technology, the arts, our relationships with others and our everyday activities all make our lives meaningful and "easier to bear", to use Berger's expression. What is more, religion has not disappeared. Aside from the simple observation that various religious traditions and organisations continue to play a role in many people's lives, it is obvious that the basic sentiments and ways of thinking that are involved in making sense of the world today have not changed as drastically as some thinkers propose.

Despite un-churching and the de-mystification of traditional religious worldviews our society, in many ways, continues to be religious. Processes of meaning-making are still influenced by myths and magical thinking. Religious language and notions of salvation and transcendence still play a role in how we perceive our lives and how we talk about the future. Even what is conventionally considered to be the secular world – areas outside the boundaries of religious institutions and the reach of traditional religious teachings – is marked by religion. Political ideologies, philosophies and value systems, social movements, public debates, pop culture and sports events, and mass-scale manifestations can all display religious elements and fulfil tasks associated with religion.

In the present thesis, my main interest lies in such manifestations of religion that can nestle everywhere in our culture. I shall explore what their function is and how they might serve as sources of meaning. In this study, I shall employ the term 'implicit religion' to describe such tacit, non-institutional religiosity and attempt to show that in its implicit form religion has a greater influence on our *zeitgeist* than we might imagine. The following questions will guide me: What are the characteristics of such implicit religion? In which kinds of phenomena is this form of religion housed? And, what might explain the continued presence of religious language and sentiments in secular culture?

0.2 TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGION

To Kevin Kelly, technology is the answer to the problem of meaning of which he speaks in the quote above. It is what defines our culture and steers our lives. As he puts it, technology will have to be the ideal that transcends the human and provides us with the beliefs, values and meanings that we seem to have lost with the rise of our modern way of life. In other words, Kelly speaks of technology as something that can function in ways equivalent to religion: it can serve as a force that guides us and provide us with an overarching frame of reference for orienting ourselves in the world. In fact, he describes technology as if it were a deity: it transcends us humans and we must submit to its will.

Indeed, today, technology is subject to strong faith, in many respects fulfilling functions attributed to deities. Contemporary attitudes towards technology and (applied) science are far from irreligious. In fact, the idea that these two somehow represent a victory over enchantment, magical thinking and blind faith can itself be seen as one the better examples of the continued prevalence of enchantment and blind faith in the modern era. In the chapters of this dissertation I shall argue that in contemporary culture, technology has religious meaning; it is regarded as an omnipotent force that can fulfil age-old dreams and bring humanity to new and better ways of life. It carries dreams of salvation, it shapes our beliefs and values and it is the anchor to which our ideas about what is important and meaningful are attached.

Occasionally, certain new technologies mobilise collective emotions and give rise to very hopeful, exhilarating discourses. A prime example of shared effervescence inspired by a technological novelty is the public excitement that followed the popularisation of the Internet in the early 1990s. The Internet had great appeal as a wonder and it became the subject of highly optimistic narratives about far-reaching social change. In the closing years of the 20th century, an avalanche of stories about the significance of the Internet for all aspects of society and humanity at large appeared in the international media and a variety of dedicated publications. These visions of the future mobilised the financial markets and gave rise to a phenomenal investment boom on the stock exchanges in North America and Europe. For a period of about seven years – between 1994 when the Internet browser *Netscape Navigator* was introduced and the deflation of the boom in Internet-related businesses on the international markets in the course of 2000 and 2001 – the Internet was the focal point of intense media hype. It became a popular culture phenomenon that channelled dreams of prosperity, boundless freedom, enlightenment and progress. The Internet, so went the argument in many

4

accounts of its potential, would act as the sort of powerful, god-like, transcendent force of which Kevin Kelly speaks in the quote above.

In this study, the public enthusiasm for the Internet throughout the 1990s will serve as a case study of how modern, secular societies attempt to create guiding values and ultimate meaning. The optimistic discourse about the Internet as it developed in the journalistic media and other publications was a setting where aspirations and goals for society were established, notions of what is of importance in the world today were articulated, and ideas about where humanity was headed were defined. My thesis is that not only was the popular craze that followed the introduction of the Internet an emotional, irrational matter, it was also a religious affair. It is the religious dimension of this phenomenon that interests me the most. It was not unusual for enthusiasts and commentators to allude to religious themes and to suggest that the Internet represented an omnipotent higher power that could take humanity beyond existing ways of living. It is striking that, in this secular setting, language and imagery familiar from religious traditions were often used and that on several occasions the Internet was literally presented as something to believe in. In other words, the optimistic stories about the Internet displayed a number of religious facets and they fulfilled the fundamentally religious task of providing a point to which ideas and beliefs could be anchored.

One can describe the excitement about the Internet as a manifestation of implicit religiosity. That is, while it was not affiliated to any specific religious institution, the discourse about the Internet nonetheless drew on religious ideas and language, functioning as a source of strong belief. The task at hand is to see what the particular appeal of the Internet was as an object of faith and how it could inspire the sort of emotional reaction that typified many stories about this new technology. What were the characteristics that allowed it to take on implicitly religious significance and in what way did the visions and narratives about the Internet serve as sources of meaning?

0.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation sets out to work in line with the programme of what is sometimes referred to as cultural sociology. In his book *The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology* (2003) the American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander describes the task of cultural sociology as follows: "To bring the unconscious cultural structures that regulate society into the light of the mind" (Alexander 2003: 3-4). To put it more simply, cultural sociology aims to shed light on the customs, collective agreements and ways of thinking and behaving that give form to societies. It is concerned with how people talk about things and phenomena around them, how they approach these and

what they mean to people. However, this thesis has a more specific focus: it looks to uncover some of the implicitly religious dimensions of contemporary culture and to explore how this kind of religiosity 'works'. That is, with the help of the case study – the Internet craze – I shall examine the ways and directions in which such basically religious aspirations as overcoming human uncertainties and transcending life as we know it were channelled. I shall set out to unearth the underlying motives and aspirations that fuelled the enthusiasm for the Internet and consider why the craze became such an emotional matter.

While cultural sociology is anchored in classical sociological theory, it draws on different areas of sociology – the sociology of religion, collective behaviour, law, politics, knowledge, science and technology, and so on – *and* it integrates several other disciplines, most notably hermeneutics, semiotics and psychology. In the current work, two main areas of study come together: sociology of religion and social studies of science and technology.

First of all, the perspective of sociology of religion is central to the study of spirituality and meaning-making. In researching the basic hypothesis that religiosity continues to play a role in parts of our culture that are generally described as secular, I relied on the question of what is the task rather than the essence of religion. In other words, the question was: what does religion typically do, and not: which kinds of phenomena, teachings or ideas must it contain. This functional approach took me to a line of thinking within the sociology of religion that is informed by ideas put forward by the early sociologists Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, as well as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

The backbone of the argument in this thesis is inspired by ideas concerning implicit religion put forward by the British religious studies scholar Edward Bailey in his *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society* (1997) and *The Secular Quest for Meaning in Life* (2002). Bailey's simple thesis is that what we know of religion in its traditional form – how it functions and what it can mean for society and individual lives – may help us in making sense of the secular world (Bailey 2002: 6). His daring claim is that anything in the world has the potential to be religious (Bailey 2002: 9), as long as it displays one of the following qualities: it provides shared beliefs, inspires commitment and functions as a source of meaning and values. In essence, the current dissertation will follow the same line of thinking. My basic assumption is that any phenomenon can be religious but, following the Dutch sociologist Meerten Ter Borg's work on implicit religion (Ter Borg 1996; 1999; 2004a), I would posit that this qualifier only applies to phenomena that hold a religious promise. By that I mean: they inspire notions about the existence of ideas or forces that transcend the individual,

they give rise to hope of great changes to life as we know it and they hold the promise of conquering human uncertainty and fragility.

Secondly, this dissertation has much affinity with branches of sociology and history that are concerned with the social construction of technology. Studies in science and technology from this perspective examine the role of social factors (politics, power relations, social hierarchies, gender, financial considerations, and so on) in the development and possible applications of technology. In addition, this area of scholarship explores the public reception of technological innovations: how new technologies are understood and what kinds of connotations and expectations are projected onto them. My analysis of the discourse about the Internet is influenced by a number of such studies that are concerned with collective visions and dreams of technology, or the technological "imaginaire", as the French media historian Patrice Flichy calls it in his *The Internet Imaginaire* (2007). Research in this area can give one access to ways of thinking about technology as an emotional and religious matter to which sweeping, hopeful narratives are often attached. For instance, in addition to Flichy's book, the Canadian sociologist Vincent Mosco's *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004) and the British sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005) both show that technology is far from being as rational and opposed to religion as one may think. These and other, similar studies indicate that historically technology has, in fact, often been associated with such religious notions as the sacred, the transcendent and the sublime.

0.4 SOURCES AND METHOD

In researching the case study, my objective was to sketch the expectations and excitement that the Internet inspired in the early days of its commercial application. As was said, this technology gave rise to an enthusiastic public discourse. Judging by coverage in international newspapers and magazines, from 1994 onwards the Internet enjoyed much attention from journalists, academics, politicians and business people of many different backgrounds; it seemed to be everywhere. How to study such an international, widely publicised popular craze or hype?

Certainly, there were individual Internet users and investors in related businesses who contributed to the heightened interest for the Internet. But the main engines behind what one can call the Internet hype were the popular media and various appearances and publications by specialists and enthusiasts. This dissertation is concerned with the public reception of the Internet as it displayed itself on the level of mass media rather than the individual experiences and sentiments of specific groups of Internet users. Therefore, the primary sources of the study on which this thesis relies are

publications concerned with the Internet: articles in the international journalistic press and a variety of manifestos, business manuals, books by futurologists, technology visionaries and ICT specialists, and (auto)biographies of those involved in the Internet industry.

While the Internet hype was originally an American phenomenon, news soon spread to Europe and other parts of the Western and westernised world, making it an international affair. Ideas about the Internet had a near-global reach via this new medium itself, and several American magazines and newspapers that reported about the Internet were distributed internationally. Moreover, local and national publications in Europe and elsewhere carried their own Internet stories and popular American books such as Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy* were sold worldwide and translated into other languages (including the Dutch *Nieuwe regels voor de nieuwe economi*e and the Estonian *Uue majanduse uued reeglid*; both translations published in 1999, respectively by Nieuwezijds and Tänapäev).

In reconstructing the public enthusiasm surrounding the Internet, the focus of this dissertation will lay on media reports and essays that appeared throughout the latter part of the 1990s in well-known magazines and newspapers with an international reach. I shall draw from both specialist magazines concerned with new technology and the business world (such as *PC World, Wired, Red Herring, Internet Week, Industry Standard, Forbes, Fortune, Money and Business Week)* as well as news-, general interest and fashion magazines from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist* and *The New York Times* to *Playboy, Harper's Bazaar, Rolling Stone, Billboard* and *Vanity Fair*. Additionally, in order to have some idea of the stories about the Internet that appeared in the European media, I shall also consider articles in a number of British periodicals and examine the discourse on the subject in the Dutch national newspapers.

Some of the publications just mentioned are perhaps somewhat unusual sources for research within the walls of a Religious Studies faculty. But in fact, the method on which this study relies is familiar to scholars of religion: interpretative manuscript research. In my attempt to make sense of the intense public interest for the Internet that marked the late 1990s, I shall sketch an image of this episode from the recent past on the basis of historical documents: texts by visionaries, accounts by commentators and visual representations of objects of admiration (the Internet itself and its heroes). If we wish to get a picture of the broad appeal of the Internet as a popular culture phenomenon, then coverage in glossy magazines and tabloids is as relevant as pieces by specialists or articles in the more serious periodicals.

The sources selected offer rich pickings for analyses of the narratives, imagery, symbols and rhetoric that constituted the public discourse about the

Internet. Such discourse analysis will take me to realms that traditionally belong to literary- and sign studies, or semiotics. As would be the case when trying to unravel the underlying message of a novel or the connotations of an allegoric representation, the questions to ask when interpreting the Internet hype are: Which strategies were employed to tell the story of the Internet? What motivated the use of specific language and imagery in its representations? Which underlying meanings were attached to this technology?

0.5 THIS BOOK

The eight chapters of this study are concerned with meaning-making within contemporary Western society. In each, the underlying ambition is to investigate the ways in which religiosity plays a role in predominantly secular settings.

The first three chapters form the theoretical framework of the dissertation. Chapter One is concerned with theories of religion and meaning-making in modern society. In this chapter I shall put forward a definition of religion and consider its position in relation to ideas about spirituality and religion outside established religious organisations that are current within sociology and religious studies. In Chapter Two the concept of ultimate meaning as developed by Luckmann in *The Invisible Religion* (1967) will be discussed. The chapter will focus on three themes that give form to notions of ultimate meaning in the West today: consumerism, technophilia – or the love of technology – and the ideal of progress. Chapter Three will concentrate on what the French sociologist Durkheim describes as collective effervescence, or excitement shared by groups of people, which can display itself in the context of festivals, fashion frenzies, crazes and media hypes. In that chapter I shall develop the thesis that such instances of excitement are important ways of creating meaning: they are a means of (re)affirming collective values and (re)defining what is important to groups.

The next four chapters will deal with the main case study of the dissertation: the public enthusiasm for the Internet. Chapter Four sketches the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s and examines the roots of the techno-utopian discourse that characterised its surrounding hype. The chapter will also touch on the historical context from which the hype emerged and consider the ways in which the Internet phenomenon could serve as a reaction to some of the post-Cold War uncertainties that played up in the early years of the decade. Chapter Five brings together a number of the hopeful stories that constituted the discourse about the Internet and it examines the religious dimensions of these narratives. Chapter Six will pay attention to the heroes and visionaries who played a central role in the

discourse about the Internet. The chapter will be concerned with how both the whiz kid programmers and the various enthusiasts who published about the Internet contributed to the public's fascination and how they legitimised the underlying implicitly religious attitudes towards this new technology. In Chapter Seven, I shall pay attention to the climax of the public interest for the Internet, the so-called dotcom boom on the financial markets in the very last years of the 20th century. Interestingly, this boom coincided with another highly publicised matter that was also concerned with information technology, namely the millennial computer problem. This phenomenon will be the subject of the Eighth Chapter, where I shall approach it as a dystopian counterpart of the excitement surrounding the Internet and the dotcom firms. I shall show that despite their difference both phenomena displayed religious sentiments and devotion to shared beliefs.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation will pull together the theoretical dimension of the first three chapters and the analyses in the chapters concerned with the case study. Using the Internet hype of the mid-1990s as the point of reference, I shall consider the evidence for the central thesis of this work that, even when it comes to secular settings, such as the realms of technology and commerce, religiosity in its implicit, non-institutional form continues to be a significant factor in modern-day meaning-making.

CHAPTER 1

SECULARISATION, AND RELIGION BEYOND ITS INSTITUTIONS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A familiar narrative that can be traced back to the Enlightenment tells us that reason and modern science have uncovered the naiveté and false myths of religion. As a result (at least as far as Western cultures are concerned) society has been subject to a steady and thoroughgoing process of secularisation. Religious cosmologies, so goes the argument, have been replaced by a new worldview that is anchored in the secular realm: science has acquired the task of accounting for the state of affairs in the world, technological prowess compensates for humanity's shortcomings and protects it against its fragility, and political ideologies, social ideals and material, economic concerns direct our sense of purpose and ethics. In short, the conclusion of this line of reasoning is that religion has become irrelevant to our lives. It is incongruent with our morals, it cannot help us to understand the world around us and it is thus bound to somehow fade away.

The declining appeal of the traditional religious institutions of the West and the official exclusion of religious influences from specific parts of society – most notably, the state and its judicial system – seem to confirm the ever-decreasing importance of religion in our society. Local and international censuses have indeed shown that, with the exception of the United States, the numbers for both church membership and regular attendance are dropping in almost all countries in the West (Greeley 2003; Halman, Luijkx, & Zundert 2005; Becker & De Hart 2006). Furthermore, the same surveys also indicate that traditional religious teachings and morals have less and less bearing on the daily lives of modern-day individuals. For instance, views of the Church regarding medical ethics, sexuality, the position of women in society and certain lifestyle choices can be incongruent with values that are current in our culture.

If we follow the more uncompromising versions of the secularisation thesis, then de-churching and dwindling clerical influence over social institutions and individual lives are tokens of a complete disappearance of religion from society *and* from matters relating to the human mind and psyche as well. In line with Weber's notion of an all-encompassing disenchantment of the world, this understanding of secularisation implies the

complete disappearance of the sacred, magical and the mysterious from the world. Inherent to Weber's disenchantment thesis is the idea that the characteristically modern scientific-intellectual mindset is essentially opposed to religious ways of thinking and that, with increasing rationalisation, religion cannot but vanish from the world (Weber 1989: 13). Milder versions of the thesis hold that in the near future, rather than becoming extinct, religion will be more like a rare species. The British sociologists Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce follow this line of thought in their theses that in modern society religion has little social significance. Its public function is negligible and its influence on the dominant systems of meaning reduced to a minimum (Wilson 1982: 149-150; Bruce 2002: 3). Only at society's margins – in personal beliefs – does it persist. Accordingly, religion is conceptualised as a curious personal pastime that is a matter of subjective experience whose continued existence in the private realm is an outdated remnant of a more irrational era than ours.

But there is more to religion than its traditional organisations and their teachings. While these may indeed have lost their one-time social standing, it is reasonable to assume that religiosity, parallel to the changes in our society, has also undergone alterations and that it may have taken on new forms. In the current study I shall explore territories that are far removed from what is usually referred to as 'religion' in our daily parlance and consider the possibility that in the course of de-churching and demystification of religious cosmologies religion has found other outlets than its established organisations. The central point of interest will be how religion displays itself in different facets of our society: in matters that fascinate us, things that we value, people, images and ideas that we worship collectively and objects that form a counterpoint to our fragility. Some of such things may seem banal and inconsequential or even irreverent of religious tradition. One might be inclined to find that they are therefore not up to scratch when it comes to providing 'true' existential and moral guidelines. However, to claim that what is available to us outside the boundaries of traditional, official religious rituals and teachings is by definition of lesser value or depth is to bring the efforts to understand contemporary sources of meaning to a dead-end.

A more fruitful approach is to perceive of religion not as some exceptional domain of society that has become an irrelevant anachronism but as an integral part of our existence. By doing so, one can employ the concept of religion as a useful analytical tool in efforts to understand contemporary sources of meaning and consider the presence of religious themes, language and functions in areas of culture that are not associated with religious institutions. In order for such an analysis of the religious facets and functions of phenomena in the lay world to be successful one first needs to surmount

the obstacle that is the identification of religion with its traditional institutions and then redefine the concept accordingly. After a critical sketch of the thesis that religion is of little significance today, I shall work towards a concept of religion that can grant insight into contemporary systems of meaning. The term implicit religion will be discussed and related to a number of other concepts that are also used in reference to what is variously described as post-Christian (Davie, Heelas & Woodhead 2003; Houtman & Aupers 2007), post-traditional (Hervieu-Léger 2000, Houtman & Mascini 2002; Hume & McPhillips 2006) and non-institutional religiosity or spirituality (Besecke 2005; Dillon & Wink 2003; Hjelm 2008; Karaflogka 2003).

1.2 WAYS OF SEEING – THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGION

In his book *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (1967) Luckmann regrets the tendency of his contemporaries to identify religion with organised congregations and to conclude (mistakenly) that with the decline of the churches modern society has become non-religious. In this book and in later publications Luckmann's position is that the fate of religion today should be discussed in more nuanced terms than the equation: 'fewer churchgoers = less religion'. Since the late 1960s, when *The Invisible Religion* was first published, an extensive debate about secularisation has emerged and by now the creed that religion has little or even no social significance has lost its one-time standing. The secularisation thesis has been disputed on several grounds but the central point of criticism often reflects Luckmann's complaint: that it is rooted in a specific understanding of religion, which focuses on monotheistic traditions of the book and the experiences of Western Europe in particular.

Today, the most striking arguments against the secularisation thesis are provided by the rise of radical orthodoxy in different world religions and the extremely fierce response to perceived disrespect to religious teachings. In this context, in his book *The Revenge of God* (1995) the French sociologist Gilles Kepel speaks of a fearsome return of religion. Certainly since the al-Qaeda attacks in the United States in September 2001 'the rise of Islam' has been a dominant topic of discussion in the press and in politics all over the world. In many European countries the position of Muslim migrants in society and various religious prescriptions related to the Islam have become some of the more important matters to preoccupy public debates. Moreover, the great public attention for events such as the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 and the highly publicised interest taken by certain celebrities in Buddhism and the Kabbalah also attest to the persistence of religion in Western popular culture. The continued presence of religious imagery, faith

and controversy in our society is also underlined repeatedly in the daily news: in the measure of so-called 'god talk' in the debates leading up to the American presidential elections of 2008, in the occasional Christian pro-life demonstrations, in controversies fuelled by bans on wearing religious symbols in public office, and in the late 2006 news that the youth organisation of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Christian party, the SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) sued the American pop singer Madonna for blasphemy after a performance where she posed in a crucifixion scene.[1]

But there is a more fundamental point to be made against the thesis that religion is becoming a negligible social phenomenon. At its heart lies the early twentieth century French sociologist Émile Durkheim's conviction that the dominant types of religion of his day were likely to be superseded by systems of beliefs that are defined by other kinds of rituals and sacred objects than its conventional (Christian) manifestations. In the concluding chapter of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2001 [1912]) he posits that in the future "[religion] seems called upon to transform itself rather than to disappear" (Durkheim 2001: 326). Durkheim's argument in this work is that while the specific manifestations of religion can vary depending on historical and cultural circumstances, there is such a thing as a basic, 'elementary' form of religion. His thesis is that the essence of religion is to be found in the 'primitive' religions of the Australian Aboriginal tribes; in their faith and customs he sees the simplest and the most unaffected expressions of religion that enable him to make general statements about it. Whatever one might make of such a notion of pure religion or of universal claims about it, Durkheim's approach makes it clear that it is important to differentiate between specific *religions* (for instance, Christianity and its institutions) and *religion.*

Several authors who have questioned the validity of the secularisation thesis have made this distinction and shown that religion need not take the form of an institution (Ter Borg 1991, 1999, 2004a; Hanegraaff 1999). For instance, the Dutch historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff, describes *a* religion (his example is the Dutch Reformed Church) as an institutionalised "sub-category" of religion in general. Together with spirituality (as well as individualised New Age systems of meaning) it is but one in a broad variety of religious expression available to people (Hanegraaff 1999: 147). In the same vein, Ter Borg distinguishes between five possible "modalities of

---

1 Algemeen Dagblad. (2006, 02.09.). Minister Donner laat Madonna met rust in de Arena. *Algemeen Dagblad,* p. 20; NRC Handelsblad. (2006, 02.09.). Jongeren SGP gaan Madonna aanklagen. *NRC Handelsblad* p. 7; Trouw. (2006, 02.09.). Aanklacht om act Madonna SGP-jongeren. *Trouw* p. 1; NRC Handelsblad. (2007, 30.01). OM: geen vervolging Madonna aan kruis. *NRC Handelsblad,* p. 9.

religiosity": official, institutionalised religions, alternative religions, sub-dogmatic religiosity, optional religiosity and implicit religiosity (Ter Borg 2004a: 112). Each of these is defined by certain kinds of belief, objects of faith, levels of commitment, degrees of institutionalisation, their socio-cultural locus, and so on. By highlighting these different categories of religiosity, Ter Borg shows that religion in the modern world is a diffuse phenomenon, not always linked to religious institutions or traditions. This means that the declining influence of the church on society and individual lives need not automatically imply that religion as such is ceasing to be relevant. Rather, one can posit that under the conditions of modernity religion has been subject to metamorphoses.

According to Luckmann (and those who have been inspired by his work), what some perceive as secularisation is, in fact, a "profound change in the 'location' of religion" (Luckmann 1990: 127). Religion is conceptualised as a migrant shape-shifter that can transform and relocate to new territories, including areas beyond its historical institutions (Luckmann 1967; 1990). A transfer takes place: phenomena that are conventionally described as 'secular' become charged with meanings and tasks previously associated with specific religious traditions, objects and environments, and religiosity moves to realms outside the domain of traditional religious organisations. One can distinguish between two interpretations of the precise nature of the kind of 'migration' of religion that is taking place in contemporary society.

One view echoes a thesis to which I referred earlier in this chapter: that religion is undergoing a process of privatisation and becoming a marginal phenomenon. Similarly to Bryan Wilson's view that religion is retreating to the domain of individual experiences, this view takes its lead from the conviction that religion is increasingly becoming an individual, subjective affair. The specific contents of an individual's religiosity are seen as a matter of personal choice, rather than determined by dogmas or other outside influences. Furthermore, as Luckmann posits, in modern society, "religious themes originate from experiences in the 'private sphere'" (Luckmann 1967: 103). They are to be found in the family, the romantic ideal, the quest for personal growth and fulfilment, the social mobility ethos, and so on. These aspirations and experiences are sacralised and articulated as important values and beliefs. Subjective sentiments and judgement form the most important moral guidelines.

However, although it is a matter of personal experience, this kind of religiosity is far from socially marginal, as Wilson and others would have it. It is attributed a considerable role in contemporary culture and in the day-to-day lives of individuals, and it is occasionally embedded in dedicated organisations or movements. For instance, as the British scholars Paul

Heelas, Linda Woodhead and their co-authors Seel, Szerszynski and Tusting show in the book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005), themes of self-exploration and valorisation of personal experience have found organisational backing from the kinds of spiritual and alternative healing practices that are often bundled together under the umbrella-term 'New Age'. They point out that while such groups and organisations are yet to have serious social impact, there is evidence of the growing presence of subjective religiosity and its major themes in popular culture at large. It is in the realm of "purchasing culture" (consumer goods and services) in particular that subjective spirituality is gaining ground (Heelas et al. 2005: 68). Products and services associated with healthcare and personal hygiene, cosmetics, specialist literature, spas and the so-called wellness centres, fitness, spiritual awareness courses, as well as general interest magazines and film and television all serve as carriers of spiritual and religious themes in contemporary Western culture (Heelas et al. 2005: 68-73).

According to the second line of thought, the privatisation and subjectivisation of religion are not the only possible outcomes of the processes of reorganisation that one can detect in the contemporary religious landscape. In addition to what Heelas and Woodhead describe as "subjective-life spirituality" (Heelas et al. 2005: 5), individuals pin their quests for meaning to countless social phenomena that lay outside the immediate personal sphere. In our culture, celebrities, consumer goods, technological innovations and political ideals are occasionally placed on a special pedestal and granted a superhuman status; pop music events and sports manifestations can become effervescent collective affairs; and dreams of progress and enlightenment are the objects of strong, shared faith.

A much-studied case of religiosity in popular culture is the world of football (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997; Ter Borg 1996). Another well-known example of religious sentiments, language and rituals present in mass-scale events is the collective bereavement after the death of Lady Diana Spencer in England and across the world in 1997 (Harris 1999; Parrot & Harré 2001; Richards, Wilson & Woodhead 1999). In the Netherlands, a similar case arose in 2004 after the death of the popular singer André Hazes when spectacular commemorative events took place (De Hart 2005; Van de Ven 2004). Finally, as David Nye shows in his *American Technological Sublime* (1994), the parades, banquets and jubilees organised throughout the history of the United States to celebrate such technological achievements as the telegraph, the railroads and the completion of the lake Erie Canal in 1825 were also charged with religious meaning.

1.3 IMPLICIT RELIGION

Thus far I have established that religion is not limited to specific historical institutions or notions of the supernatural, and can thus exist in different modes and locations. Contrary to theories that see religion as an isolated, marginal phenomenon, it is, in fact, intricately woven into all strands of the social fabric. In *The Meanings of Social Life* (2003) Jeffrey Alexander develops the idea that even in the modern, technological culture our interpretations of reality very much rely on religious ways of thinking:

> We need myths if we are to transcend the banality of material life. We need narratives if we are to make progress and experience tragedy. We need to divide the sacred from the profane if we are to pursue the good and protect ourselves from evil. (Alexander 2003: 4)

Together with many other themes, transcendence, the sacralisation of certain objects and sweeping myths play an important role in modern-day meaning-making. Sometimes, as is the case with traditional faith communities, rituals and beliefs that accommodate the needs of which Alexander speaks are indeed explicitly tagged as 'religious'. In addition, various newer groups ranging from the Osho-Rajneesh movement to the Raelians and the Church of Scientology have clearly profiled themselves as religious. But on other occasions, religiosity can have a nebulous existence in realms other than established faith groups, and manifest itself through certain phenomena and discourses that we might not immediately recognise as religious. A useful label for this kind of diffuse and non-institutionalised form of religiosity is 'implicit religion', one of the modalities listed by Ter Borg in his inventory of different kinds of religiosity that was mentioned above.

   The concept of implicit religion represents a shift in the understanding of what religion is and where in society its proper domain may be. Originally coined by the British scholar Edward Bailey, the term has its roots in Bailey's analyses of a number of matters conventionally not associated with religion from the perspective of concepts and ways of behaving that are familiar to him both as a member of the clergy and a scholar of religion. In Bailey's *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society* (1997), the motives and 'strategy' of the implicit religion approach are articulated as follows: "We may gain in our understanding of some of the phenomena of secular life, if we compare them with what we already know of religious life" (Bailey 1997: 16). In that manner, Bailey treats the rituals, shared values and the codes and customs of, for instance, the English country pub to analogies with the church. He conceptualises religion as a system of meanings that can give existential security to individuals and integrate groups by forming objects of shared

focus. The concept incorporates commitment to certain values and activities, and the creation of 'ultimate', existential meanings, or what is described as: "intensive concerns with extensive effects" (Bailey 1997: 8-9). The qualifier 'implicit' is used in order to disassociate the term religion from specific traditions and denominations, and to create a more value-neutral analytic concept. Notably, while this form of religiosity is not embedded within organised, 'explicitly' religious contexts, Bailey observes that it is sometimes channelled through *explicit* religion (Bailey 1997: 7). For instance, references to deities, the use of existing religious vocabulary and allusions to Biblical imagery in secular settings can point at underlying and perhaps unintentional religious sentiments.

Researchers have used Bailey's term both in their explorations of noteworthy events, emotions and social developments *and* in order to trace the tracks of religion in the modern world. Several examples of religiosity in unexpected, secular contexts have come to light. Analyses of practices and beliefs involved in health care, medical ethics, social work, science, political ideologies, environmental issues and popular culture have revealed similarities between them and the rituals, myths and ideals of established religious traditions.[2] In this manner, one frequently encounters explicitly religious terminology (heaven, paradise, evangelist, guru, faith, holy grail, and so on) in discourses about science, the business world, consumerism and political movements, and one can recognise references to deities, spiritual leaders and saviours, worship, etc. But if one wishes to arrive at a satisfactory definition of (implicit) religion that can assist in an analysis of how meaning is constructed in the modern world, then it is important to look further than similarities with language and customs familiar from religious traditions. One also needs to pay attention to the underlying significance of a particular object of study: the kinds of sentiments that it inspires and the sorts of questions or needs to which it might provide answers. In other words, it is important to ask which tasks the social phenomenon in question might fulfil and to approach it from the perspective of the so-called functional definition of religion.

Put forward by Durkheim and developed further by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973 [1966]) among others, the functional

---

2 For examples see: Ter Borg, M. B. (1996). *Het geloof der goddelozen*. Baarn: Ten Have; Grainger, R. (2002). *Healthcare and Implicit Religion.* London: Middlesex University Press; Menard, G. (2004). The Moods of Marianne: Of *Hijabs*, Nikes, Implicit Religion and Post-Modernity. *Implicit Religion. 7*(3). 246-255; Moss, B. (2005). Thinking Outside the Box: Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education and Practice. *Implicit Religion. 8*(1). 40-52; Nesti, A. (1990) Implicit religion: The issues and dynamics of a phenomenon. *Social Compass 37*(4). 423-438.

definition of religion is concerned with the workings and objectives of what we consider to be religious. To use Ter Borg's wording, in comparison to the substantial approach that ties the definition of religion to notions of the supernatural, the emphasis of the functional definition is on what religion does, rather than what it is or should be (Ter Borg 1999: 402). Accordingly, in his eyes the defining function of religion is its promise of solving what he calls the basically religious problem of human limitations and fragility (Ter Borg 1999: 406). From this perspective any phenomenon that is seen as an opposite to humanity's essential vulnerability and serves as a source of ultimate meaning for its existence can be described as religious. If we follow Geertz's well-known definition in his 'Religion As a Cultural System', then the task of religion is to "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order of existence" (Geertz 1973: 90). That is, religion's key function is to provide a convincing framework of beliefs and sentiments, which can help us to understand the world and make sense of our experiences.

In Durkheim's work religion has the additional task of anchoring collective identity in a shared vision of the world and thus creating social cohesion. As Durkheim sees it, the main purpose of religion is to "make us act, help us live… [help us] to cope with the difficulties of existence or to defeat them" (Durkheim 2001: 311). In summary, if we define religion from the functional perspective, then it can be described as a system of values and (ultimate) meanings that instils humans with a sense of belonging and gives purpose to their existence. With the concept of *implicit* religion one can focus specifically on the presence of such functions in secular phenomena.

In his article 'Some Ideas on Wild Religion'*,* Ter Borg gives several examples of implicit religiosity: the devotion to football and to celebrities, the collective mourning after the death of Diana Spencer in England and road-side shrines for victims of traffic accidents (Ter Borg 2004a: 116). All these contain analogies with official religions: certain rituals, vocabulary and rhetoric, and the status attributed to teachers, leaders and objects of worship. Occasionally, observers may even describe such events as 'pseudo-' or 'quasi-religious' but they are strongly rooted in the secular world. According to Ter Borg, the characteristic signs of the sort of religiosity implied in events like the commemoration of Diana are the following: charismatic feelings, collective exhilaration, a sense of common cause and the elevation of the object of fascination to a special status (Ter Borg 2004a: 116). Often, the key function of this kind of religiosity is to bring individuals closer together and to (re)articulate what is important and valuable to them personally and as a collective.

However, it is clear from Ter Borg's argument that not all activities, events or sets of beliefs that function as such anchors of meaning are necessarily religious. Hobbies, life styles or political convictions can serve this purpose without being religious. In his concept of religion Ter Borg adds an important substantive qualifier to the functional definition. As he sees it, the factor that defines implicit religion as *religious* is the notion that an exceptional object is involved that transcends human capacity and has an absolute, unquestionable value (Ter Borg 1999: 401). This may be a celebrity, an idea or an object that has become a 'larger-than-life' point of focus in a quest for meaning. Such an object is somehow thought to rise above ordinary human experience: it is credited with "super-human" qualities and can function as an answer to the religious problem by counterbalancing human fragility and instilling the belief that one is in the presence of something greater and stronger than oneself (Ter Borg 1999: 403). This feature is particularly noticeable in discourses about technology, where science and technological achievements are attributed the capacity to transform the human condition and even facilitate transcendence to a new kind of existence. In the chapters to come I shall focus on this specific manifestation of implicit religion.

If we define religion as a system of shared values and beliefs that functions as a source of (ultimate) meaning and refers to some force, object or idea that transcends the human as its anchor, then we can speak of implicit religion when this source of meaning is located outside the boundaries of traditional faith-based institutions. While this concept refers specifically to non-institutionalised forms of religion, implicit religion is not by definition without institutional backing. Lay institutions frequently provide a framework for expressions of implicit religiosity – the financial and commercial markets, political parties, the scientific community, the medical world and the entertainment industry are some of the examples. The term implicit religion can be applied to phenomena where the following are displayed: shared convictions and (utopian) beliefs, trust in the power of certain objects or individuals to bring about radically new (and better) ways of existence, attribution of a superhuman status to objects, and collective excitement about the objects or ideas in question.

1.4 A JUNGLE OF TERMS

Implicit religion belongs to a family of terms that have been used by social scientists in reference to the (often tacit) religious facets of the secular world since the 1960s. One can distinguish between two major groups of concepts current in studies of the relocation of the religious in the West. Firstly, scholars have qualified 'religion' with a number of different adjectives that

convey an imperceptible or diffuse presence: in addition to implicit religion, invisible (Luckmann 1967), civil (Bellah 1970), popular (Chidester 2005), quasi (Hunt 2002; 2005) and secular religion (Chidester 2006; Hanegraaff 1999) are the better known terms. In these instances, the word 'religion' continues to be used but the stress is on its unexpected manifestations as a popular culture or socio-political phenomenon. Secondly, authors have chosen to replace 'religion' with concepts, such as (self)spirituality (Hanegraaff 1999; Heelas & Woodhead 2005), magic, (re)enchantment, and sacralisation (Alexander 2003; Aupers 2004; Bar-Haim 1997; Szerszynski 2005). Here, the associations with the institutions and traditional teachings that the term religion can awaken are discarded and vocabulary is employed that focuses on the specific functions and practices of a given manifestation of religion.

The jungle of terms current in this field of research calls for a consideration of their respective meanings. How are these notions employed and what might be the motive behind choosing a particular term or adjective? What is the position of the term implicit religion in relation to other similar concepts just mentioned? Without wishing to enter a polemic about 'the correct' word for the practices of making sense of life in the contemporary world, let us make an inventory of some analytical tools available for studies of meaning-making in our day and consider which concepts best suit which kinds of contexts.

1.4.1 Invisible and civil religion

The concepts of invisible and civil religion can be regarded as one of the first landmarks in studies of the relocation of religion to areas outside the realm of traditional religious institutions. These two terms – respectively formulated by Luckmann and the American sociologist Robert N. Bellah – point at scholarly interests that are quite closely related. Writing in the second half of the 1960s both Luckmann and Bellah were concerned with two connected matters: the central sources of order and meaning in modern Western society and the possible metamorphoses of religion in a period of widespread de-churching. Along these lines, Luckmann's guiding question in *The Invisible Religion* (1967) is how structures of meaning other than the ones provided by the Church succeed in projecting cohesion to everyday social life. As he puts it, "What is it that secularization has brought about in a way of a socially objectivated cosmos of meaning?" (Luckmann 1967: 40). That is, rather than assuming that secularisation has resulted in a vacuum of meaning, Luckmann sets out to explore how the lay world fulfils the basically religious function of meaning-making. In a similar manner, Bellah's focus in "Civil Religion in America" (first published in the same year as *The Invisible Religion* – 1967) is

on the fulfilment of fundamentally religious functions by lay institutions and collective myths current in public life. The key question in his argument in "Civil Religion in America" is: how does religiosity display itself in a context that has explicitly been declared secular – the American political system.

Both concepts mirror the distinction between *religion* and *a religion* that I highlighted earlier. The assumption on which they are built is that there is such a thing as a basic, undefined form of religiosity, which can have different manifestations depending on the cultural and historical setting. According to Luckmann's definition, religiosity is an essential anthropological quality. He regards the human ability to transcend pure biological existence and to reason at meta-level as a basic, non-specific form of religion present in all humans. To Luckmann, the fact that we, humans create meaning and construct worldviews makes us religious beings by definition (Luckmann 1967: 78). In Bellah's essay too, the notion of "an ultimate and universal reality" is key (Bellah 1970: 186). He conceives of religion as a moral guideline and as something that functions as a binding element for societies. As Bellah points out, his notion of civil religion refers to Rousseau's liberal version of Christian ethics and teachings, which includes references to god, an idea of an afterlife, reward of virtue, punishment of vice and exclusion of religious intolerance. Bellah regards his case study – American patriotism – as a specific manifestation of this more general idea of religiosity.

One can describe both authors' understanding of religion as follows: it is an instrument of meaning-making that can nestle imperceptibly in a variety of secular phenomena. With his term *invisible* religion Luckmann refers to the hidden nature of this sort of religiosity and he suggests that it is primarily a private rather than public affair, something that has literally withdrawn to the intimate sphere of the home. For instance, he points out that there are religious elements present in 'familism' (the veneration of the family unit) and intimate relationships, the cult of the individual and the emphasis on personal development. As Luckmann sees it, with the relocation of the religious to the private sphere, religion is increasingly becoming a bricolage of different symbols and themes that each individual constructs for themselves (Luckmann 1967: 99). From *Playboy* magazine and its advice columns to lyrics of pop songs, a variety of 'secondary institutions' can function as carriers of religiosity and all sorts of different experiences and values can also have religious connotations (Luckmann 1967: 104).

In a similar vein, to Bellah, American civil religion is a particular expression of universal religiosity that has found a host in American patriotism and is articulated through the American experience (Bellah 1970: 179). Accordingly, certain events, places or persons that are important in

American mythology have acquired a religious status as the transcending guarantees of the meanings and values of a particular worldview. Bellah indicates that civil religion draws parallels between biblical tales and details from American history. In consequence, veterans' cemeteries, Memorial Day, presidential inaugurations, the American Way of Life and so on, are all associated with religious themes, such as martyrdom, charismatic leaders and evangelism, the Promised Land, and virtue and enlightenment. However, Bellah argues that civil religion should not be identified with specific traditions or denominations. He regards civil religion as a secularised version of traditional (Judeo-Christian) religious thought – the references made to familiar religious mythology are to be seen as rhetorical devices that are effective in articulating the shared beliefs, norms and values of the American state. He envisions American civil religion as a collective sentiment or frame of reference that overarches the different faith groups of the country and serves as the basis of a common worldview.

The common denominator of the terms civil, invisible and implicit religion is their applicability to non-institutionalised forms of religion. All three allow us to speak of the religious facets of the secular world. However, the concept of implicit religion has some advantages in comparison to the other two. Bellah's civil religion has two major limitations. Firstly, while he may refer to it as a 'universal form of religion', it is, in fact, primarily a mainstreaming of Christian concepts in a more neutral form. In the case of implicit religion, analyses can move further than references to or analogies with any existing religion tradition. For instance, if Bellah describes a generalised notion of god as the core of American civil religion (Bellah 1970: 168-175), then in the case of implicit religion such a concept as a divine creature does not play a defining role. Secondly, with his civil religion Bellah focuses solely on matters related to the state and its citizens and he thus limits the scope of the study of non-institutionalised religiosity to this specific area.

Luckmann's 'invisible' religion' is also problematic. His use of the term may give a wrong impression about many phenomena that fulfil a religious function, for he suggests that one is dealing with something undetectable and disguised. In fact, in the preface to *The Invisible Religion* he mentions that in an earlier draft of the book he speaks of 'missing', rather than invisible religion. That is, he has in mind a kind of religion that is somehow absent or lost. But one can think of several examples of religiosity in the secular culture that are quite obvious and clearly present. For instance, popular crazes, which focus on consumer goods or mass-scale pop music events are far from inconspicuous. Not only are these occurrences the objects of much public attention, the similarities between conventional religious expression and the

sentiments inspired can be quite obvious and recognised as (quasi) religious by those involved. Possible religious elements can indeed be obfuscated in such cases but rather than being 'invisible', they are suggested or implied.

With whatever terms one may nuance the word religion, it remains charged with connotations linked to the traditional religions. When speaking of religion in the context of the secular world, some may be offended, some may see it as a sly threat on secular values, and others still may be inclined to declare the object of study old-fashioned. Moreover, explanations of the distinction between religion and institutionalised religions are admittedly complex and inelegant. Instead, in the more recent research authors have chosen to bypass the word religion altogether and to employ vocabulary that focuses on the specific functions and practices of a given manifestation of religion. Today, spirituality, sacralisation and magic are the most frequently used terms in discussions of modern Western, non-institutionalised religion. In what follows, I shall look at how they are employed in analyses of the religious dimensions of contemporary, secular society.

1.4.2 Spirituality

In his introduction to *A Sociology of Spirituality* (2007) the British scholar Kieran Flanagan observes a turn to spirituality in our culture at large and he points at the growing interest for it within sociology. He is not alone in spotting this trend. From Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (1998) and Wade Clark Roof's *The Spiritual Marketplace* (1999) to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005), Christopher Partridge's *Re-enchantment of the West* (2005) and Gordon Lynch's *The New Spirituality* (2007), spirituality has been the subject of a number of serious sociological studies. These and several other publications within this field of scholarship commonly speak of the growing importance of the kind of "religious individualism" about which Durkheim speculated in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

If Durkheim anticipated the possible rise of "individual religions" that would "consist entirely of internal and subjective states and would be freely constructed by each of us" (Durkheim 2001: 45), then in contemporary scholarship the term 'spirituality' often refers precisely to such subjective religiosity where personal experience and the valorisation of the self play a key role. For instance, in *The Spiritual Revolution* Heelas, Woodhead and their co-authors echo Luckmann's idea of the privatisation of religion and define spirituality as something that is above all an intimate matter, a set of practices and beliefs concerned with individual quests for meaning and self-knowledge. They associate it with the cultivation of personal identities and

efforts to make contact with what individuals experience as their inner depth (Heelas et al. 2005: 4).

In a similar manner, the definition offered in *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* also reflects the notion of spirituality as an essentially subjective experience. Spirituality is described as an individual, inward-looking journey, which focuses on the development of the human being. Material and external affairs are set aside and institutional contexts are deemed irrelevant (Hinnells 1997: 495). The role of the individual both as a source of religious themes and as the main authority in the formation of values and meanings is emphasised. In his article 'New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion' (1999), Hanegraaff too describes spirituality as "*a private interpretation*" of systems of meaning available to individuals (Hanegraaff 1999: 149). As he points out, spiritual activity can be located within the boundaries of existing religious traditions or, as is the case with the New Age movement, distinctive new forms of spirituality can arise (Hanegraaff 1999: 147; 149). But always, the defining facet of spirituality is what Hanegraaff refers to as "individual manipulation of various symbolic systems" (Hanegraaff 1999: 147). That is, spirituality is an idiosyncratic creation that reflects individual needs and choices.

While spirituality has been and continues to be a significant feature of all religious traditions, several commentators have observed that modern-day spirituality is no longer anchored exclusively to these traditions (Holmes 2007: 24; Houtman & Aupers 2007: 205). In fact, contemporary conceptualisations often emphasise the *difference* between religion and spirituality and they explicitly classify the latter as something other than religion. For instance, in the account of his research on spirituality in the United States in the late 1980s in *The Spiritual Marketplace*, Roof observes that while his respondents could often not define 'spirituality' with clarity, they described it as markedly divergent from religion (Roof 1999:81). This idea of spirituality is exemplified by such phrases as 'spiritual but not religious' (Fuller 2001; Hill et al. 2000: 61) and it tends to hinge on a notion that spirituality is the opposite of the hierarchies, establishment, rules and constraints that religion represents.

In *The Spiritual Revolution* Heelas and the others point to this distinction as the key to understanding contemporary spirituality. They speak of "subjective-life spirituality" *versus* "life-as-religion", and distinguish between personal experiences and insights on the one hand and inherited religious traditions and dogmas on the other. While the latter is described as an external framework that imposes meaning on people and prescribes specific ways of living, the former – subjective-life spirituality – represents greater individual freedom and places individuals, their judgement and

choices on pedestals (Heelas et al. 2005: 5). As Heelas and several other authors point out, rather than conforming to fixed morals and teachings, spirituality is concerned with uninhibited exploration of one's own personality and needs. It focuses on the validity and importance of the individual's feelings, experiences and intuitions, and on authenticity and originality (Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman & Aupers 2007; Hunt 2003; Knoblauch 2008).

In short, contemporary usage of the term spirituality often denotes a kind of personalised religiosity that is uncoupled from its institutionalised forms. Furthermore, as Heelas and the others remark, in common parlance spirituality is usually understood as commitment to profound values and truths that belong to the earthly realm, rather than otherworldly domains (Heelas et al. 2005: 6). That is, the 'contents' of what people experience as spiritual are not necessarily defined by references to divinities, nor do certain other objects have a monopoly on the tag 'spiritual'. This understanding of spirituality rhymes well with implicit religion. Firstly, implicit religion is similarly concerned with religiosity outside official religious organisations. Secondly, both concepts refer primarily to phenomena of the world around us and are not necessarily defined by an association with notions of the divine or supernatural. In both cases, religious sentiments are projected to things of *this* world with the underlying idea that any object has potential to be regarded as religious.

Indeed, as the Canadian psychologist of religion James Gollnick shows in his article 'Is Implicit Religion Spirituality in Disguise?' (2003), there is some overlap between the concepts of implicit religion and spirituality. He argues that many contemporary forms of spirituality can be called implicitly religious: they have many of the same functions as religion but they are not associated with any specific religious organisation (Gollnick 2003: 156). He mentions psychotherapy, self-help books, and courses and meetings designed to foster personal growth or to overcome addiction and behavioural problems. Like other implicitly religious phenomena, they are concerned with finding purpose and meaning in life and (re)articulating values and beliefs. Other manifestations of spirituality such as those involved in New Age or the ecology movement might also refer to certain concepts or values that transcend everyday human existence.

However, while spirituality can be a feature of certain implicitly religious phenomena, not all manifestations of implicit religiosity display the kind of reflexivity or emphasis on individual quests for meaning that is usually associated with spirituality. For instance, when it comes to mass-scale demonstrations and festivals, popular devotion to sports and celebrities or hopes projected onto science and technology, as a rule, no conscious effort is

made to reflect on individuals' place in the world, their well-being, development and fulfilment or their subjectivity and private experiences. To the contrary, many implicitly religious matters are concerned with shared experiences and emotions. This kind of religiosity is often anchored not to the self but to the collective or to some common belief or ideal, such as progress, the power of science and technology, the consumer ethic and so on. So, one can posit that (as is the case with other forms of religion) spirituality and implicit religion *can* overlap and that the term implicit religion *can* but does not always include spirituality. Spirituality is simply one possible facet of the broader terrain that the term 'implicit religion' covers.

1.4.3. Sacralisation

In contemporary writing about spirituality one often encounters the term 'the sacralisation of the self'. For instance, Heelas and others speak of "the sacralisation of unique subjective lives" (Heelas et al. 2005: 6). The Spanish sociologist José Casanova recognises the "sacralisation of humanity" in the valorisation of human rights and freedoms as the ultimate values of modern society (Casanova 1999: 21). According to Luckmann, the forms of religion that dominate the modern 'sacred universe' are typified by "this-worldly transcendence" that is linked to the "sacralised self" (Luckmann, 1990: 135). The Dutch sociologists Aupers and Houtman, too, refer to the "sacralisation of the self" when describing the valorisation of the individual as the source of 'higher', 'deeper', 'true' or 'authentic' knowledge and experience (Aupers & Houtman 2006: 205). In all these examples, 'sacralisation' refers to the attribution of a select status and a range of special qualities to the individual, one's inner experience and self-knowledge. As a sacred object, the self is distinguished from ordinary, profane things. As Aupers and Houtman show, the self is deemed to be sacred because it – unlike anything else – can provide knowledge of true reality (Aupers & Houtman 2006). It thereby becomes an unquestionable, fixed value that can guide individuals in their quest to make sense of existence.

The notion of the self as sacred points to something that typifies the relocation of religion in contemporary Western society: as religiosity moves outside the boundaries of its institutions and traditions, sacred qualities are projected onto matters of the lay world. In addition to the individual and his liberty, social and political ideals (such as, democracy, equality, freedom and progress), the family, the romantic ideal, and science and technology are also examples of secular phenomena that are subject to sacralisation. In other words, the sacred is not limited to specific religious traditions and their particular objects of veneration, nor has it disappeared with the rise of the rational-scientific mindset of modernity.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim explicitly disputes the notion that modern times no longer accommodate the sacred, arguing that: "now, as in the past, we observe society constantly creating new sacred things" (Durkheim 2001: 160). According to Durkheim, the sacred is not an innate trait of *only* specific phenomena but a product of collective projection of specific characteristics onto people, activities, places and objects in the world around them (Durkheim 2001: 174). It is public opinion that sacralises and, as he points out, make matters that belong to the secular world – to civic and public life – come to be regarded as sacred. To Durkheim, these are phenomena that a group holds in high regard by consensus and whose status as such cannot be denied or doubted (Durkheim 2001: 161). His example is the sacralisation of the ideals of the French Revolution: "In the general enthusiasm of that period, things that were purely secular in nature were transformed by public opinion into sacred things: homeland, liberty, and reason" (Durkheim 2001: 161). The Revolution gave rise to its own sacred beliefs and Durkheim suggests that, albeit for a relatively brief period, it created an awareness of a transcendent force that both governed and supported society (Durkheim 2001: 161).

In a similar vein as Durkheim, the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade considers the persistence of the sacred in the modern world to be fact. In *The Quest* (1969) he points at "a number of apparently nonreligious phenomena in which one can decipher new and original recoveries of the sacred – although, admittedly, they are not recognizable as such from a Judeo-Christian perspective" (Eliade 1969: iii). For instance, the sacred can manifest itself in the popular and youth culture, a variety of individual beliefs, sexual liberation, the ideal of personal freedom, and so forth. (Eliade 1969: iii). In fact, Eliade posits that the sacred is an indispensable part of humanity; it is present in all societies (Eliade 1969: i-ii). In an earlier work, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), he explains this idea as follows: the need to project structure onto the world is basic to humanity and it necessarily involves references to some elevated, sacred object. In the uncertain world of the profane, the sacred is the absolute and unchangeable point of reference to which society's values and meanings can be attached. So, according to Eliade, the construction of the sacred is a reaction to the human need to create order in the world and to make sense of it. The sacred provides answers to questions related to the purpose of human existence and gives meaning to events in society and in individual lives (Eliade 1958: 9).

Contemporary social scientists exploring the religious dimensions of the lay world frequently use the term sacred in analyses of phenomena that are somehow deemed to be exceptional and have a special appeal to whole

communities. These may be objects that are very highly regarded or key ideals and beliefs that cannot be questioned. The definition that is employed in these studies tends to echo the observations put forward by Eliade and Durkheim. The central feature of both authors' definitions is the categorical dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. Similarly to Durkheim, Eliade poses that the defining characteristic of the sacred is the fact that it is the diametrical opposite of the profane. To put it simply, the sacred is whatever the profane is not. The two belong to different realms and, as a rule the sacred is thought to be inaccessible and incomprehensible. It is subject to other laws than the ones applicable in the ordinary world and it is capable of acts that transcend human limitations (Eliade 1958: 459). While the profane is experienced as changeable and uncertain, the sacred is fixed, reliable and unquestionable. According to Eliade, a sense of the sacred is regularly associated with matters that are somehow exceptional: "unusual, unique, new, perfect or monstrous" (Eliade 1958: 13). Such things are mysterious and fascinating; they seem to belong to a different order of reality and can become associated with powers that are considered impossible under ordinary circumstances.

In the early 21st century applied science and technology are perhaps the most striking examples of objects that have such a status. In the chapters to come I shall pay greater attention to a number of scholars who have studied the sacralisation of technology in our society. For instance, Jeffrey Alexander who was mentioned earlier, the Dutch sociologist Stef Aupers, the French philosopher Jacques Ellul and the British sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski all employ the terms 'sacred' or 'sacralisation' in order to highlight the religious facets of discourses about technology and to get a grasp of the elevated significance attributed to it (Alexander 2003; Aupers 2004; Ellul 1990; Szerszynski 2005). In this manner, in his *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*, Szerszynski writes about the sacralisation of nature and technology, and motivates his use of the term 'sacred' as follows: "I am using 'sacred' in a more general sense, to understand the ways in which a range of religious framings are involved in our ideas and dealings with nature and technology" (Szerszynski 2005: ix). In line with Durkheim's analysis that any object (however commonplace or worldly) can take on a sacred status, Szerszynski suggests that in modern, highly advanced societies technology is treated as just such a sacred object. This seemingly profane phenomenon is associated with great but inexplicable and uncontrollable powers, it is differentiated from ordinary experience and understanding, and it carries the promise of (secular) salvation (Szerszynski 2005: 63).

As a rule, the technological sacred belongs to the domain of implicit religion. It is located outside explicitly defined religious communities,

finding expression in sometimes very emotional discourse: both in utopian and dystopian visions of the future. What is the relationship between the sacred and (implicit) religion in this context? According to Durkheim, the construction of sacred objects is a defining, universal feature of religion. As he puts it, "the division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane, is the hallmark of religious thought" (Durkheim 2001: 36). Indeed, if we recall the definition of religion put forward earlier in this chapter, then the sacred is a key feature that distinguishes specifically *religious* systems of meaning from other ways of meaning-making, such as hobbies and lifestyles.

The sacred can be seen as a key feature of religion; it is the anchor to which religious beliefs and teachings are fixed. Studies of the sacralisation of objects or ideas are concerned with how such anchors are created and which meanings are projected onto them. They explore a specific facet of religiosity. But there is more to religion than the sacralisation of certain objects. It is also possible to consider a number of other constitutive features of religion: teachings, beliefs and dreams, rituals and prescriptions. Furthermore, one can study religiosity from the perspective of its various functions: as a source of comfort and certainty, of identity, and of social cohesion *or* conflict. In other words, as a tool of analysis, the concept of (implicit) religion simply allows one to do more than what one can achieve with the term sacralisation.

1.4.4 Re-enchantment and magic

A key notion in several studies of religiosity in contemporary Western societies is that the disenchantment thesis put forward by Weber in the early 20th century seems not to be applicable in the early 21st century. At least not to the devastating effect that Weber imagined; mystery, fascination and magic continue to be a part of people's understanding of the world around them. Several authors speak of a process of re-enchantment – the re-emergence of mysticism, irrationality and trust in magical powers (Aupers 2004; Bailey 2005; Szerszynski 2005). The realms of science and technology have offered particularly edifying case studies of such new forms of enchantment, and a number of these have highlighted the attribution of magical qualities to modern technology. For instance, in his *The Enchantments of Technology* (2005) the American scholar of religion Lee Worth Bailey argues that technology has come to be seen as a "wonder", subject to "fascinations, charms, captivations, mystiques, trances, wizardry, sorcery and magic" (Bailey 2005: 19). He suggests that the powers of technology, combined with the lacunae in people's understanding of how it works, can give rise to the magical expectation that technologies function as

independent agents that can be manipulated into fulfilling hopes and desires through rituals and special knowledge (Bailey 2005).

Similarly, in his research on the religiosity of Silicon Valley computer programmers, Aupers detects magical beliefs and rituals in their approach to computer technology (Aupers 2004: 97-134). Some of the characteristic aspects of magic in the practices that he considers are: the programmers' role as creators of new (virtual) worlds, their access to obscure knowledge that is unavailable to 'laymen' and the mystery surrounding the technology with which they work. Aupers shows that in much of the discourse about it, ICT is associated with omnipotent powers and granted its own intelligence and spirituality. In this context he refers to "technoanimism", which involves the following: the projection of subjective qualities to technology, the assumption that it has an independent will and can exercise power over the world, and its valorisation as a sacred object that inspires both admiration and fear (Aupers 2004: 117).

An important point of reference for defining magic (particularly for those interested in its role in technological discourses) is the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* (1955). According to Malinowski, magic has the following characteristics: firstly, magical thinking relies on trust in the supernatural and the miraculous. Secondly, it is primarily a utilitarian craft, "a specific art with specific ends" (Malinowski 1955: 88). Finally, Malinowski regards magic as a reaction to emotional times: it is employed at critical moments, at times of stress, worry or fear. Its function in society is to overcome anxiety, and to inspire "confidence over doubt" (Malinowski 1955: 90). His argument is that by filling in the gaps that cannot be explained with empirical knowledge and ordinarily available reasoning, magic instils faith in what Giddens would later term 'ontological security' (Giddens 1990: 92), a sense that the world is orderly and meaningful.

Malinowski approaches magic as a primitive form of religion and he cannot hide his feelings about its "crudity and irrelevance" (Malinowski 1955: 90). As "the embodiment of the sublime folly of hope" (Malinowski: 90) magic seems altogether naïve and irrelevant to modern, technological societies. Nonetheless, Malinowski highlights a number of similarities between science and magic, which indicate that these two are not as far removed from one another as theories of rationalisation and disenchantment would have one believe. Magic and science (and technology) both have practical applications and both are put to use with specific results in mind. Both are employed to explain the world and to make sense of it. Both have a theoretical framework and both follow instructions for effective action. That is, both have developed specific strategies for achieving their goals

(Malinowski 1955: 86). Malinowski immediately offers reasons for why the two are not the same – the main argument being the fundamental difference between the emotionality of magic and the rationality of science (Malinowski 1955: 87).

However, examples from recent academic research and from popular scientific writing have shown that precisely this enchantment and the mysticism of magical thinking have been transferred to science and technology (Alexander 2003; Aupers 2004; 2008; Davis 2004; Noble 1999; O'Leary 2004; Wertheim 2000). In fact, several aspects of Malinowski's understanding of magic are mirrored in analyses of attitudes towards modern technology. For example, the definition of magic that emerges from Aupers' argument contains several elements that Malinowski brought to the fore and it can be summarised as follows. Magic is the manipulation and adaptation of the world through contact with the inexplicable and the mystical. Whether in the form of active creation, as is the case with the Silicon Valley programmers, or in the form of utopian beliefs in the power of technology to change the world, ICT is regarded as such an obscure, magical instrument (Aupers 2004: chap. 6).

What is the relationship between magic and (implicit) religion? According to Durkheim, beliefs, myths, specific symbolism and rituals are features that religion shares with magic (Durkheim 2001: 41). He adds that, often, aspects of the two are intertwined: "magic is full of religion, just as religion is full of magic" (Durkheim, 2001: 41). Durkheim's main criterion for differentiating between the two is collective activity, where shared morals are born. While he regards magic as an individual cult that does not relate to a community, religion to him is basically a social activity (Durkheim 2001: 43). This distinction seems dissatisfactory. As several case studies indicate, there *is* a social dimension to many magical practices (Aupers 2004; Davis 2004; Mosco 2004; Nye 1994; Stahl 1995). For instance, in his study of the use of techno-magical language in media reports on computer technology, the Canadian sociologist of religion William Stahl clearly shows that the attribution of magical qualities to technology can become a matter of collective preoccupation (Stahl 1995). As he has pointed out in different studies, it is in the context of *public* discourse that magical thinking about technology often develops and flourishes (Stahl 1995; 1999; Stahl, et al. 2002).

Stahl posits that the kinds of attributes and expectations to which Aupers and Lee Worth Bailey refer in their studies of technology are tokens of implicit religiosity (Stahl 1995: 241). That is, the phenomena described have no formal links with official religious institutions but the references to mystery, omnipotence, special powers and independent agency all point to

religious thinking (Stahl 1995: 249). Indeed, in these and other similar studies, the term 'magic' is employed to highlight the (implicitly) religious dimensions of new technologies, such as notions of the superhuman, and hopes of transcendence and salvation. Magical language and expectations are facets of implicitly religious phenomena. They can be telling signs of religiosity in the non-institutionalised, day-to-day contexts, but implicit religion refers to more than magical thinking. Most significantly, while the term 'magic' refers to one specific aspect of religiosity (beliefs and practices that are geared towards influencing one's environment by means of some contact with inexplicable, supernatural powers), then (implicit) religion is concerned with an entirety of symbols, beliefs, sentiments and practices. The term religion implies a coherent set of (magical) beliefs, teachings, (sacred) objects, (spiritual) experiences and practices that can function as sources of meaning and offer ways to counter what was described earlier as the religious problem: an awareness of the fragility and insecurity of human life.

1.5 CONCLUSION: RELIGION BEYOND INSTITUTIONS

As religious institutions lose their earlier, dominant position in contemporary Western societies, researchers look for signs of religion elsewhere. At a time when the secularisation of the West was deemed a near *fait accompli* by many social scientists, both Luckmann and Bellah approached religion as a landscape after an eruption of a volcano. With their concepts of invisible and civil religion they sought to find out what was happening to its remnants: where the last fragments had settled and to which nooks and crannies of society religion had withdrawn. Thus, Bellah's civil religion referred to important civic values and a strong sense of belonging, which both draw primarily on a secularised version of Judeo-Christian notions and beliefs. The term religion was used to uncover the vestiges of an earlier era in contemporary social values and conduct. Luckmann's "newly emerging religion" of the secular era, which is imperceptible from the perspective of conventional definitions of religion, was to be found in a personalised "assortment of "ultimate" meanings" (Luckmann 1967: 102).

It was Luckmann's argument that side by side with secular values and personal aspirations, traditional religious themes would be used to create new, fully reconfigured frameworks for making sense of existence and establishing hierarchies of meaning. As he saw it, religion had changed to the extent that it was becoming invisible and unrecognisable. In short, the underlying concern in both cases was how Western society's dominant systems of ordering reality had been affected and transformed by the processes of de-churching and de-institutionalisation.

Those who have employed the terms spirituality, sacralisation and magic often do the same – they track the changes in the contemporary religious landscape – but they have chosen an alternative approach to religion. In these cases it is not the fate of religion as a *whole* but specific *features* of religion that are of primary interest. By pointing at the sacred, the spiritual or magical associated with objects in the modern world, scholars have shown that certain fundamental aspects of religion continue to be of importance in the formation and maintenance of worldviews. For instance, signs of religion have been brought forward in the accounts of the quest for true knowledge of the self, the special status granted to certain guiding ideals such as progress and the improvement of the human condition, and the attribution of inexplicable, magical powers to technology (Aupers 2004; Heelas & Woodhead 2005). Here, specific aspects of religion rather than religion as a structured system have formed the object of study.

The term 'implicit religion' too refers to the assumption that religion can be found in the secular domain, beyond the boundaries of religious traditions and institutions. But rather than focussing on single features, such as the magical, the sacred or the spiritual, it offers an analytical tool for studying whole frameworks of ideas, beliefs, hopes, myths and ways of behaving. Implicit religion provides a way to understand how these different facets of religion relate to one another and how they 'work': how they create social cohesion, channel a group's emotions and give meaning to existence. This concept allows one to explore new sources of meaning that have taken centre stage as traditional religious cosmologies have retreated. For instance, dreams of progress, love of technology, reveries of the knowledge economy and the promises of the consumer culture are some of the more prominent themes that shape our understanding of the world today. They are conduits of deep meanings – hopes and desires, fears and uncertainties, devotion and adoration – and they provide contemporary Western culture with the sorts of myths that have conventionally belonged to the domain of religion. With the notion of implicit religion one can analyse how these express and relate to a society's values, how they fit in broader sets of beliefs, and how all these are integrated into comprehensive systems of meaning.

In the next chapter I shall consider the implicit religiosity of the phenomena just mentioned: the consumer ethic, technophilia, and the ideal of progress. I wish to find out two things: one relating to the structures of modern-day meaning-making and the other to its content. Firstly, which fundamental facets of religion continue to be of importance today? Secondly, which themes and ideals characterise contemporary quests to find answers to essential existential questions?

CHAPTER 2

THE CONSOLATIONS OF MODERNITY: ULTIMATE MEANING IN THE SECULAR ERA

> I shop, therefore I am. (Barbara Kruger, 1990)
> I link, therefore I am. (William Mitchell, in McClellan 2003)
> iPod, therefore I am. (Dylan Jones, 2005)
> I innovate, therefore I am. (Todd Watson, IBM Corporation, 2006)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary popular culture the philosopher René Descartes' well-known and often-quoted phrase *cogito ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am – has inspired endless adaptations with a characteristically modern twist. Descartes' original statement was concerned with the certainties on which to base our knowledge of the world. Famously, after rigorous skimming his conclusion was that the only thing that we can know beyond doubt is *that* we think and doubt. To Descartes, the single truly trustworthy indicator of our existence was the fact that we pose questions about it. But what kinds of certainties are we talking about when the American artist Barbara Kruger replaces the first part of Descartes' axiom and presents us with a novel statement: "I shop, therefore I am" or when the computer manufacturer IBM proudly declares: "We innovate, therefore we are"? Here, the question is not just whether or not we can be sure that we exist; the emphasis has shifted to the *meaning* of our existence.

However humorous or trivial the many contemporary versions of *'cogito ergo sum'* may sound, they are all concerned with a *raison-d'être*: what defines existence and what gives it purpose. The four quotes above are telling indicators of what is important in our society today, what makes our culture what it is, and what tells others and ourselves that we exist. For instance, if we agree with the American scholar and architect William Mitchell of the MIT Media Lab, then it is not thinking but 'linking' that makes us who we are: networked information technology determines our very nature. Mitchell describes the meaning of technology for contemporary lives as follows: "I am part of the networks and the networks are part of me. I am visible to *Google*. I link, therefore I am" (Mitchell in McClellan 2003).

Similarly, with the pun in the title of his book *iPod, Therefore I Am* (2006) the British journalist Dylan Jones suggests that it is the joy of using the music player iPod that lets one know that they are alive. As the

promotional text on the back of the book tells us, the iPod can be regarded as "the defining toy of the 21st century" and throughout the book the author conveys the idea that this new technology has not only changed *his* life (Jones 2006: 130) but that it has "galvanised a generation" (Jones 2006: 6).

Indeed, the fascination with new technology and attractive gadgets of which Jones and Mitchell are fine exponents, the consumer attitude to which Kruger refers and the great value attributed to innovation by IBM can easily be described as some of the central themes of contemporary Western cultures. Admittedly, to speak of 'our culture' or 'the Western worldview' is dangerous: these labels involve sweeping generalisations that are certainly not applicable to all members of a society. But if one looks at the opinions, observations and hopes voiced in the public discourses in what can be called the West – countries of high economic and technological development whose cultures have predominantly Christian roots – then certain key notions *do* come to the fore as important and distinctive themes and ideals. On the whole, belief in progress, technological innovation and consumerism provide us with potent narratives, imagery and what Berger refers to as "definitions of reality" (Berger, et al. 1973: 185) to hold on to.

In this chapter I shall discuss the three themes just mentioned and consider the ways in which they might offer means of countering what several scholars of modernity have described as a problem of meaning. That is, how might dreams of progress and innovation, the love of technology, and consumerism compensate for the existential confusion and lack of direction that Giddens associates with the typically modern process of disembedding? How might they answer the problem of human fragility and finitude to which Berger refers when speaking of 'metaphysical homelessness'? Which hopes have they given birth to and which frameworks of values, beliefs and explanations do they offer?

In Chapter One I put forward the idea that secular phenomena and belief systems can have religious facets and fulfil functions that can be described as fundamentally religious. In this chapter I shall argue that our highly technological consumer culture displays such implicitly religious features: it is filled with dreams of salvation, hopes of transcendence, charismatic sentiments and a strong belief in the special, at times even sacred qualities of certain objects or ideas. Technology, the consumer attitude and faith in progress provide us with beliefs and sentiments that can help us make sense of the world around us and project some kind of purpose onto it. They serve as important anchors of what Luckmann refers to as 'ultimate meaning' throughout *The Invisible Religion*.

2.2 ULTIMATE MEANING AND THE SACRED

"Ultimate meaning", as well as the terms "ultimate relevance", "ultimate concern" and "ultimate significance" have been employed by several scholars of religion when referring to the key beliefs and values to which human understanding of the world is fixed (Ter Borg 1991; Luckmann 1967; 1990; Tillich 1964; Weber 1989). All these denote some final, indubitable answer to essential questions regarding the purpose and meaning of human existence. For instance, when, in his 'Science as a Vocation', Weber reflects on the "ultimate meaning" that science could possibly offer, he is concerned with its capacity to provide reasons for our existence and guidelines as to how to live. While Weber's conclusion is that science as an essentially irreligious force (Weber 1989: 18) in fact empties the world of any sense of (ultimate) meaning (Weber 1989), others have posited that secular societies have generated their own ideals and belief systems that can be described as carriers of ultimate meaning. This is what Luckmann proposes in *The Invisible Religion* and other publications.

Luckmann's understanding of what he calls both 'ultimate meaning' and 'ultimate significance' is quite simple: it is what a society and its individual members deem more important and valuable than anything else. As he sees it, people's sense of reality is founded on hierarchies of meanings, and some matters have more weight in their notion of what 'life is all about', while others remain relatively trivial. Ultimate meanings function as the 'true north' of a society's value systems and they help its members to define what is true and valuable to them. They tower above all other concerns, and what we think, believe and experience is measured against these ultimate meanings (Luckmann 1967: 57-58; 60-61). While, traditionally, divine forces in particular have functioned as such measures of meaning and value, Luckmann posits that in the modern world, secular matters have also acquired this status. That is, while the narratives and dogmas of religious traditions may have lost their earlier monopoly in providing ultimate meaning, this task is now fulfilled by different "themes of ultimate significance" which are subject to individual choices rather than dictated by official teachings (Luckmann 1967: 105).

A number of these themes were mentioned in the previous chapter, when Luckmann's notion of the individualisation of religion was discussed. For instance, he points to the family and relationships with "significant others" (Luckmann 1967: 106), personal autonomy, self-expression and -realisation, as well as the democratic ideal and the social mobility ethos as matters of ultimate significance for modern individuals (Luckmann 1967: chap. 7). According to Luckmann, out of these and other themes people construct their personal systems of ultimate meaning, which function as

guidelines in finding their way in the world. Crucially, what he describes as the "sacred cosmos"– an exceptional realm of reality that is somehow set apart from the ordinary, day-to-day life (Luckmann 1967: 61) – no longer consists of a single hierarchy; several different objects and concerns make up the collection of ultimate meanings in contemporary society. As he sees it, on the whole, in modern societies, ultimate meaning is distilled out of a subjective *selection* of themes.

Luckmann's concept of ultimate meaning is closely related to what several other authors have referred to as 'the sacred'. In fact, from his perspective, matters deemed to be of the greatest importance for individuals can be described as such (Luckmann 1967: 109; 113). For instance, his 'ultimate significance' rhymes well with both Durkheim's and Eliade's conceptualisations of the sacred, which were sketched in the previous chapter. Durkheim thus associates the sacred with shared convictions and beliefs that have an elevated status in a society and form its most important values. He describes it as something of ultimate significance: radically different from the profane and placed above all other matters, the sacred is 'untouchable' and not to be questioned (Durkheim 2001: 161). As such an object of absolute truth and value, the sacred directs people's beliefs and behaviour, serving as a touchstone to which other matters are related.

Much like Durkheim before him, Eliade too regards the sacred as the absolute and unchangeable point of reference to which a society's morals and meanings can be attached (Eliade 1958; 1969; 1987). It stands for its key values, and Eliade posits that the sacred plays an essential role in the structuring of human sense of reality. As he puts it, "[the sacred] *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world" (Eliade 1987: 30). In the chaotic and uncertain world of the profane, the sacred (which represents its complete opposite) can offer clarity, provide answers to questions related to the origins and purpose of existence and give meaning to events in society and in individual lives (1958: 9).

In a similar vein as Eliade and Durkheim, in his *Een uitgewaaierde eeuwigheid* [Unfolded eternity] (1991), Ter Borg too couples his concept of the sacred to that of ultimate significance. He argues that matters that represent a society's ultimate meanings (its most important values and morals) can be described as sacred (Ter Borg 1991: 95). These can be emblematic and symbolic objects and representations (such as flags and anthems, foundation myths of a nation or community, statues, scriptures and so on) or a variety of less explicitly articulated sets of beliefs, truths, norms and rules of conduct. In line with both Eliade's and Durkheim's descriptions of the sacred as an ultimate value, Ter Borg emphasises that,

characteristically, whatever is deemed to be sacred cannot be put to question and criticised; it is thought to have an absolute validity (1991: 96).

However, while Eliade and Durkheim both stress the radical difference between the sacred and the profane and thus base their definitions of the sacred on its absolute otherness, in *his* account Ter Borg underlines the sacred's hybrid, dual nature (Ter Borg 1991: 88; 95). On the one hand, sacred objects are venerated as extraordinary and somehow superhuman, charged, as Ter Borg puts it with charismatic sentiments (Ter Borg 1991: 95). These phenomena inspire fascination and admiration, instil strong faith in their exceptional capacities and give hope of countering basic existential insecurities and anxieties (Ter Borg 1991: 88). Charismatic objects seem to transcend the ordinary and they are thus seen as an answer to the vulnerability and uncertainty that are characteristic of the human condition (Ter Borg 1991: 94). On the other hand, matters that are deemed to be sacred – beliefs, objects, people or places – are a part of the everyday world in which people live. Not only do the objects that are attributed this status belong to the world around us, they are also the currency on which people's understanding of their day-to-day existence is based. As was said, the sacred forms the key to sense-making, both on the level of individual lives *and* societies at large.

The assumption shared by Luckmann and the other authors just mentioned is that matters of ultimate significance and the sacralisation of objects and ideas are not limited to any specific place, object or historical period. The argument that all put forward is that a variety of matters can be of ultimate significance to people and that any object can be granted sacred meaning as long as it fulfils certain conditions: it is considered somehow exceptional, is taken to be of higher importance than ordinary matters, is seen as an unquestionable and reliable source of answers as to the meaning and reasons of existence, and, following Ter Borg, it somehow exemplifies the beliefs, norms and principles that constitute a society. In short, a crucial point that comes to the fore in Luckmann's work as well as in Durkheim's, Eliade's and Ter Borg's accounts of the sacred is that in modern western societies secular phenomena can take on the status of a sacred object. Luckmann thus speaks of the sacralisation of the private sphere (Luckmann 1967: 109), Durkheim of the public consecration of secular things and ideas (Durkheim 2001:161), Eliade of "recoveries of the sacred" in the secular realm (Eliade 1969: iii) and Ter Borg of the "secularisation of the sacred" (Ter Borg 1991: 161-165).

This understanding of the sacred and of matters of ultimate meaning implies that religiosity continues to be present in ostensibly secular contexts. If one is interested in discovering what Luckmann refers to as "modern

religious themes" (Luckmann 1967: 107-114) – the convictions and ideals that are of guiding significance to contemporary Western societies – then it is important to not only look at the religious teachings that have traditionally been the sources of ultimate meaning but also to consider the secular world as a possible context for such themes.

2.3 THEMES OF ULTIMATE MEANING IN THE SECULAR ERA

In *The Invisible Religion* and later publications Luckmann emphasises that the themes of ultimate meaning that constitute the "newly emerging religion" of modern, secular societies belong predominantly to the private realm. He assumes that these are highly personal, "syncretistic and vague" and that therefore no specific overarching themes of ultimate significance that are of general relevance can be pinpointed (Luckmann 1967: 99; 1990: 134-137). Yet, however idiosyncratic modern individuals' value systems may be, certain key themes that mark contemporary Western cultures *do* come to the fore. In addition to the consumer attitude to which Luckmann himself points (Luckmann 1967: 98-99), trust in technology and belief in progress can certainly be seen as shared, central themes of ultimate significance that have a dominant presence in modern Western cultures. In the following sections, I shall pay attention to these three and explore their role as sources of ultimate meaning.

2.3.1 Consumerism

In contemporary Western societies consumption – a practice that includes desiring, acquiring and discarding commodities, be they goods, services, events, experiences or even human beings – is a highly meaningful activity. The consumer world at large can thus be seen as one of the foremost vehicles of the values and beliefs that define these societies. Indeed, as several scholars have argued, consumption is one of the key markers of Western culture today and it is of great importance to the functioning and maintenance of contemporary societies (Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 2007; Campbell 1989; 2004; McCracken 1990; 2005; Miles 1998; Rief 2008). An often-made point is that, while some may dismiss consumption as trivial and devoid of any values, in fact, it is the basis of a coherent, organised set of beliefs, values and practices that has a strong influence on both individual lives and societies at large. The Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman articulates precisely this idea in his *Consuming Life* (2007), where he refers to such a system of thinking and behaving as "consumerism". He describes it as follows:

> We may say that consumerism is a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent … human wants, desires

and longings into the *principle propelling and operating force* of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the processes of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies. (Bauman 2007: 28)

The thrust of Bauman's argument in this brimming sentence is that consumerism is a matter of ultimate significance to modern societies. It is their main engine: a key to social structure and cohesion, and a major resource in the development of people's sense of the self. Furthermore, Bauman posits that consumerism functions not just as an important but as the *primary* frame of reference for defining the creeds, beliefs and principles – "individual life policies" – that guide existence. In other words, if we follow Bauman's argument, then in today's societies consumerism is *the* main source of meaning and shared convictions. Like the sacred that grounds worldviews and functions as the guarantee of a society's belief systems (as Eliade argues), this "force" forms the central value to which our understanding of the world is anchored.

In a similar manner as Bauman, in his *The Consumer Society* (1970/1997) the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard proposes that consumerism represents modern society's *most* dominant framework of meaning. His conviction is that it enjoys a *complete* hegemony in modern-day meaning-making and that it is usurping the tasks and status previously associated with religion: "consumption can on its own substitute for all ideologies and, in the long run, take over alone the role of integrating the whole society, as hierarchical or religious rituals did in primitive societies" (Baudrillard 1998: 94). Baudrillard emphasises the role of consumerism as the new religion of affluent Western societies heavily. Throughout *The Consumer Society*, he proposes that it fulfils the same functions as religion and entails the same kind of worship, belief in miracles and complete abandonment to one's faith. Unfortunately, rather than explaining how consumerism might function as a source of meaning – much in the style of Marx's 'opium of the people' argument[3] – he mostly underlines its coercive and mind-numbing nature. To Baudrillard, consumerism – like religion – is a powerful institution that subjects people to conscious training and socialisation into a specific morality: one that values abundance and

---

3 Marx, K. (1972 [1843]). Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (T. B. Bottomore, Trans.). In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (pp. 11-23). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

enjoyment but is also bland and devoid of any tension or contradiction (Baudrillard 1998: 81-83).

Both Bauman and Baudrillard speak of the significant influence that the consumer world has on not just one's choice of goods but on shaping societies at large and giving form to people's beliefs and attitudes. While both seem overly exclusive and vehement in representing consumerism as the single, *most* important driving force of modern societies, their general observation that it can be a source of ultimate meaning is certainly correct. Consumerism can indeed be seen as a set of beliefs and aspirations that guides societies and gives direction and purpose to individual lives. Furthermore, specific consumer goods can have deep emotional significance to people, become objects of strong faith and be worshipped collectively much like sacred objects. Finally, as Baudrillard and several others have pointed out, consumer mentality entails magical thinking that regards commercial products as a means of realising dreams and facilitating transcendence to new planes of experience, as if by miracle (Baudrillard 1998; Campbell 1989; 2004; Ritzer 1999). All in all, if modernity is struggling with a crisis of meaning, then consumerism offers something of a consolation: shared focus and purpose, enchantment, and hope of rising beyond the status quo to better ways of life.

In his article 'I Shop Therefore I Know That I Am: The Metaphysical Basis of Modern Consumerism' (2004) the British sociologist Colin Campbell addresses the concern that modernity has brought with it a general crisis of meaning. He contends that whereas consumerism is frequently regarded as a passive and fruitless reaction to a sense of meaninglessness, it should rather be seen as a means of overcoming ontological uncertainty (Campbell 2004: 35). Campbell puts forward the thought that today's consumerism fulfils an ontological function itself: it entails a "metaphysic", or a set of assumptions about the underlying purpose and significance of human existence and the world around us. That is, consumerism provides people answers as to what is real and meaningful, offering what Campbell calls "a default philosophy" for making sense of how modern societies 'work' (Campbell 2004: 42). As he puts it in the conclusion to his article, "[in consumerism] most people find the firm foundations upon which their grasp of the real and the true are based, while also providing them with their life's goal" (Campbell 2004: 42).

Campbell's argument is that consumerism taps into the 'emotional ontology' that characterises modern Western societies at large, i.e. it is fuelled by a belief that the more intense emotions something inspires, the more real and authentic it is and the greater proof it can provide of one's existence. Referring to the Descartes-inspired statement 'I shop therefore I am', he

posits that exposure to consumer products and our individual appraisal of them (whether positive or negative) does indeed confirm our existence and tell us that we are authentic and unique beings. The sentiments and idiosyncratic reactions that consumer goods arouse in people – desire, hope, excitement, surprise and a sense of satisfaction or disappointment – form tangible proof of their existence. Furthermore, as Campbell points out, people define themselves on the basis of their consumer preferences and tastes, and their sense of unique individuality is anchored to their specific likes and dislikes. Through consumer goods individuals can discover themselves and, by coming in contact with new consumer products, continuously remind themselves of who they are – what interests them, how they react to stimuli around them, where their allegiances lie, and so on.

Campbell's suggestion that the consumer experience should be seen as an important source of meaning for modern societies rings true. Not only do the sentiments that consumer goods spark off instil a sense of ontological certainty in people about their own existence, they can also be potent vehicles of a society's main beliefs and aspirations. As Ter Borg observes in his book *Zineconomie* [The meaning economy] (2004b), modern-day individuals refer to commercial products in articulating their values, in giving shape to their identities and in determining the socio-cultural niche to which they (wish to) belong. Through advertisement and other marketing techniques "a suggestion of meaning" becomes encoded in consumer goods (Borg 2004b: 22). Products can come to be associated with matters such as a specific social class, status and lifestyle or with more general aspirations like freedom, happiness, friendship, comfort, and so on. Be it a new line of deodorant, a brand of soft drink, the mobile telephone or the latest portable music player, goods represent what a society considers important and they can confirm such key ideals as individualism, mobility, progress and innovation (Borg 2004b: 20-23).

As Ter Borg shows, consumer goods can carry the promise of somehow surmounting the perceived shortcomings of human existence and providing new and better ways of living. People look to commercial products as the means of surpassing day-to-day life and realising dreams of wealth and plenty, of liberty and ease, of security, affection and well-being. A similar notion is expressed by Campbell in an earlier work – *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism* (1989) – where he describes 'the spirit of consumerism' as something marked by wilful dreaming and a yearning to leave behind what is known and familiar (Campbell 1989: 89-90). As he says, the prevailing mood of consumerism is motivated by fundamental discontent with the present and the desire to experience in real life one's hopes and imaginary pleasures. Campbell expresses this idea as follows: "the

'real' nature of products is of little consequence compared with what is possible for consumers to believe about them, and hence their potential as "dream material" (Campbell 1989: 89).

In other words, the consumer market promises transcendence: the advertisement, design and overall image of products often suggest that their users can rise above the familiar and encounter new, superior ways of life. If in earlier times imaginings of heaven, paradise, the fairytale land of Cockayne or the myth of the wealthy city of El Dorado grew out of a hope to be released from scarcity, toil and hardship to a superior existence, then today the consumer world fulfils much the same function. However trivial commercial products may appear, they often carry the promise of improvement and deliverance to some ideal, more exciting and fulfilling way of life.

In the past decennia new, digital information, communications and entertainment technology have become potent carriers of such dreams. Together with the Internet, networked computers form a particularly fine example of an instance where consumer products – in this case communications technology – have been hailed as the means of fulfilling age-old dreams. As I shall show in the chapters to come, the variety of highly optimistic hopes projected onto the Internet included overcoming the constraints of matter and space, reducing the importance of physical work, providing greater ease at learning and communication, inspiring freedom and greater equality, and creating ingenious ways of generating wealth. As a number of authors have pointed out, such trust in the near-limitless power of consumer goods to make fantasies come true is marked by magical thinking that attributes enchanted qualities to them (Baudrillard 1998; Campbell 2004; Ritzer 1999). It is rooted in the belief that simply by projecting certain wishes onto commercial products (be it greater beauty, wealth, health or love and attention) these can indeed be realised, and that what we consume has some kind of inherent power to call forth joy and contentment, to materialise aspirations related to one's standing in society, to grant one greater acceptance among peers, and so on.

Contemporary consumer culture is full of meaning. When the journalist Dylan Jones exclaims "iPod therefore I am", then it is clear that the iPod somehow means more than just an electronic gadget that can play music. The possession of this product itself has become an activity that defines Jones' very existence and offers him basic certainties as to 'the point' of life. However jokingly Jones may put it, the statement "iPod therefore I am" points at an explanation and a purpose. The consumer world provides us with ideas to trust and believe in, it forms a steady framework for definitions of ultimate meaning and it is enchanted and invested with qualities that are

regarded as out of the ordinary. Even the most banal consumer goods can instil in the user the notion that they facilitate transcendence to fresh and better plains of experience. In particular, when in it comes to articles of consumer technology, then one can come across unambiguous declarations of great wonderment and awe, where the technologies concerned are placed on a special pedestal and explicitly described as superhuman vehicles of salvation and transcendence.

2.3.2 Technophilia

Contemporary Western societies are strongly marked by technology. One only need look around one's home and office or glance over the day's newspapers to see that it is an integral part of almost all aspects of our everyday lives. Technology has great influence on how we experience and understand the world, and it serves as an important point of reference for making sense of our lives. As a rule, in our day, technology is very highly regarded. Modern Western culture is characterised by what the American cultural theorist Neil Postman describes as a "technophile" stance. Postman uses this term in his *Technopoly. The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992), when referring to the extremely strong love for technology, which can turn people blind to its dangers and often make for overly hopeful rhetoric. Technophilia is a vehicle for articulating hopes and values that define modern societies and it can thus be seen as one of the major themes of ultimate meaning today.

The key to understanding the importance of technology for modern-day meaning-making lies in two related matters. Firstly, the great hopes and powers projected onto technology make it a highly emotional matter that can offer both comfort in the face of basic existential insecurities and a sense of purpose. Secondly, I would argue that although it is a product of rational scholarship, to a great extent, technology today appears to be beyond empirical explanation, representing a force that transcends the human. The great trust in technology is thus largely rooted in a sense that it is an independent force whose magical powers are not within the grasp of human understanding and control.

Certainly since the nineteenth century technological inventions and the feats of engineering have been enthusiastically welcomed as ways to cope with human fragility, and great trust has been invested in them. For instance, in their early days the steam engine, the railroad and the telegraph were all celebrated as awe-inspiring means of conquering time and space and overcoming poverty (Alexander 2003; Nye 1994, Standage 2000). As Jeffrey Alexander puts it in his essay 'The Sacred and Profane Information Machine' (2003), these technologies were hailed as forces that were to bring humanity

closer to wondrous, heavenly blessings (Alexander 2003: 188). As new technologies lend us the capacity to do things that were previously thought to be beyond the grasp of mankind (flying, space travel, extensive manipulations of nature, complicated medical interventions, instantaneous long-distance communication, *etc.*) they come to be associated with the miraculous and inexplicable. They acquire the select status of objects that transcend the everyday, they inspire wonderment and worship, and they become objects of intense emotions.

The Canadian scholar David Noble describes technologies that have such elevated connotations as "technologies of transcendence" (Noble 1999). These are technological inventions to which great hope is pinned and which are typically hailed as the means of overcoming the uncertainties and shortcomings of the human condition. In *The Religion of Technology* (1999) Noble argues that throughout history such "technologies of transcendence" have been approached as means to "the recovery of man's lost divinity" (Noble 1999: 6). That is, technology has had great emotional significance as the means for humanity to regain a Paradise-like ideal way of life. As Noble shows, since the beginning of the second millennium crafts and skills, scientific knowledge and technology have been regarded as moving closer to divine powers and knowledge, granting us humans ever-greater control over the earthly realm as well as the heavens, the fate of humanity and even mortality. Noble's examples from more recent history are atomic weapons, space travel, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. In all these cases he recognises the desire to transcend: to triumph over the forces of nature, to reach the heavens and rise above the limitations of the Earth, to create life and to overcome death.

In short, in addition to carrying the promise of simply adding ease, wealth and comfort to our lives, many technologies imply a radical transformation of the human condition at large. As the Dutch philosopher Rein de Wilde points out, even the most trivial new consumer technologies – appliances, machines and media of communication – are often promoted as things that will 'revolutionise the world' and 'change our lives'. According to De Wilde, such technologies function as "bridges" between the present and imagined, ideal future worlds (De Wilde 2000: 117). Whether they are consumer appliances or large-scale projects, such as those involving atomic energy or space travel, new technologies can indeed represent a passage to marvellous new worlds. It is this potential to change life and to facilitate transcendence that marks technology as a powerful carrier of meaning: it gives purpose to human existence and places the present in the context of future promises, thus offering explanations and providing consolation.

Contemporary attitudes towards technology reveal a strong, even blind faith in its salutary effects and in its unwavering course. With its limitless but inexplicable powers technology is sometimes approached as a remarkable and enigmatic force that belongs to a wholly other order of things than our own world. Computer technology is a striking case in point. The sociologist of religion William Stahl explains why computers have this remarkable status. He makes the point that in popular discourse the workings of computers (and technology in general) are often explained according to the so-called black box theory and that our understanding of them is therefore filled with magical thinking (Stahl 1995: 252).

That is, technology is mostly studied from the perspectives of input and output – how it is made and what it can do – without clarification as to how it works. These processes tend to remain obfuscated and beyond explanation: technology seems to follow its own, magical logic and its extraordinary capacities are simply attributed to its 'otherness'. Technology of this kind is incomprehensible and inaccessible for ordinary people. As Alexander observes, experts with special knowledge and priest-like specialists are needed who can mediate between technology and the ordinary world and manipulate the former so that it would grant us favours (Alexander 2003: 188).

In his 'The Sacred and the Profane Information Machine' Alexander shows that since the introduction of the first so-called supercomputers (the most advanced computers of the time) in the 1940s these machines have been regarded as objects that transcend the day-to-day world and form a link to cosmic powers, to matters beyond human understanding and capacities. Out of the many quotes from the popular press that he analyses, the computer emerges as an infallible, impartial, and yet mysterious entity. Alexander refers to an article published in *Time* magazine in 1968, which illustrates the deferential attitude towards technology very well: "When we want to consult the deity, we go to the computer because it's the closest thing to God to come along" (Alexander 2003: 188). Much like a divine force, here the computer is conceptualised as omnipotent, omniscient, and fundamentally different than what we know from the ordinary world. In Alexander's quote technology is represented as the final answer to humanity's questions; it is the ultimate, unquestionable and god-like entity that gives direction and significance to all other matters.

A fine example of the attribution of a near-absolute value to new technology comes to the fore in the book *Being Digital* (1995) by Nicholas Negroponte of the MIT Media Lab in which the author expresses his conviction that the Internet and ICT are "irrevocable and unstoppable" agents of change (Negroponte 1995: 4); they have a mission of their own

that cannot be doubted or intervened with. Negroponte argues that the tools that people use – computers and information networks – shape their world and their experience of it. He treats these as astounding objects of trust and admiration: technology is *bound* to transform the world from "atoms to bits" (Negroponte 1995: 4). What he refers to as "digital living" is an inevitability determined by an independent agent of change: information technology (Negroponte 1995: 165).

Such an understanding of technology implies that it has a fundamentally religious significance. Technology is thus an object of faith that transcends the ordinary, instils in us humans the idea that it can help us overcome our limitations and reveals to us the 'grand scheme' of things. Bronislaw Szerszynski makes exactly this point in his *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005), where he argues that technology is revered as a god-like and sublime entity that holds the promise of "secular salvation" (Szerszynski 2005: 63). Szerszynski shows that throughout history technology has been expected to ease the human condition by assuring well-being, providence and eternity. But, he posits, in our own era it is no longer regarded as *just* a means to an end, as a way of achieving an ideal existence. Technology has become an independent force, which people admire for its own sake and obey as the unquestionable reason for their existence. In other words, technology forms one of the ultimate concerns around which the modern worldview is built and to which society refers when determining values and aspirations.

The great importance that is attributed to technology has inspired some scholars to describe it not just as an important source of meaning but as *the* new dominant faith of modern Western societies (Corn 1986; Ellul 1990; Postman 1992). The most resolute articulations of this idea have been put forward by Postman and the French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul. Both have argued that technophilia now enjoys complete hegemony in the contemporary Western worldview and that technology has become the *only* and most important point of reference on which our culture relies.

The key notion that Ellul puts forward in several of his works is that "technique" – his umbrella term for the tools, instruments, machines, industry, organisations, rational methods and systems of knowledge that humans employ in controlling their environment and shaping their world as efficiently as possible – is the crucial, defining attribute that makes modern society what it is. As he puts it in the very beginning of *The Technological Society* (1964 [1954]), "no social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of technique in the modern world" (Ellul 1964: 3). According to Ellul, the technical imperative is integrated into all aspects of modern life and its rationality and instrumentality govern our society's attitude towards the world at large.

In a later work, *The Technological Bluff* (1990 [1988]) Ellul adds to his analysis that technology is the key to understanding modern societies by arguing that the trust that is invested in it is rooted in the conviction that it is omnipotent and essential to our lives, i.e. that it is an important, benevolent force that *should* be valued accordingly. He posits that technology is worshipped as the single answer to all of mankind's dreams: "Not only is technology good, not only is it indispensable, but also… it alone can achieve all that human beings have been seeking throughout centuries: liberty, democracy, justice, happiness (by a high standard of living), reduction of work, etc." (Ellul 1990: 30). In addition to pointing out that in modern societies technology carries great promises, Ellul thus argues that today it is the *most* important concern that we have; it is truly our single, ultimate concern.

In his *Technopoly. The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Postman makes much the same point as Ellul. As the sub-title of his book reveals, Postman argues that technology and all that it implies (rationalisation, instrumentality and efficiency) have defeated every other realm of culture and become so important to modern society that they are monopolising all its systems of meaning. As he sees it, technology is the prime anchor of the beliefs, meanings and values that guide us and shape our culture. All other "thought-worlds", including religious traditions, are pushed aside and redefined by the so-called technopoly, a social order where technology and related knowledge are central (Postman 1992: 48).

As Postman puts it, "To every Old World belief, habit, or tradition, there was and still is a technological alternative. To prayer, the alternative is penicillin; to family roots, the alternative is mobility; … There is even an alternative to the painful riddle of death" (Postman 1992: 54). Technological achievements and scientific insights have fully replaced the promises of traditional religious worldviews (Postman: 54). In his characteristically forceful rhetoric, Postman describes technology as the infallible and reliable point of orientation that is the answer to humanity's insecurities and of which all other matters are somehow dependent:

> Amid the conceptual debris [the sense of relativity created by modern science and scholarship], there remained one sure thing to believe in – technology. Whatever else may be denied or compromised, it is clear that airplanes do fly, antibiotics do cure… and as we know now, computers calculate and never make mistakes – only faulty humans do. (Postman 1992: 55)

In short, Postman's contention is that in the technopoly, technology has acquired the status of a god – it is "deified" – and that like a god it has become the central belief of a surrogate religion (Postman 1992: 71). We conform to what it dictates and trust its omnipotence as the ultimate 'solver' of problems and dilemmas as if it were a god. He argues that, like a deity, technology towers above all other matters and it is undeniably the ultimate meaning of modern Western cultures, which it moulds and directs according to its own wishes.

Both Postman and Ellul sketch an image of technology as the core of an ideology that leaves no space for any other way of relating to the world or understanding one's individual existence. As they see it, no other concern is as significant to modern societies as technophilia. Certainly, they are correct when pointing out the high status that technology enjoys in modern societies and they rightfully highlight the great influence that technology has on how we make sense of the world. Modern Western societies are indeed largely typified by a technophile attitude. However, the contention that it has overruled all other belief systems and that technology is thus our *only* god is clearly mistaken. As the continued presence of various faiths, political and social beliefs, commitments and ideals reveals, technophilia has not cancelled out all other matters that people today might hold dear. From religions to the consumer experience, a variety of concerns other than technology and its powers play an important role in making sense of the world today. So, rather than boldly declaring that technology is modern society's only divinity, it makes more sense to regard it as *one* of its many gods. Technophilia is but one of the themes of ultimate meaning available to us today.

2.3.3 Progress

Belief in progress, or the conviction that various aspects of human existence can be improved and perfected through reason, science, growth of knowledge and the subsequent mastery of the world forms a third key theme on which contemporary meaning-making relies. Several observers have argued that progress is one of the more important ideas to have shaped Western cultures (Alexander 1990; Houtman et al. 1994; Kumar 1978; Laeyendecker 1986; Marx 1996; Nisbet 1970). In his *History of the Idea of Progress* (1970) the American scholar Robert Nisbet even goes as far as to argue that: "No single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years" (Nisbet 1970: 4).

Nisbet's bold statement is that faith in the inevitable advancement and continuous betterment of humanity is the defining, most dominant belief of Western societies, one that has been deemed more important than matters

such as freedom, social justice or equality throughout history. As he sees it, progress is "the developmental context", or the setting in which other important ideals have crystallised (Nisbet 1970: 171). For instance, liberty is thus understood as a product of progress; as one of the characteristic, inevitable outcomes of social and individual advancement. In other words, Nisbet interprets progress as the single ultimate value of Western cultures: he conceives of it as the central concern that defines all other principles.

While others have been more subtle in their assessments of the significance of the idea of progress, the general notion that it is indeed an important source of meaning for modern societies comes to the fore in numerous authors' works. For instance, Jeffrey Alexander posits that belief in progress should be seen as one of the defining characteristics of the typically modern mindset (Alexander 1990: 15-16). He argues that the conviction that the world can be changed, improved and fully controlled by applying reason and science – a notion that underlies the faith in progress – is fundamental to modern understanding of life.

Similarly to Alexander, the American historian Leo Marx contends that trust in progress represents "an all-encompassing collective mentality" that has had a strong influence on modern societies (Marx 1996: 206). According to Marx it is comparable to religious belief, both in the sense that it serves as a key to making sense of the world and defining matters that are of importance to societies, *and* in that it has the same broad socio-cultural appeal that religion has had in earlier times (Marx 1996: 206). As he puts it: "the belief in Progress has provided a temporal matrix – a way of ordering and assigning priorities – to a large portion of modern society's shared meanings, values, and purposes" (Marx: 206). That is, progress is one of the fundamental values of modern Western cultures that can provide a framework of ideas about the purpose of human existence and give it direction.

If one considers dictionary definitions of the term, then progress is simply a step-by-step development – either an accumulation of events and deeds or an onward movement – and in its more arcane meaning it refers to a journey (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition). However, above all, since the Enlightenment 'progress' has had strong normative connotations. The term has come to be associated with not just a pattern of change but with perfection both in specific areas of arts and sciences as well as in society and human life in general. Progress has become an ideal that can be subject to deep-seated faith, and it is in this sense that it can be described as something of ultimate significance, as Nisbet and the other authors mentioned above suggest.

There are a number of reasons why progress has functioned as such an important source of meaning and why it continues to inspire belief even today. Firstly, as an ideal, progress entails the assumption that history and human existence do not just consist of random sequences of events but that they fulfil a particular purpose. From the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment such as Condorcet and Saint-Simon to social thinkers ranging from Comte to Marx, progress has been understood as a linear and cumulative process that is geared towards some ideal state of existence. As the sociologist Krishan Kumar points out in his *Prophecy and Progress* (1978), belief in progress assumes that the future represents the triumph of some kind of an ideal, be it reason, liberty, equality, greater material well-being or a more general notion of the betterment of humanity and its civilisation (Kumar 1978: 14). This understanding of progress implies two ideas that are key to sense-making: that there is a reason for human existence – to advance the betterment of society and the human condition – and that developments in the present are meaningful because they represent significant steps towards the realisation of a specific goal.

Secondly, as a rule, the teleological understanding of history that characterises the belief in progress is rooted in the assumption that the past and the present somehow *inevitably* lead to the betterment of humanity at large. According to this line of thinking, history itself represents a steady, self-evident and unstoppable step-by-step improvement of human life, both in material and moral terms (Marx 1996: 205). In this manner progress embodies a powerful force that directs history and shapes individual lives. It provides both a general historical, goal-oriented framework in which human existence acquires meaning and a sense of an overarching force that transcends the individual and has an influence on their existence.

Thirdly, progress represents hope of better times and it reveals aspirations to improve societies and to release humanity from hardship. It is typically associated with the promise of wealth and material comfort, of lesser dependence on the whims of nature, as well as of greater freedom, social equality and harmony (Alexander 1990: 16; Laeyendecker 1986: 81). As a rule, the reasoning behind the faith in progress is that growth of knowledge, scientific insight and technological expertise will contribute to increasing human ability to exercise control over both the social and the natural world. Knowledge, science and technology are thus seen as instruments of ensuring greater well-being and realising long-standing dreams of overcoming the uncertainties and fears of human existence, even death. In short, the belief in progress not only entails the exhilarating prospect that life can be made easier and more pleasant, it also offers the promise of countering the fragility and insecurities of human existence. Progress can provide a solution to what was

described in Chapter One as the basic religious problem of the finitude of life and insecurity as to its purpose. To have faith in progress is to believe that there exists some form of secular salvation; that humanity can be saved from danger and suffering and be delivered to a better way of life. It implies that there is something that one can trust to bring comfort and security, and that rewards for possible difficulties thus await us.

In the early twenty-first century the one-time belief in the progress of humanity seems to have lost the significance and credibility it once had. The two world wars, the Holocaust, the threat of nuclear war and disasters such as the one in Chernobyl in 1986 have greatly damaged the belief that humanity is on a course towards ever-greater perfection. For one thing, these events have shown that far from being beneficial by definition, technology, science and a rational mindset can be put to use for great evil and pose a serious danger to humanity. The scarcity of recent academic publications on the subject suggests that the very idea of progress is no longer relevant, and indeed numerous scholars have spoken of its decline since the mid-twentieth century (Alexander 1990; Beck 1992; Marx 1996; Nisbet 1970). For instance, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that the current era is critical and disenchanted to the extent that progress, "the secular religion of modernity" (Beck 1992: 214) has ceased to hold ground. According to Beck, "reflexive modernisation" – a period marked by continuous analysis and assessment of both individuals and social structures – cannot accommodate the sort of unreasoned and unquestioned hope and optimism that have characterised belief in progress in earlier phases of modernity (Beck 1992: 202-203; 226).

Nonetheless, faith in progress is still going strong. In fact, the popularisation of personal computers in the mid-1980s and the introduction of networked ICT, such as the Internet and the rise of the knowledge economy a decennium later, released a whole new wave of such faith. The hopeful narratives that emerging ICT inspired throughout the 1990s typically revealed a strong conviction that knowledge and the implementation of new technologies would inevitably lead to the betterment of society and be the answer to variety of problems. Characteristically, the reasoning of various ICT specialists, management consultants and leading opinion-makers of the period was that adopting certain appliances, machines, software applications and communications systems would have the effect of granting us humans what we have always dreamt of. Wealth, happiness, comfort, liberty, equality and security would be the logical consequences of the new technologies and of a knowledge-based economy in general.

As Rein de Wilde puts it in his critical assessment of ICT-related visions of progress *De Voorspellers* [The forecasters] (2000), ICT has given rise to a

"future industry" of predictions and prophecies, which presents matters like e-mail, e-commerce and the Internet as paths to an ideal society (De Wilde 2000: 9). De Wilde describes such images of a future where information technology is the bringer of utopia with a term borrowed from William Mitchell: "e-topia" (De Wilde 2000: 30-31). E-topias reveal a particularly strong faith in the notion that society and humanity in general can be perfected and that knowledge, science and (information)technology are the instruments that inevitably lead to such progress.

One thing typifies the visions of progress in the age of e-topia in specific: it is striking that many are concerned with overcoming a number of the limitations created by earlier technologies and bureaucracy. When studying manifestos, popular scientific writings and articles in the press concerned with ICT and the Internet that where published throughout the 1990s, one is struck by the often-expressed expectation that the implementation of knowledge- and information technologies (high-tech) would lead to the emergence of societies that are more 'open', flexible and caring than those whose economies are based on heavy industry (low-tech). Some of the hopes for future social order included: closer communities, transparency in governance, de-centralisation of organisations, levelling of hierarchies, greater personal contact, a move away from anonymity, attention to individual needs, and finally, greater flexibility, liberty and variation in all aspects of social life.

Above all, e-topian versions of progress generally regarded information technology as a benign, liberating force that can release society from the sort of "iron cage" that Weber associates with modern life in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2001: 123-124). That is, it was expected to deliver societies from the chains of the inflexible, highly rationalised social order that was based on the model of efficient and mechanised, capitalist industry. In an e-topian society progress would imply the empowerment and liberty of individuals, social equality and greater appreciation of such emotional matters as a sense of community and empathy with others.

Despite the many serious blows that the twentieth and early twenty-first century have dealt to faith in the inevitable improvement of societies and their cultures, today progress continues to be an important anchor of ultimate meaning. The belief in progress is rooted in the idea that we humans follow a steady course of development that leads to a specific goal. Progress can thus instil a sense of purpose in people and it can offer sometimes very well articulated ideas about why and how we should live. Furthermore, to understand history as a process of continuous betterment of mankind and its society means that specific human lives and events around us are not arbitrary, and that they have an inherent significance which fits in

a historical scheme of things that transcends individual biographies. Finally, visions of progress are rich sources of meaning because they encompass many ideas that are highly valued in modern Western cultures, such as: growth of knowledge, scientific and technological development and skill, mastery over one's natural and social environment, and emancipation of the individual.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Exclamations such as "I shop, therefore I am" or "iPod, therefore I am" may seem like exercises in wit and clever punning but, as I argued in this chapter, in fact they point at concerns that are of ultimate significance to contemporary Western cultures. The consumer market, technology, and notions of progress preoccupy us and people draw upon them when forming an understanding of the world, when explaining why things are as they are and when attempting to work out the purpose of one's existence.

If the modern condition implies that people's minds are indeed lost and homeless, then modernity has given birth to its own sources of consolation. Consumerism holds people in its grip not only because they are greedy but more so because of the promises that goods can carry. Consumer goods are often associated with comfort, prosperity and affection, and they can represent ideals that we hold dear: growth of welfare and the continuous improvement of the standard of living, liberty and individuality, flexibility, variety and change. Similarly, technology fascinates because it is often seen as an omnipotent and omniscient force that can improve lives and offer plausible answers to questions that have a deep emotional significance to humans: what steers our existence, and how can we prepare against the chaos and dangers of the world around us? The belief in progress has much the same effect: it offers a hopeful view of the world, certainty and a sense that human existence has a 'point'.

Most importantly, all three themes of meaning discussed in this chapter can be seen as pegs that secure our sense that things are as they should be and that the world 'works' in a way that we can understand. People refer to these anchors of meaning when measuring the value of matters in the world around them and determining the guidelines by which they should live. The consumerist and future-oriented techno-culture that typifies modern Western societies on the whole is a great source of solace, comfort and certainty, or 'ontological security'. In the next chapter I shall discuss this concept and pay attention to a number of ways in which ontological security is maintained in modern societies.

CHAPTER 3
ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND HYPES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In their collaborative work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasise that meaning-making requires continuous attendance, or "universe maintenance": explanation and justification as to why matters in the world around us are as they are (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 105). They point out that although the basic assumptions about the world that guide our existence are mostly taken for granted, the sense that our understanding of the world is correct must be regularly confirmed.

Worldviews are fragile constructions: they can be brought out of balance by changes both in people's personal lives and on a broader socio-cultural plane, due to transformations in political regimes, in wartime, as a result of new scientific insights and technological inventions or through contact with other cultures and religions (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 103-105). What is assumed to be important can become irrelevant, what is accepted as self-explanatory can become subject to doubt, and guiding principles and matters that are deemed to be of ultimate significance can lose their credibility. As Berger and Luckmann put it, "*All* social reality is precarious. *All* societies are constructions at the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse" (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 103). That is, meaninglessness and existential unease lurk behind all worldviews and the sort of crisis of meaning that Berger and Giddens attribute to modernity can strike on occasions when particular explanations of the world around us no longer seem to 'work' (Berger et al. 1973; Giddens 1990).

At such moments when the accepted view of the world is threatened, or when the objects and individuals who function as proof of its validity no longer seem reliable, groups often emphatically declare their shared values and make intense attempts at re-establishing certainties. One of the important ways in which groups articulate and (re)affirm the meanings, beliefs and truths that they share is through collective events: mass-scale gatherings, demonstrations, spectacular festivities, as well as commercial crazes and media hypes. For instance, Berger and Luckmann describe the public reactions following the death of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 as "the most solemn reaffirmations of the continuing reality of the sheltering

symbols" (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 104). They interpret the public mourning for Kennedy and other commemorative events related to his death as attempts to cope with a sense of social unease and ways to secure order at a time of political uncertainty. According to Berger and Luckmann, these highly emotional acts represented *en-masse* confirmations of collective values, such as political stability, patriotism, respect for the country's institutions and leaders, and the democratic ideal.

But what Berger and Luckmann refer to as universe maintenance does not necessarily involve collective acts that are as grave and exalted as the Kennedy example. Brief (media)hypes and commercial crazes can also function as means of asserting the importance of specific values and confirming the validity of notions related to ultimate meaning. Popular crazes are often passionate declarations of meaning and purpose, and the collective enthusiasm that they can inspire provides a shared focus, however banal the object of people's attentions may be. For instance, while (as was argued in the previous chapter) consumerism, technophilia and belief in progress are of central, defining significance to modern Western societies, hypes and crazes relating to consumer goods and new technologies can be seen as vehicles for articulating their great importance.

In this chapter, I shall consider the possible relationship between hypes and the sort of crisis of meaning that appears to typify modernity. The question that will guide the discussion in this chapter is: how do such often short-lived collective outbursts of emotion respond to the difficulties in meaning-making at a time when traditional (religious) worldviews are losing their relevance for many people's understanding of the world? How might they offer a sense of certainty and purpose in the face of the possible "vacuum of meaning" – to use Kevin Kelly's terminology (Kelly 1998:160) – created by processes of modernisation and secularisation? In what follows, I shall first discuss Anthony Giddens' notion of ontological security and explain why such a sense of certainty is as important as it is. Subsequently, the discussion will move on to various forms collective effervescence and pay particular attention to the phenomena of craze and hype as important channels of confirming shared meanings in the 21st century.

3.2 ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND ANOMIE

In his *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) Anthony Giddens employs the term "ontological security" to describe the confidence that people can have in the reliability and orderliness of their worldview. In its basic definition 'ontology' is the (metaphysical) study of the meaning and purpose of that what exists. The term ontological *security*, then, refers to the feeling that the meanings that individuals and societies project on objects are valid and that there is

inherent coherence and reason to the way that the world is organised. As Giddens puts it, ontological security entails the sense that "the world is as it is because it is as it should be" (Giddens 1991: 48). This kind of security comes down to the ability to find one's bearings in the world without much doubt. More specifically, in Giddens' use of the term, ontological security relates to a personal feeling of certainty about such existential matters as the significance and purpose of one's life. In an earlier work, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), he defines it as the trust that people have in the "continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens 1990: 92).

Philosophy and religion can suggest answers to existential questions and explicitly anchor ontology to certain worldviews but, as Giddens says, ontological security remains primarily on the level of so-called practical consciousness, or mostly unarticulated awareness of the significance and working principles of the world around us (Giddens 1991: 36). Trust in the validity of a worldview is particularly strong at this level: here agreements on meaning and codes of behaviour are tacit. They are not seen as arbitrary, explicitly defined rules but have taken on the status of being 'natural'.

Whether it is on the level of practical consciousness or that of specific, explicitly articulated teachings about the world, ontological security is of central importance for our existence. As Durkheim argues, the sense that one's compass for orientating in their social environment and the world at large is correct is essential for the very survival of both individuals and societies (Durkheim 1952; 1964). In both his *The Division of Labour in Society* (1964 [1893]) and *Suicide* (1952 [1897]) Durkheim puts forward the notion that a state of anomie, or unease that results from the breakdown of meaningful structures in a society, can have fatal effects on the "general health of the social body" (Durkheim 1964: 29), *and,* in acute cases, lead to self-destruction (Durkheim 1952). To Durkheim 'anomie' signifies a loosening of social control and a general deregulation of established law, order and beliefs. In terms of Giddens' notion of ontological security, this understanding of anomie is its opposite – *in*security about (ultimate) meaning. As Durkheim sees it, at its most extreme anomie can mean chaos and even a complete inability to function: "Society suffers from it [anomie], being unable to live without cohesion and regularity" (Durkheim 1964: 5). In *Suicide* his argument is that anomie, which is brought about by a disruption in the established social order, is the key to understanding suicide. His explanation is that "every disturbance of equilibrium, even though it achieves greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality … is an impulse to voluntary death" (Durkheim 1952: 246). In other words, Durkheim's assertion is that individuals cease to be able to exist when points

of reference for orientation in society are lost and their understanding of their worldview becomes confused.

Just as it is important for our physical sense of security that our material environment are stable and not likely to collapse, the meanings that make up one's world must also be robust and unfailing in order to maintain ontological security. If we agree with Durkheim, then the task of keeping anomie at bay is vital for the existence of societies and individuals. When accepted worldviews are subject to confusion and one's ontological security is no longer self-evident, explicit articulations of collective meanings and values become necessary.

3.3 COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE

According to Durkheim, shared excitement or effervescence is a prime means of counteracting the uncertainty and unease that can arise when the truths and values of a worldview are questioned. As he argues in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, gatherings of groups where individuals have the feeling that they participate in a significant event can function as a means of confirming and (re)establishing what Giddens would later call ontological security. According to Durkheim, many groups "deliberately hold periodic meetings in which their members may renew their common faith by some collective demonstration" (Durkheim 2001: 157). As he puts it, such events serve to "reaffirm feelings that might fade if left to themselves"; they have the task of "reassuring and invigorating" people's view of the world (Durkheim 2001: 157).

In his discussion of the *corroborees*, or periodical gatherings of the Australian Aboriginal tribes (these form the main case study of his book), Durkheim shows that values and ideals that are important to a society are (re)articulated and amplified in the course of collective events where emotions can run wild (Durkheim 2001: 162-165; 175-178). Rituals, narratives and collective symbols emerge and formulaic answers are formed as to how to 'deal with' the world. Shared points of focus and sacred objects are (re)established and societies can thus reassure themselves that their compasses for orientation in the world are correct. With the example of the French Revolution, Durkheim indicates that this principle applies to a variety of historical events, not just tribal rituals. He argues that, like the corroborees of the Australian tribes, the events of the Revolution were also effervescent meetings of crowds where the guiding beliefs of a group (patriotism, liberty and equality) were emphatically articulated (Durkheim 2001: 157-158; 161).

In the contemporary Western setting, gatherings at pop concerts, football matches and funeral ceremonies for public figures are comparable occasions of collective effervescence born in crowds of hundreds and

thousands of people. For instance, following the death of the Princess of Wales, Diana Spencer in the United Kingdom in 1997, two million people are reported to have assembled in London for her funeral (Parrot & Harré 2001: 30). Shrines of flowers, toys, drawings and letters of commemoration were created in London and other parts of the United Kingdom, and feelings of grief and loss were expressed *en masse* on the streets and through the media. Although this was a sad occasion, a thrilling sense of purpose and togetherness was born in the midst of the crowds that gathered to mourn the princess. The numbers of people in close contact with one another and in concert about their feelings gave rise to a mix of turbulence and collective exhilaration. As several commentators have observed, the "Diana phenomenon" (Parrot & Harré 2001: 29) was characterised by the wish of thousands to be together with others and to share their emotions in a group (Harris 1999; Richards, Wilson, & Woodhead 1999; Thomas 2002).

Though they seem far less elevated, perhaps the most common gatherings of crowds in Western societies today can be found within the consumer world. The storming of department stores in times of sale by shoppers and frenzied quests for particular toys in the Christmas season are both fine manifestations of effervescent mass-action. A striking recent example of such crowd behaviour presented itself at the opening of a series of new clothing stores that belong to the Primark retail chain across Britain in the spring of 2007. The British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* gave this report of the shopping frenzy that took place at the London store:

> Mounted police, bobbies on the beat and officers from the Safer Neighbourhoods team joined forces with Primark's security force to try and restrain the thousands of bargain hunters, some of whom had been queuing since 2am. … It was an every-woman-for-herself situation as shoppers crawled, scrambled and clambered over one another to be first in when the security shutters opened up at 10am. Some shoppers were knocked to the ground … as people stormed the racks and rails like sharks in a feeding frenzy. (Alexander 2007)

At first glance, such a gathering of crazed shoppers seems hardly comparable to the moments of collective confirmation of a group's shared values and main concerns to which Durkheim refers in *The Elementary Forms*. After all, in such cases as the Primark frenzy, people are drawn together by a banal longing to procure certain consumer goods and it is mainly the prospect of bargain prices that stirs emotions. In what way could an event like this possibly contribute to the maintenance of any worldview?

Despite its frivolous nature, the crowd behaviour of consumers, such as displayed in the Primark example, can contain very powerful and extremely emotional affirmations of what I described in the previous chapter as one of key themes of ultimate meaning that mark contemporary western societies: the consumer ethic. Such events attest to the central importance of consumption in modern lives and they provide one with remarkable proof of the lengths to which individuals can go in their efforts to conform to the consumer ethic.

In his *Collective Behavior and Public Opinion* (2003) the Dutch psychologist Jaap van Ginneken confirms this idea. He argues that hypes and crazes, as well as fashions, ever-shifting public moods and assemblies of crowds are all forms of collective behaviour that arise when groups feel the need to affirm and sharpen their sense of ontological security. In his wording:

> Typical mass and collective behavior patterns emerge whenever and wherever (and insofar as) the 'habitual' responses in the relevant domain are being experienced as insufficient and inappropriate. … Concrete, lively, and salient symbols (new words and images, events and people) … facilitate and stabilize the process of 'redefinition of the situation' (Van Ginneken 2003: 240)

Van Ginneken posits that gatherings of crowds, public opinion and trends all represent attempts to channel a group's emotions. He points out that not all occasions of collective effervescence are jubilant. The emotions involved in different meetings and crazes can vary from joy and euphoria to anger, fear and sorrow (Van Ginneken 2003: 150).

For instance, the commemorative events marking the deaths of public figures, such as John F. Kennedy, Diana Spencer or (to take some examples from recent Dutch history) the public assemblies and debates following the killings of the politician Pim Fortuyn and the columnist and film-maker Theo van Gogh, respectively in 2002 and 2004, were sad and angered. The media-hype that surrounded the computer problem known as the 'Y2K bug' at the very end of the 1990s (which I shall discuss in greater detail in Chapter Eight) was also primarily driven by panic and anxiety.

However, as far as the task of providing objects and ideas on which groups can focus their attention is concerned, the nature of the sentiments does not matter. Of importance are: the emergence of striking signs, narratives and images that can give form to matters that preoccupy people, the rise of intense shared emotions and the presence of a feeling that people are communally participating in a significant event.

3.4 THE CROWD AND THE PUBLIC

Shopping frenzies, sports events, public celebrations, commemorations and festivals, and the corroborees of the Australian Aboriginals of whom Durkheim speaks, are all assemblies of people in close physical proximity. On these occasions, the presence of large numbers of others itself contributes both to the emotional intensity of the event and to any sense of shared belief. However, in the case of many other examples of collective effervescence in the modern-day context, such as waves of opinion, panics, fashions, crazes and hypes, exhilaration and the sense of a common cause are often generated from a distance. Newspapers, magazines, blogs, websites, various other publications and radio and television programmes mediate and fuel collective excitement, and those involved may never meet. These instances represent a specific kind of collective behaviour that expresses itself not through crowds but primarily in the form of public opinion and trends. This type of collective behaviour 'lives' mostly in discourse, rather than action. To a great extent, these are media events; articulated, shaped, orchestrated and amplified by the press and other means of public expression. For instance, the Internet hype of the mid-1990s was above all a media phenomenon. Certainly, this new means of communication was embraced *en masse* by individuals and businesses. It triggered the interest and involvement of a very large group of actors and gave rise to a consumer craze. But this was not *crowd* behaviour. The primary locations of this event were media outlets, and it was media coverage that made this craze into the hope-filled, emotional phenomenon that it became.

The distinction between actual meetings of people and the more dispersed public opinion was made by early students of collective behaviour, most notably by the sociologists Gabriel Tarde in the treatise "The Public and the Crowd" (1898) and Robert E. Park in "The Crowd and the Public" (1904). Both distinguished between the crowd as a physical entity that is formed as people come into contact at demonstrations, riots or parades, and the public that emerges in the course of the exchange of information and beliefs, primarily through printed matter. Both Tarde and Park regarded the birth of the public as a consequence of the rise of popular journalism and mass-scale use of the telegraph and the printing press. The public could only come into existence at this particular stage of technological development and was thus regarded by both sociologists as a typically modern phenomenon. Tarde in particular saw the public as *the* social group of the future that would define collective behaviour in society. In fact, in "The Public and the Crowd" he replaces Gustave Le Bon's epitaph for the modern era as "the age of the crowds" by his own "age of the public" (Tarde 1969: 281).

Indeed, while several examples can attest to the fact that emotional crowd behaviour continues to be an important facet of society today, a different type of collective behaviour has become manifest that is of ever-greater significance in defining the dominant moods and actions of society. To a great extent the public, rather than crowds constitute collective behaviour in the twenty-first century, and as the British media scholar Simon Cottle says, "Today, 'society in action' is often enacted in and through the media sphere" (Cottle 2006: 415). With the help of media of information and entertainment, groups of people articulate common sentiments and act in unison without necessarily sharing the same physical space with others. Shared ideas are formed and collective action is conducted via broadcasts, print and digital publications or (commercial) publicity campaigns.

Yet, however virtual this type of collective behaviour may appear, it *can* have great influence on mobilising social action, which may express itself in such varied matters as shifts in electoral choices, civil initiatives and protests, mass-scale followings of artists and celebrities, and rushes by consumers to purchase specific goods. Furthermore, collective behaviour that involves the public can fulfil the same functions as those that Durkheim associates with group demonstrations and rituals: give rise to shared exhilaration and thus draw social groups together and remind them of common values and aspirations. While they may seem trivial, popular crazes and hypes (which are largely generated and shaped by the media) are common instruments of doing this in modern Western societies: they create excitement and a sense of shared experience, they provide common points of focus and they highlight matters that groups deem worthwhile.

3.5 CRAZES AND HYPES

In his *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962) the American sociologist Neil Smelser defines the craze as a "mobilization for action based on a positive wish-fulfilment belief" (Smelser 1962: 171). In other words, crazes are acts of groups inspired by a conviction that the object of their attention has the potential to realise hopeful dreams and aspirations. The object in question can vary from trivial things to matters of great importance. The craze is born from and spreads among dispersed groups and individuals in the public opinion, rumours, beliefs, advertisements and communications media. Although Smelser does not exclude the possibility that a craze could be carried by crowds who are in close proximity, the key to crazes is the creation and confirmation of shared beliefs and sentiments via the public opinion.

Crazes can occur in all social settings. Smelser pays attention to speculative booms on the stock exchange, the bandwagon effect in politics, fashions and fads in clothing and the arts, and waves of religious revivalism

(Smelser 1962). In each case, he indicates that they fulfil an important function in society. In line with Durkheim's thoughts on collective effervescence, he argues that crazes offer a means of dealing with uncertainties and finding counterweights for the anxieties that exist among groups. Smelser explains that the wish-fulfilment beliefs on which crazes are founded provide structure to ambiguous situations by "the creation of a world of positive generalised powers – a system of causality… – which counteracts or overcomes the negative forces implicit in anxiety (Smelser 1962: 97). Dreams of wish-fulfilment are "crystallised", or fixed to an object, notion or person and linked to specific goals and ways of behaviour (Smelser 1962: 205-217). Concrete action and beliefs emerge that are designed to respond to ambiguity and apprehension. For instance, in the political context, groups of people follow a leader and an ideology, or in the case of fashion, masses will imitate trendsetters and take to a certain style of clothing. They adopt specific patterns of behaviour, a framework of ideas and focus emotions on leading figures.

In the recent decennia, 'hype' has become a popular term in analyses of group behaviour. In essence, it represents a contemporary take on the more dated 'craze': both are used to describe the same social phenomenon of sudden collective excitement about a chosen object of attention. Hypes arise as visionaries, journalists, trendsetters and specialists promote and publicise an object, idea or person. As the Dutch media theorist Peter Vasterman shows, the term 'hype' is often understood as active promotion and publication of certain matters by journalists, advertisement agencies and 'spin doctors', with the objective to create intense interest and excitement among the public (Vasterman 2005: 511). Opinions and praise are articulated through various media, and the public takes its cue from those who are seen as models for forming an idea or for taking a certain course of action. 'Hype' refers specifically to public opinion and collective sentiments that are induced and carried by media of entertainment and communication: public debates, gossip, urban legends, trends and fashions are not just channelled by the media but *created* on television, radio, the Internet, newspapers and so on.

Furthermore, hype is often associated with attention to seemingly trivial matters and useless consumer products (Vasterman 2005: 511-512). Trinkets and gadgets can receive extensive media coverage, become the source of fervent emotions and take on a great importance. According to Vasterman, when something is hyped, attention from the press to an item is usually disproportionate compared to its 'real' social significance (Vasterman 2005: 509). Characteristically, hypes are short-lived and each old hype is likely to be erased from memory as a new one takes centre stage. For instance, the

Netherlands experiences a continuous flux of hypes: from a deluge of toys and collectibles, to the Tamagochi electronic pet and the iPod, from Big Brother to *The Da Vinci Code,* all relatively unimportant phenomena that have however briefly enjoyed passionate media and public attention. However, more significant matters – political and public events, natural disasters, technological inventions or controversial ideas – can also become subject to media-hypes. To mention but a few examples: Bill Clinton's impeachment affair in the United States in 1998-1999, public discussions concerning headscarves worn by Muslim women in many Western European countries, the SARS pandemic throughout 2002 and 2003, and from the mid-1980s onwards personal computers and the Internet have all been the focal points of shared excitement fuelled by the media.

But perhaps the most effervescent and profound hypes today can be found in the domain of technology. As the case study of the Internet hype in the following chapters shows, enthusiasm for new technology can provide edifying examples of intense collective attempts to establish anchors necessary for maintaining ontological security. When looking at the promotion and media reports regarding the Internet and examples from the realm of personal technologies, such as the iPod and iPhone, one can see that these technologies embodied the three themes of ultimate meaning that were discussed in the previous chapter: the consumer ethic, technophilia and belief in progress. Typically, these technologies have inspired both explicit confirmations of the joys of the consumer world and exuberant celebrations of technology and its promises. They have also highlighted the imperative of continuous innovation, change and progress in contemporary Western societies.

Furthermore, crazes and hypes such as those related to the technologies just mentioned can mobilise large numbers of people and play a crucial role in contemporary individuals' quest for the comfort of like-minded others. They inspire thrilling moments of communal dreaming and yearning, out of which meaning and a sense of purpose can be distilled.

3.6 CONCLUSION

The many crazes and hypes that one can encounter today can be seen as instruments of what Berger and Luckmann call "universe maintenance" (Berger & Luckmann 1967: 104-128). They serve as means of sustaining the techno-consumer culture that marks modern societies and they provide common interests, passions, aspirations and ideals. Even if for a brief period, crazes and hypes can offer a framework of meaning out of which ontological security, or confidence about the inherent coherence and rationale of one's environment, can be distilled. In other words, instances of collective

celebration of consumer goods and new technologies are equivalent to the periodic moments of renewing a group's shared beliefs and assumptions of which Durkheim speaks in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* Hypes surrounding technology in particular are impassioned confirmations of such highly valued aspirations as: comfort and mobility, novelty and change, independence and free choice. They place technological innovation on a special pedestal as a means of improving and radically changing lives and they show a sense of wonderment and even affection for technology.

However, many contemporary cases differ in one important respect from Durkheim's corroborees and other gatherings of crowds. They are largely media events, where various publications and broadcasts form the primary platform for developing and expressing shared interests and common sentiments. As was the case with the Internet, the excitement about emerging consumer products is often built up by various enthusiasts and promoters through advertisements and public appearances. The press and other forms of popular media can pick up on the ideas and promises put forward by such advocates and, in turn, create an intense air of anticipation and exhilaration around a product or some kind of innovation, like the Internet. In this manner, large groups of people can share their fascination with certain products and concepts and be moved to act in unison without necessarily ever meeting.

The question of how a hype emerges and what it entails is the topic of the next chapter. The focus of the chapter will be on the history and development of the Internet hype. With the help of this case study I shall attempt to explain further why hypes can be described as answers to (potential) social anomie and show why the Internet might be considered a peak moment in the maintenance of the techno-consumer worldview that plays such an important role in our culture.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROOTS OF THE INTERNET HYPE: POST-COLD WAR ANOMIE AND THE INFORMATION AGE

> Everything was just hyper speed, hyper everything. … We could feel the competition of this pioneering new medium; everyone was beginning to notice. We felt this rush. It was a potential new religion. This was a religion being invented.
> Now would come the Crusades.
> (Stephan Paternot, *A Very Public Offering*: 57)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Since the mass-market introduction of the personal computer in the mid-1980s, information and communications technology (ICT) has intermittently been the focus of intense public fascination. Computer technology and new media of communication have inspired optimistic visions of the future: among other things, they have been hailed as the bringers of wealth, enlightenment and boundless freedom. In the course of the 1990s, the system of networked computers and information services known to us today as the Internet became the pinnacle of such technophiliac hopes. Among various enthusiasts, in the journalistic media and through other publications it gave rise to particularly intense utopian narratives. As has been the case with several other technological innovations throughout history, the Internet came to be associated with age-old dreams of comfort, with the betterment of human existence, transcendence beyond the limitations of time and matter, and hopes of greater harmony worldwide .

For a period of six or seven years between 1994, when the *Netscape Navigator* web browser – one of the first of the more user-friendly graphics-based internet browsers[4] – was introduced, and 2000's deflation of the dot-com boom on the stock markets, the Internet was the source of passionate collective effervescence. It functioned as an object of strong, shared belief and devotion that gave shape to dreams, aspirations and fortifying narratives

---

4 A browser facilitates viewing the content of websites (text, images). Sometimes, this interface itself is commonly but mistakenly identified as 'the Internet'.

about the state of the world. The public hype that the Internet inspired forms an exemplary case of an intense attempt to anchor a sense of ontological security to technological innovations and to collectively confirm the key meanings and values of contemporary society.

In the next three chapters, I shall focus on the question how this hype could serve as a source of meaning and look at the ways in which this essentially secular phenomenon could answer questions of purpose and ultimate significance traditionally associated with the religious. But first, in the current chapter, I shall sketch a history of the Internet hype, give an account of what it consisted of and attempt to explain how it responded to a sense of social anomie by looking at the historical context whence it emerged.

4.2 THE INTERNET – A HISTORY

In its present form, the Internet can be best described as a worldwide network of interlinked computers that enables the exchange of information in the form of digitised data. E-mail, the World Wide Web, discussion forums, various audio-visual applications and so on are all facilitated by the medium Internet. By now, it is more than a medium of communication like the telephone or a source of information and entertainment like the radio or the television: the Internet has become a platform that combines services, information, entertainment and commerce.

Standard histories of the Internet locate its birth in 1969, when the first hypertext systems, or inter-linked, computer based texts and documents were created by the United States Defence Department as a military research project (Abbate 1999; Bolter 1991; Hafner 1996; Winston 1998). The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) network originally connected computers in four locations via telephone lines and in the 1970s it slowly gathered momentum as a means of communication between some sixty universities and research institutes in the United States (Hafner 1996:151-55). However, the popularisation and commercialisation of the Internet only lifted off in the early 1990s when the Word Wide Web browsing system with its standard mark up language (HTML) and universal resource locator (URL) was introduced. Around that time the first commercial dial-up networks via telephone lines were launched both in the United States and Europe and the Internet became a viable medium of communication for private use.

The beginnings of the Internet hype can be located at the time of the introduction of the *Netscape Navigator* web browser in 1994 and the ensuing 'browser wars', or heavy competition between the software producers *Netscape* and *Microsoft*, whose *Internet Explorer* was launched in the next year. The international media followed the struggle for market dominance

between the two companies with much interest, pitching the smaller company *Netscape* against Bill Gates and his *Microsoft* (*The Economist* 1995a; Kaplan 1995; Kehoe & Jones 1995; Quittner & Mondi 1995). This rivalry was compelling and it drew the attention of the media to the newly evolving Internet industry and trade. The fortunes made by those involved, the youth of many of the new Internet billionaires, the novelty of the medium and the many accounts of the salutary effects of the new technology added fuel to the interest in the Internet, so that by the mid-1990s it was a fully grown hype.

The Internet generated much interest among the popular press, and across North America as well as Europe, Australia and parts of Asia a lively public discourse emerged. At the heyday of Internet enthusiasm a number of dedicated lifestyle magazines were born (*Wired, Red Herring, Mondo 2000, Fast Company*) and in the years leading up the year 2000, the Internet enjoyed a dominant presence in established general interest and news magazines as well. For instance, between 1993 and 2002 the American magazine *Time* featured the Internet and its many visionaries and heroes on its cover on at least twenty occasions. The election of Jeff Bezos, the founder of the Internet-based bookstore *Amazon.com* as the magazine's Person of the Year in 1999 was a telling sign of the special status granted to the Internet in the public discourse. The Internet and enterprise related to it were honoured as phenomena of historical import for the world and Bezos was added to a list of eminent world leaders that includes such figures as Stalin and Hitler, Adenauer, John F. Kennedy, Gorbachev and Bill Clinton. Finally, a superficial, tell-tale sign of the hype was the sudden popularity of 'e-neologisms' (e-commerce, e-trade, e-workers, e-banking and e-church among many others) and terms such as 'the information superhighway', 'dot-com', 'cyberspace' in the press from the mid-1990s onwards.

In addition to the coverage in the journalistic media, this hype manifested itself in an avalanche of speeches, manifestos and other publications by a variety of pundits, the explosive growth of websites and the web-community, the rise of Internet 'gurus' and 'whiz kid' specialists, and the exhilaration about the so-called dot-com firms on the financial markets. By the very last years of the 1990s the Internet had become an all-out popular culture phenomenon. As the journalist Linton Weeks put it his column 'The *Navigator*' which ran in *The Washington Post*, the Internet seemed to be everywhere and influence all aspects of everyday life: "The Internet is omnipresent. It's altering how we live and think, the way we meet people, research term papers, tell jokes, write fiction, plan romantic evenings, adopt children, stay in touch" (Weeks 1999).

The statistics on the spreading of the Internet in the course of the 1990s vary depending on the source and most represent rough estimates, but all

reports point at the large numbers of people who took to the Internet in those years. According to information available on the website of the Internet Society (ISOC) – an international organisation that promotes Internet use and provides information concerning its growth – by 1999, 206 countries worldwide had access to the Internet. The ISOC estimated that at that time there were 50 million Internet hosts [ISOC defines a host as a computer that is connected to the Internet], 700 million web pages and 140 million users (ISOC).

In the report 'More Online, Doing More' the Pew Internet and American Life Project group quotes data on the numbers of hours that Americans were estimated to have spent on the Internet: on average 5,2 hours a week in 1999 (Rainie & Packel 2001: 3). The Dutch Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research) reports that by the beginning of the year 2000 more than 30% of the Dutch households had access to the Internet. Within a year, those numbers had grown fast, so that at the start of 2001 50% of the households had Internet access. Another indicator of the growing presence of the Internet in Dutch society in the 1990s was the rise in the number of .nl domain names.5 If in 1990 seven of such domain names were registered in the whole of the country, then by 1999 there were 100.000 and a year later, in 2000, the numbers had reached 500.000 (Huysmans, de Haan & van den Broek 2004: 90).

Parallel to the history of inventions and developments in computing, and the infrastructure and commercial applications that gave birth to it, runs the story of the Internet as a concept. What we know as the Internet today is strongly formed by ideas that overlap with science fiction and futurology. As an idea, the roots of the Internet are traced back to the American scientist Vannevar Bush's article 'As We May Think', published in 1945 in the cultural and current affairs magazine *The Atlantic Monthly* (Winston 1998: 322). In it Bush develops the idea of a memory machine – "memex", as he calls it (Bush 1996: 43) – that can store books, letters and files of information, index and organise them, link different documents, and be operated from a distance. He foresees the emergence of new kinds of encyclopaedias and what we now know as databases (Bush 1996: 45-46). As some of Bush's ideas in 'As We May Think' are strikingly close to what the Internet has become, a number of authors have described this article as one

---

5 A domain name is the name given to the virtual host that facilitates websites and e-mail. For instance, Leiden University has the domain name leidenuniv.nl and one can recognise it in the addresses of its web pages (www.hum.leidenuniv.nl/godsdienstwetenschappen/) and in e-mail addresses that belong to the organisation.

of the very first steps in the evolution of the Internet (Castells 2001: 15; Stefik 1996: 15; Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003: 35; Winston 1998: 322). Another important storyline in the narrative about the origins of the Internet is linked to the science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984), written by the American author William Gibson. Gibson is generally considered to be the creator of the neologism "cyberspace" and often hailed as one of the pioneering visionaries of the Internet (Bell 2001, Davis 1995; Mosco 2004; Wertheim 1999). In *Neuromancer* he uses the term cyberspace when describing the alternative, digital environment where the main character of the novel, the computer hacker Case operates and dwells as a bodiless being. In this and other novels, Gibson conceives of cyberspace as notional data-space, which is facilitated by networked computers. Not only is it a platform for communication and the exchange and storage of data, Gibson's cyberspace is also a meeting place for individuals from across the globe. This idea of virtual space that is somehow housed within computer networks had great influence on the way that the Internet was conceptualised all through the 1990s. By the early years of the decade, Gibson's word "cyberspace" had become a common popular term for denoting matters relating to the Internet and the World Wide Web (Flichy 2007: 124).

In his book *The Internet Imaginaire* (2007) the French media historian Patrice Flichy argues that *Neuromancer* and other science fiction works of the so-called cyberpunk genre6 played an important role in introducing the idea of the Internet to broader audiences (Flichy 2007: 122-127). As Flichy puts it: "This cyber-*imaginaire* also interested ordinary users. It provided them … with a general vision of cyberspace and the information society" (Flichy 2007: 127). That is, such fictional tales about digital communication networks as Gibson's made the Internet interesting and accessible to people who were not necessarily specialists in computing or engineering. Ideas developed by science fiction writers were a way to understand new technologies and to appreciate their potential. In other words, to a certain extent the popularisation and later commercialisation of the Internet can be described as the fruit of the imagination of science-fiction writers. The origins of the Internet as a cultural phenomenon are closely tied up with science fiction and such scientific speculations as those of Vannevar Bush.

In addition to both the science fiction element and the story of technological advancement in the history of the Internet, some authors also point at its Californian hippie roots (Davis 2004; Segaller 1998). As the

---

6 Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science-fiction that deals with (often dystopian) futures where computers and information networks define social order. Characteristic elements of cyberpunk literature are: a virtual reality environment, artificial intelligence, computer hackers and other information technology specialists.

American writer Steven Segaller shows in his book *Nerds 2.0.1: A Brief History of the Internet* (1998), the "grassroots of the Internet" sprouted out of a 'scene' that was associated with the quintessential hippie band the *Grateful Dead* and a publication entitled *Whole Earth Catalog* (Segaller 1998: 269-273). Published since the late-1960s, the latter was an almanac-like guide, concerned with learning and the spreading of knowledge, self-sufficiency and the environment, political activism and community forming. In 1985 the makers of the *Whole Earth Catalog* launched the *WELL*, or *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link*, which is regarded as one of the first virtual communities. The principles of the *WELL* (which still exists)[7] originally reflected such counterculture ideals such as free access to knowledge and tools, uninhibited exchange of information, freedom of expression, self-governance and a strong sense of community. Although in the course of the 1990s public discourse about the Internet was dominated by more predatory, commercial aspirations, these ideas became an integral part of the way that the Internet was understood. Such counterculture ideals as those adhered to by the creators of the *WELL* had a great influence on the dream of the Internet as a means to enlightened utopia.

By today, 2009, the Internet has lost its initial special allure and it has become a normal part of our everyday lives. Excitement about the Internet cooled down from March 2000 onwards, following what is known as the dotcom crash: the spectacular bankruptcies of many new Internet companies that had caused much excitement on the stock exchange only months before. While, in the recent years, the transactions concerning the search engine *Google*, the video platform *YouTube* or the virtual reality environment *Second Life* have all generated considerable media interest, the kind of excitement that marked the rise of the Internet has not re-surfaced.

4.3 THE RHETORIC OF THE HYPE

Right from the start, the Internet was subject to myth-making, and public understanding of what this new technology really was, was coloured by a gamut of metaphors and rich imagery. Depending on the use that commentators and enthusiasts attributed to it, the Internet came to mean different things to different parties. In *The Digital Sublime* Vincent Mosco lists the six most frequently used conceptualisations of the Internet: the digital library, the information highway, electronic commerce, virtual community, digital ecology and the narrative stream, which evokes an image of the Internet as a story (Mosco 2004: 51-52). In addition to these different

---

7 The *WELL* is now property of the Salon media group and can be found on: http://www.well.com/

74

figures of speech, looking at media reports and popular scientific *as well as* academic literature on the subject, one can come across a great variety of terms, all of which somehow refer to the Internet and matters related to it. I have already mentioned "cyberspace" (Barlow 1996; Dyson et al. 1994; Wertheim 2000). Some of the other words and concepts employed are: "the web" (Andrews 1999; Burnett & Marshall 2003; Gillies & Cailleau 2000), "the net" (Insana 2000), "hypertext" (Bolter 1991), "the online world" (Brasher, 2001; Dawson & Cowan, 2004), "virtual reality" and "dotcom" (Pope 1999; Schenker 2000; Smith 1999). Each of these is concerned with a specific facet of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Cyberspace, online world and virtual reality thus refer to a parallel, imaginary space; the web and the net point at the interlinked system of computers which facilitate the Internet and its services; hypertext is concerned with the way that data is organised; and dotcom refers to Internet-based commerce. Together these terms gave body to the discourse about networked information technology, pointing at its varied capacities.

Because the Internet appeared to have so many different uses and meanings, it was ideal dream material, to use Colin Campbell's term (Campbell 1989: 89), which I discussed briefly in Chapter Two. It had great potential as a vehicle for hopes, fantasies and speculations. The gist of many reports in the press and visions of the future concerning the Internet in all manner of publications was that with the introduction of this (largely incomprehensible) technology something special was starting to take place. As I shall show later, the Internet and related technologies were often associated with sweeping changes to various aspects of society and they inspired keen anticipation amongst enthusiast and journalists. For instance, in 1995 a bewildered journalist at *Newsweek* magazine writes about digital technology in general as the "Bit Bang", the Big Bang of information technology that "will change every aspect of our lives" and he refers to the Internet in specific as the mysterious but powerful entity that is bound to have far-reaching effects on our lives: "as we grappled with the unanswered questions, we're in for a the ride of a lifetime" (Levy 1995a).

In truth, there were exceptions to the enthusiasm. For example, the British journal *The Economist* paid much attention to the false enthusiasm and exaggerated hopes surrounding the Internet and the ICT economy. As the preoccupation with the Internet grew, a number of articles and books were published that were critical of the hype (Frank 2000; Kuo 2000; Swiss & Herman 2000; in The Netherlands: Jole 2000) and commentary in the press increasingly contained such derogatory terms as craze, frenzy, madness,

buzz, bubble, and so on.[8] The connotation of such vocabulary was chiefly that the public interest for the Internet had been blown beyond proportion. A typical expression of this notion can be found in the article 'Internet Insanity', the 'cover story' of a 1999 issue of the international trade and finance periodical *Money Magazine*. The author of the article, the journalist Suzanne Woolley describes the great exhilaration about the Internet as a case of "insanity" and "frenzy" and she suggests that an inexplicable madness of crowds was taking hold of the public (Woolley 1999).

However, despite such critical notes, the sort of language that dominated the discourse about the Internet up until just after the year 2000 was mostly very confident and buoyant. Telling signs of the enthusiasm for the Internet were the many references to faith and religious zeal in accounts of the significance of the Internet for society. It was not unusual for journalists, various experts and entrepreneurs to speak of "Internet religion", "web religion" or "digital religion" (Cortese & Verity 1995; Mack 1999; Reinhardt 1999). For example, in the book *A Very Public Offering. A Rebel's Story of Business Excess, Success, and Reckoning* (2001) – an auto-biographic retrospective on the fortunes of his company *theGlobe.com* that caused much furore in late-1998 – the youthful Internet entrepreneur Stephan Paternot describes the exultation about the Internet in these terms. In the quote with which I started this chapter, Paternot refers to the sense of elevation, passion and commitment that the Internet inspired as "a religion being invented" (Paternot 2001: 57). His sentiments towards the Internet typified much of the discourse about it in the mid-1990s: it was an emotional matter that gave rise to fervent and vigorous proselytising, or "a Crusade", as Paternot puts it (Paternot: 57).

Rhetoric about the Internet was filled with religious analogies and some felt free to describe the feelings inspired by it as religion. But was this not a case of mere florid metaphor, can one really speak of religion? In line with Paternot's suggestion that the craze for Internet-related businesses was giving birth to a new religion, I would posit that the public interest for the Internet was indeed a religious affair. However, unlike Paternot, I would not claim that *a new religion* was being invented. No religious organisation or dogma in the conventional sense was born. Rather, the discourse concerning the Internet was a manifestation of a more implicit form of religion. As I shall

---

8 The Financial Times. (1995, 01.03.). The Internet Phenomenon. *The Financial Times,* p. 18; Lewis, P. H. (1996, 03.04.). Yet Again, Wall Street Is Charmed by the Internet. *The New York Times,* p. 1.; Serwer, A. (1995). Internet-worth: why the frenzy won' t stop soon. *Fortune, 132*(12), 26; Van Marin, S., & Boven, R. (1998). The Buzz Machine. *Newsweek, 132*(4), 22.; Warner, M. (1999). The Beauty of Hype: A Cautionary Tale of Silicon Valley. *Fortune, 139*(4), 140; Woolley, S. (1999). Internet Insanity. *Money, 28*(1), 94.

show see later on, the technology concerned was nonetheless, without any exclusive links to religious institutions, charged with characteristically religious notions such as transcendence, salvation, charisma and a strong belief in the power of one's object of admiration to transform one's existence. Above all, the trust in the great potential of this technology fulfilled tasks that I described as the defining functions of religion in Chapter One: it provided a strong object of faith to which it was possible to anchor a sense of ontological security and it thus presented a frame of reference for making sense of the world.

I shall be paying greater attention to the religious language and notions associated with the Internet in the next chapters. For now I want to consider where this hype came from and look at the function it fulfilled in late 20th century Western society.

4.4 POST-COLD WAR ANOMIE

In the previous chapter I spoke of the role of collective events, crazes and hypes in a society's attempts to (re)articulate common values and to confirm the truths and certainties that constitute its worldview. I argued that it is vital for humans to project order and meaning onto their life-worlds and to keep potential chaos and uncertainty at bay. I put forward the thesis that media-hypes and commercial crazes arise at moments when the values that a society takes for granted are subject to doubt or – in the more extreme cases – when a society experiences a breakdown of important meaningful structures. Hypes and crazes represent attempts to mobilise collective sentiments and re-establish ontological security. The Internet hype was certainly an exemplary case but to what kind of social and historical developments did it respond? In other words, what were the uncertainties or problems to which the hype could have provided answers?

At the time when the Internet made its debut in the public discourse, one of the major themes that featured on the pages of popular newspapers, magazines and books was the question of a new, post-Cold War world order. In the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was much debate about the meaning of those events. The initial disbelief and euphoria that one may recall from the scenes of the dismantling of the Wall were quickly replaced by a general concern as to the possible alternatives to the socio-political reality of the Cold War years.

This was unfamiliar and confounding terrain, and many agreed with Samuel Huntington in finding that: "wherever one turns, the world is at odds with itself" (Huntington 1993: 6). The effects of the new world order were far reaching: in addition to a sea-change in international relations,

things would never be the same for many individuals on both sides of former animosity. As the American political scientist Yahya Sadowski says in his *The Myth of Global Chaos* (1998), during the aftermath of the Cold War Americans "had to adjust to a world without the 'red menace'" and "think about how they were going to deal with the world 'from scratch'" (Sadowski 1998: 1). The effects of the changes reverberated all over the world and the end of the Cold War brought even greater changes to life on the Eastern side of the former Iron Curtain. Not only did the political situation undergo a revolution in these societies but whole lifestyles and worldviews had lost their one-time self-evidence.

Indeed, the post-Cold War years were characterised by one major sentiment – the 'world as we knew it' was no more. To some, such as the economist Francis Fukuyama, the new order gave hope of peace and security. In his 1989 article 'The End of History', Fukuyama puts forward the eschatological notion that, with the conclusion of the Cold War, mankind had reached the end of the world as he knows it. The dialectic between ideologies had found the last stage of its evolution, leaving "Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989: 4). In Fukuyama's opinion, the victory of liberalism on the international political arena was to be the final stabiliser of historical insecurities. His vision of the 'new' world is unusually optimistic. To Fukuyama, the post-Cold War world holds the prospect of complete ontological security: it is a stable and admittedly stagnant place[9] from which all uncertainties have been removed.

However, more often, the long-awaited truce between East and West was seen as a source of Durkheimian anomie. However much desired by both sides of the conflict, the termination of the Cold War gave rise to social unease and insecurity. The often-expressed feeling of the post-Cold War years was that things were seriously awry around the globe and that the world was experiencing collective insanity. With the wars in the Balkans, Chechnya and Rwanda, and the rise of separatist, nationalist and fundamentalist movements all over the world, violence appeared to be increasing and becoming ever more cruel. The new world order meant insecurity, global chaos and general anxiety.

That this was the case was confirmed by a number of best-selling authors and well-known academics in renowned journals, most notably *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*. For instance, Samuel Huntington (described as a "global chaos theorist" by Sadowski 1998: 31) foresaw "increased instability, unpredictability, and violence in international affairs" (Huntington 1989: 6).

---

9 Fukuyama predicts that in its peace and quiet the post-historical times will be inert and boring: "Perhaps the very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started again" (Fukuyama 1989: 18).

The process of globalisation that the collapse of the Iron Curtain allowed to flourish, was expected to bring with it social and political mayhem, and undermine locally held values. In his much publicised article 'The Clash of Civilizations?' Huntington claimed that at the end of the Cold War conflicts were not over but were replaced by new and 'more sustained' antagonism between different cultures.[10] There was still much reason to be afraid: "The Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology" (Huntington 1993: 28).

In addition to global cultural conflict, many also foresaw all-out disintegration in domestic affairs. For example, in the article 'Toward the Post-Cold War World', which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1991 the American military historian John Lewis Gaddis saw the political changes of the early 1990s as threats to the United States' internal safety and stability. After the period of the "Long Peace" (Gaddis 1989) of the Cold War years, society was now splintering and problems that had been pushed aside during the Cold War were making themselves visible. Gaddis links the rise of "fragmenting tendencies… within American society", such as drug problems, immigration and the disintegration of the educational system, to the disappearance of the bi-polar system in world politics (Gaddis 1991: 107). While the Cold War had integrated society by focusing its anxieties on a single enemy, Gaddis states that "the new geopolitical cartography provides no immediately obvious answer to the question of which of these processes might most threaten the future security interests of the United States" (Gaddis 1991: 109).

In a similar manner, the new world order also meant insecurity and deterioration of home affairs to the political theorist John Ikenberry. In the article 'The Myth of Post-Cold War Chaos', he prepares the reader for internal breakdown: "several signs indicate that the domestic Cold War order is coming undone, ushering in a period of political decay" (Ikenberry 1996). He expresses a fear that is common in times of change: that society would somehow fall apart and its achievements be nullified. "The end of the Cold War threatens to unravel [the] accomplishments [of the past] and return the United States to the impasses of the 1920s and 1930s", was the conclusion that he and Daniel Deudney had drawn earlier in their article 'After the Long War' in *Foreign Policy* (Deudney & Ikenberry 1994: 22). To Deudney and Ikenberry the end of the Cold War implied regression to some earlier, less developed world. As they put it, the return to "normalcy" meant a "partial

---

10 Huntington's book with same title continues to be a major bestseller. Today it is still used in articulations of international anomie. For instance, the book is often quoted in fearful discussions about the rise of Islam in the world.

dismantlement of war-born powers and institutions" (Deudney & Ikenberry 1994: 25).

The visions of chaos and degeneration that emerged in the 1990s call forth an image of the post-Cold War world as a chaotic, unfamiliar and threatening place. The long-stagnant world order of the Cold War had been replaced by a whirlwind of events that mostly seemed to bode times much worse than those before. Judging by accounts by esteemed authors such as Huntington or Deudney and Ikenberry, the world was indeed hurtling towards a state of general disorder in which it would be difficult to orientate oneself.

4.5 THE INFORMATION AGE

By the mid-decade, typical fin-de-siècle fears of imminent end-times had become commonplace in the public discourse. Fukuyama had written on the "end of history" and other commentators spoke about the end of the Cold War as the conclusion of a whole way of life. As was said, the new world order represented unwelcome novelties: disruption, confusion, uncertainty and far-reaching changes to various aspects of society.

This socio-political setting formed a fertile ground for the Internet hype. As Vincent Mosco shows in his *The Digital Sublime*, the underlying notion that fuelled the enthusiasm for the Internet and ICT at large was rooted in the sentiment that the end of the world as we knew it was nearing (Mosco 2004: chap. 3-4). Throughout the 1990s, ICT experts, Internet-aficionados and various commentators propagated the idea that digital information technology – computers, cyberspace and the Internet – was the catalyst of a revolution that would transform the whole world beyond recognition. However, the Internet hype transmuted the unease about uncertain times that characterised the post-Cold War years into a very hopeful narrative of a new and better way of life.

A new era in the history of humanity was dawning. We can sketch its key characteristics with the help of such often-used labels as: "the digital era", "the Internet age", "the information or knowledge age", "the New Economy" and "the Network Society", to mention a few. All these suggest that networked high-technology, coupled to digitised data and knowledge as primary economic resources (rather than physical labour and heavy industry) would redefine society on the whole in the new era. The scenarios of a new and improved society that these and other, similar terms represented offered a counterbalance to the anxieties and anomie of the early-nineties. They presented visions of peace, freedom, greater democracy and affluence, and suggested that the worries of the post-Cold War years were about to be over.

Examine, for instance, this assuring note from the December 1993 issue of the new technology magazine *Wired.* In its 'Tired-Wired' section, which is a trend watch list of matters that are losing or gaining popularity, the magazine tells its readers that the "Post-Cold War Recession" is making way for the "Wired Expansion" (*Wired* December 1993). In establishing a link between the end of the Cold War and the economic slump that plagued the early 1990s, the editors of *Wired* touch upon the apprehension and lack of confidence that prevailed in the post-Cold War world. They articulate one of the many fears that the end of the era engendered – financial insecurity – and proffer ICT as an antidote for the worries of the time. The magazine sees promise of economic growth and rejuvenation in networked ICT, and presents 'wired expansion' as something that can save society from downfall.

In addition to assuring that a sunny future was awaiting and the sense of anomie would be lessened, both the optimistic discourse about the Internet and the media hype that it generated had two other important functions. Firstly, they concentrated the attention of the public and secondly, they provided clear, programmatic visions of the world. That is, as a rule, narratives about the significance of the Internet and information technology for society explicitly articulated what was desirable and valuable, they contained gripping images of an idyllic world in the near future and they often offered unambiguous guidelines as to how to achieve the ideals that they presented.

If we agree with Durkheim, then the Internet hype was a symptomatic reaction to a state of social anomie. In *Suicide* he refers to fashions and excitement associated with the commercial and business world as signs of anomie. Durkheim describes the process in terms that could easily be used to characterise the Internet craze: "A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savour once known" (Durkheim 1952: 256). In the case of the dot-com craze on the stock markets (which I shall discuss in detail later on) this intense but relatively brief quest for novelty and unknown pleasure was particularly evident. Like the 'thirsts' of which Durkheim writes, it represented a fleeting moment when an anomic society attempted to find a way out of uncertainty and establish reassuring common points of focus.

However, the interest in the Internet meant far more than a short-lived commercial craze or an escapade on the financial markets. The techno-utopian visions associated with ICT and the Internet represented what one can refer to as an ideology: a set of ideals and aspirations, beliefs about the world and guidelines as to the right way to live. They formed a comprehensive frame of reference for meaning-making. Let us consider some

of the backgrounds of this set of ideas that gave body to the public discourse about the Internet.

4.6 THE THIRD WAVE

The genealogy of the optimistic discourse about the Internet can be traced back to theories of the information age, which became popular in the early 1990s but have their roots in the 70s and 80s, and in the works of such authors as the American social thinker Alvin Toffler, the management specialist Peter Drucker, the sociologist Daniel Bell, and the economist Marc Porat (Webster 2002: 9; 11-12).

Of these authors, Alvin Toffler enjoyed perhaps the greatest amount of attention among Internet enthusiasts. His take on the information age reverberates in several key publications of the Internet hype. For instance, Don Tapscott's *The Digital Economy. Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence* (1995), Kevin Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy* (1998), *The Long Boom: A Vision for the Coming Age of Prosperity* (1999) by Schwartz, Leyden and Hyatt, and *Control Revolution* (1999) by Andrew Shapiro, all contain quotes from Toffler's works. Toffler has also been a source of inspiration for such outspoken Internet pundits as the American writer George Gilder and the politician Newt Gingrich. In addition, Toffler himself has published on the social effects of cyberspace and the Internet. Most notably, he was one of the authors of the seminal manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age' (1994), which I shall discuss in the next chapters.

In 1970, 1980 and 1990 – at the start of each decade – Toffler published a sizeable work on trends in the relationships between technology, economy, politics, culture and religion. In particular, his *The Third Wave* (1980) had great influence on the hopes pinned to the Internet. In this 500-page argument for a new civilisation Toffler defines the rhetoric, vocabulary and central concepts of the kind of technological optimism that later became the hallmark of the Internet hype. For instance, several authors who promoted the Internet during the 1990s matched his sense of drama and antagonism. Pundits such as Kevin Kelly, George Gilder, Nicholas Negroponte, John Perry Barlow and Al Gore all picked up the general style of such statements by Toffler as: "A new civilization is emerging in our lives, and blind men everywhere are trying to suppress it" (Toffler 1980:25). Another Tofflerian feature that one can come across in many publications about the Internet is his unwavering conviction that information technology is bound to have far-reaching, *beneficial* effects on society.

To most well-informed Internet connoisseurs of the mid-1990s Toffler's book (first published in 1980) would have come across as outdated. *The*

Third Wave was written at a time when Internet as we now know it was in its embryonic state and Toffler's thoughts on the specific applications of – for example – its teleconferencing and electronic mail facilities are tentative and vague. But it was not so much Toffler's insight into technological development that attracted Internet pundits to his writings but the underlying reasoning of this work. The appeal of *The Third Wave* lies in its forceful and all-encompassing vision of the world: past, present and future. Toffler offers a systematic overview of human history, explains why matters in the world are as they are and brings order into what he describes as the "streams of change that are shaking our lives" (Toffler 1980: 146). Most importantly, Toffler sketches an image of an emerging civilisation, highlighting the role of information technology as the force that is generating this new world. In short, the central message of the book is that there is meaning and purpose to contemporary society and that history progresses along a certain pattern that is defined by technology.

The essence of the argument in *The Third Wave* can be summarised as follows: historical periods are defined by the specific tools and methods of work used. The introduction of new technologies can thus cause complete shifts in worldview. Toffler describes these historical changes as "waves" and indicates that each new wave can bring about great turmoil in society. Thus, he associates the "First Wave" of human civilisation with the agricultural revolution, by which he means the emergence and development of agriculture since the pre-modern era (Toffler 1980: 26). He links the "Second Wave" to the industrial revolution of the 18th century (Toffler 1980: 37). By 1980, society was reaching the "Third Wave" of technological change and, as Toffler sees it, this wave is brought about by an information revolution.

At the threshold of the Third Wave, society is confronted with fears, insecurities and the irrelevance of existing values. Toffler sketches a picture of a society that is in an anomic state and in need of new certainties:

> So profoundly revolutionary is this new civilization that it challenges all our old assumptions. Old ways of thinking, old formulas, old dogmas, and ideologies … no longer fit the facts. … The world that is fast emerging from the clash of new values and technologies, new geo-political relationships, new life-styles … and modes of communication demands new ideas and analogies, classifications and concepts. (Toffler 1980: 18)

His picture of the early 1980s in turmoil reminds one of the images of the post-Cold War disorder that were sketched earlier. Toffler speaks of

terrorism, fear of a new world war, financial insecurity and political inertia. As he puts it: "The proverbial man in the street says the world 'has gone mad'" (Toffler 1980: 17). *The Third Wave* represents an attempt to establish ontological security at such a time.

The strategy in the book is to identify social anomie, name its reasons and effects and to provide possible solutions to these existential insecurities. Toffler sets out to find the key to the new civilisation's "superideology" to explain reality and to justify its own existence" (Toffler 1980: 21). He emphasises the importance of finding "patterns" – regularities and certainties – "in a time of exploding change" (Toffler 1980: 22) as an essential means of survival. Even in the midst of chaos, Toffler has hope of a "fantastic new way of life" (Toffler 1980: 21), which will be a paradise-like prize at the end of the crisis. In times of upheaval and insecurity, the Third Wave civilisation awaits as a somewhat disconcerting but dazzling new dimension.

To Toffler, the Third Wave society implies radical changes to the human condition on the whole. As if anticipating the prognoses of the Internet era, he goes through aspects of society and personal experience that will be transformed (for the better) by the Third Wave. As he sees it, methods of work and production, family structures, the educational system, businesses and corporations, the economy and world politics will change (Toffler 1980: 26-27). Toffler puts forward the idea that thanks to the introduction of new information technology, humanity will reach a new level of existence: "a civilization with its own distinctive world outlook, its own ways of dealing with time, space, logic, and causality" (Toffler 1980: 27). For instance, he speaks of changes in "the relationship of the entire civilisation to time" (Toffler 1980: 271) and posits that the computer and other new technologies are "de-massifying" it (Toffler 1980: 270). That is, he expects time to become a more subjective concept that no longer imposes itself on people. Thus – according to Toffler – time-zones will no longer put limits on communication and trade, punctuality will be less important and the 'nine to five' mentality will disappear with the adoption of networked, communication at home and at work (Toffler 1980: 286-271). Similarly, Toffler expresses his conviction that with the rise of the Third Wave our notions of space will become more "dynamic and relativistic" (Toffler 1980: 316). Physical distances will be of less and less importance and there will be a greater sense of community at a global scale (Toffler 1980: 316).

Throughout the book a sense of liberation radiates out of Toffler's prognoses. He associates the Third Wave with freedom from the shackles of time and space, and in his vision of the future, the social environment at large has been freed of many of its conventional restrictions. His thoughts on the future of work are typical of this idea of a gentle and easy-going new

world. For example, Toffler proposes that with the spreading of affordable personal computers and new media of communication our working lives will be transported from the confines of the office or the factory to the comfort of our homes. He speaks of "a return to cottage industry on a new, higher, electronic basis, and with it a new emphasis of the home as the center of society" (Toffler 1980: 210). This electronic cottage industry is a dream of simpler times, where places of work are not alienating but small and intimate and where individuals are at liberty to mix their personal and professional lives. In the "Third Wave civilization", spontaneity and personal liberty will be allowed to flourish. Even in the factories of the future: "Workers will come and go at hours convenient to them. The actual workplace will be far more humane and individualized" (Toffler 1980: 369-370).

4.7 THE THIRD WAVE IN THE 1990s

As will be shown later, many of the ideas that Toffler puts forward in *The Third Wave* were echoed in literature about the Internet that was published in the 1990s. For example, in their books *City of Bits* (1995) and *Being Digital* (1995) MIT professors William Mitchell and Nicholas Negroponte both argued that networked computers were changing perceptions of time, space and distances. Both also spoke of the emergence of new kinds of social relationships and new ways of working. Other authors, such as Ray Kurzweil and John Perry Barlow, have picked up on Toffler's thoughts on the effects of information technology on the human mind. Under the heading 'Enhancing the Brain' Toffler suggests that new technologies will help humans gain deeper insight into life, expand the capacities of the human brain and eventually spawn generations with greater intelligence and knowledge than those preceding them (Toffler 1980: 188-189).

Most importantly, the excitement about the Internet was fuelled by the same belief in the sweeping transformative powers of new technology as expressed by Toffler in *The Third Wave*. Like Toffler, the "bricoleurs", or mythmakers (Mosco 2004: 16), of the Internet era produced prophecies of information technology as the bringer of a better and more sophisticated reality. As was the case with the discourse about the Internet, Toffler's treatise attributes an extraordinary role to technology: it is fathomed as a force that directs the fate of humanity. In both settings, emerging technologies are embraced as the keys to the meaning and purpose of society, and in both cases, we can speak of implicitly religious meaning-making.

Earlier in this chapter, I briefly mentioned a number of elements present in the narratives about the Internet which point at implicitly religious ideas. These were: the attribution of charisma to certain objects and individuals, notions of transcendence, hope of salvation and the trust that some powerful

force can transform the world. In using such an implicitly religious framework for their argument the Internet pundits followed the example set by Toffler (and other, similar authors). While *The Third Wave* is not linked to any specific religious tradition, it displays the features that I just listed.

For example, Toffler approaches the Third Wave itself – the historical, revolutionary force of which he speaks in this book – with both awe and apprehension. To him, this "powerful tide" is an omnipotent force that will take mankind to a new way of life and liberate it from the limitations of human existence. But it is also a source of confusion and it is potentially dangerous, for it creates an unfamiliar environment in which one cannot easily orientate oneself. This attitude reveals the two sentiments that Ter Borg associates with charisma: a suggestion that there is an object of reverence that transcends the human and a certain amount of fear on the part of the subject (Ter Borg 1991: 88-89). In addition, Toffler's vision of the new, Third Wave civilisation is founded on the idea of rising above reality as we know it and transcending to a new plain of experience. Finally, the book claims to provide answers vital to existence and to be of use as a guiding light through hardship. It is a dream of safety and deliverance from alienation, discomfort and the restrictions of the environment in which we live. Toffler's message is that salvation can be reached by implementing new technologies and encouraging innovation and growth of knowledge.

4.8 CONCLUSION

In the introduction to *The Third Wave* Alvin Toffler tells his readers what the objective of his work is: "This book… contends that the world has not swerved into lunacy, and that, in fact, beneath the clatter and jangle of seemingly senseless events there lies a startling and potentially hopeful pattern" (Toffler 1980: 17). This was precisely what the narratives about the Internet did. At a time of post-Cold War anomie, the Internet gave hope of a better world. Tales about "the Digital Era', "the Internet Age", "Information Superhighway", and so forth suggested that (certainly Western) societies were following a very specific path that would lead to a new type of civilisation. Visions of this new world were marked by the notion that the Internet was a means to overcome uncertainties and human fragility. As I shall show in the next chapters, the ultimate dream attached to the Internet was that it would help humanity surmount many of the restrictions posed by matter, space, time, financial consideration, politics, and social hierarchy.

This new technology exhilarated experts, futurists and journalists, as well as ordinary people. The many individual investors on the dotcom market, the consumers of the necessary hard- and software and the users of web-based services all attested to its popularity. The media and consumer hype that the

Internet inspired, confirmed the importance of what I described in Chapter Two as the three key themes of ultimate meaning in contemporary Western society: consumerism, technophilia and belief in progress.

Firstly, the excitement for the internet was fuelled by two sentiments that are characteristic of the consumer attitude: the joy of its complete novelty and the happy prospect of adopting a medium that has the capacity to fulfil so many different dreams. Secondly, the Internet hype underscored the role of technology as the answer to humanity's problems and it gave rise to some highly emotional declarations of love and devotion to technology. Finally, the idea that the Internet was to be the agent of a new and much improved society attests to strong belief in progress. In the elaborate visions of what this society was to be like, the notion of continuous improvement itself was lifted to a special pedestal as the society's most important value. In brief, public discourse about the Internet throughout the 1990s contained ideas about ultimate values, questions of purpose and matters to believe in.

What made the Internet such a potent source of meaning? In the next chapter, I shall delve into the details of the stories about the Internet and look at the metaphysics of this discourse. By that, I mean the underlying ideas about human existence, matter, space and time that gave body to the tales about this new technology. I shall pay attention to the use of religious concepts, vocabulary and imagery in this context and I will consider the elevated, even sacred status granted to the Internet.

CHAPTER 5

THE DREAMS OF THE INTERNET AGE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The front cover of an October 1999 issue of the American magazine *Business Week* features an interesting rendering of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam'. Mirroring the scene from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, on a dark blue background we see God's finger reaching for Adam's hand. This is a modern version of a familiar detail from Michelangelo's work and it has an unmistakable high-tech aesthetic to it. Both hands are drawn in a style that reminds one of the wire frame models used in three-dimensional computer graphics, and because of the bright-yellow lines that delineate them the hands

Figure 1. Front cover image *Business Week*, issue 3649, 04.10.1999.

appear electrified. A spark of light emerges from the point of contact and from the space between the two hands in silvery sans-serif the text "the internet age" comes to the fore.

It is not hard to decode the message; the religious undertones of the image are immediately recognisable. Associations with godly inspiration, new life, enlightenment and the dawn of creation come to mind. In this elevating scene a parallel is drawn between the potential and genius of the Internet and the Biblical miracle of creation. A divine invention has been born, bringing about a new era: 'the internet age'.

However, like most publications that reported on the Internet throughout the 1990s, *Business Week* is not a messenger for any specific

religious organisation or set of beliefs. Its principle concerns are the corporate world, finance and world affairs. Bearing this in mind, the allusion to a Biblical tale in the otherwise strictly secular setting of a business publication is striking, for it does suggest some sort of a connection between religion and the domain of technology and commerce.

To depict the "internet age" as the product of divine creation, as *Business Week* does, is to place technology on a special, elevated pedestal. With this reference to God's work, the magazine articulates profound technophile sentiments and ultimate values with well-known, emotive vocabulary. It uses stories and images familiar from the Christian tradition in order to give body to a kind of religiosity to which I referred as implicit religion in Chapter One. Without having any particular religious affiliation, many stories about the Internet were nonetheless filled with characteristically religious features and notions, such as the attribution of a sacred status to objects, hopes of transcendence and salvation, and strong belief in the power of one's object of admiration to transform life. Narratives and visual representations, such as the *Business Week* cover in question, can be described as the most manifest expressions of these religious facets. But the sort of underlying, implicitly religious sentiments that marked the discourse about the Internet were not always as overtly articulated. Most often, media reports about the Internet and visions sketched by enthusiasts translated their belief in this technology and their dreams of transcendence and salvation into such terms as progress, innovation, ingenuity, technological prowess, increasing productivity, socio-political reform, radical changes to the economy and so on.

In what follows, I shall discuss such hopeful accounts of the significance of the Internet. The task at hand is to highlight the religious facets that I just mentioned and to show how the stories about the Internet could fulfil what I described as the defining functions of religion in Chapter One: providing a strong object of faith and presenting a frame of reference for making sense of the world. In short, I shall be approaching the Internet phenomenon of the late 1990s as an example of implicitly religious meaning-making.

5.2 TRANSCENDENCE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

In Chapter Four it was argued that the excitement about the Internet had its roots in the eschatological notion that with the rise of new information technologies mankind was reaching the end of the world as we knew it. As several pundits saw it, major changes to whole societies were afoot, resulting in what *Business Week* referred to as the "internet age". In the book *The Digital Economy. Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence* (1995) by the Canadian writer Don Tapscott, one encounters a typical formulation of the feelings associated with the imminent rise of a new kind of reality in

which the Internet would play a key role:

> We are at the dawn of an Age of Networked Intelligence – an age that is giving birth to a new economy, a new politics and a new society. Businesses will be transformed, governments will be renewed, and individuals will be able to reinvent themselves – all with the help of information technology. (Tapscott 1995: 2)

Tapscott attributes remarkable powers to what he describes as "Networked Intelligence": it will transform society and redefine the very identity of individuals. In this new world, information technology is to be the key to meanings, beliefs and ways of behaving. Of crucial importance to his argument is the emphasis on the radical break with the current, familiar worldview that the Internet is to bring about. As Tapscott sees it, new technology will be the cause of an all-encompassing revolution or a "tsunami of transformation" (Tapscott 1995: 4). This understanding of technology reveals a belief in its capacity as a vehicle of transcendence. In Tapscott's vision of the future, technology is associated with extraordinary, nearly divine powers that can bring about fundamental changes to the human condition. In the quote above, technology is granted the ability to take humanity beyond the hitherto known and to give birth to new systems of meaning. However, in the secular tale of transcendence that Tapscott's book tells, one encounters an alternative, more scientific term for the process of rising beyond the world as we know it: a "shift", or change in "paradigm" (Tapscott 1995: 4; 54; 95; 113).

The notion of paradigm change was referred to in several attempts made in the public discourse to emphasise the far-reaching influence of the Internet on various aspects of society (Burman 2003; Grow 2001; Tapscott & Caston 1992). For instance, the "techno-evangelist" George Gilder (*The Economist* 2000b; Helmore 1999), spoke of a new, "Gilder paradigm" in defining wealth and scarcity in the Internet era (Gilder 1996a&b; 1998a). Similarly, the *Financial Times* on various occasions described a "paradigm-shift in our cognisance of reality" in trade and in institutional hierarchies (resp. Pearson 1995; Authers 1998; Taylor 1999). The concept itself is derived from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), where Kuhn conceptualises a paradigm as the set of accepted models, truths and practices that inform a scientific discipline. Accordingly, a revolution in a scientific paradigm signifies the emergence of new scientific models and practices and it implies a radical change in the frames of reference employed to make sense of the world. To Internet enthusiasts such as Tapscott or Gilder the Internet era too was associated with such a revolution in truths,

values and ways of conceptualising the world. However, in their lingo, the nuances of Kuhn's discussion were largely discarded and their notion of paradigm shift mostly referred to radical, overwhelming changes in society. Fashionable catch phrases and neologisms of the era, such as information superhighway, cyberspace, online world, electronic frontier, New or Knowledge Economy and network society all referred to this change in paradigm. These terms suggested pioneering discoveries, innovation, whole new conceptualisations of space, time and distance, as well as changes in social interaction and ways of doing business. They carried the connotation that with the implementation of networked information technology society would be lifted above its *status quo* to a novel kind of existence.

On the whole, very high hopes were invested in the paradigm change associated with the Internet. In his *One Market Under God* (2000) the American journalist Thomas Frank posits that among Internet enthusiasts great effort was put into convincing the public that "the Internet was something close, in miraculous effect as well as capacity for salvation, to a democratic second coming" (Frank 2000: 159). Frank focuses on the role of the Internet in theories about a new economy in specific, which suggested that the Internet would bring with it a more egalitarian and transparent way of doing business. But his remark applies to the whole of the discourse about the Internet throughout the 1990s. The Internet was indeed regarded as a saviour, capable of wonders and responsible for the advent of a new paradigm, a new era. Looking at statements by the more enthusiastic visionaries, it was hailed as the long-awaited answer to age-old dreams: greater control over matter and space, freedom and equality, wealth and the betterment of standards of life, and finally, harmony of mankind and better mutual understanding. The realisation of these dreams implied transcendence beyond life as we knew it, to a new society and to a new way of life. In the following sections of the chapter I shall pay attention to these expectations, with the underlying objective of showing that the discourse about the Internet was filled with religious language and that the hype surrounding it was an implicitly religious phenomenon.

5.3 CONTROL OVER MATTER AND SPACE

The manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', published in 1994 by the American think-tank Progress & Freedom Foundation (PFF), begins with the following declaration:

> The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth – in the

form of physical resources – has been losing value and significance. The powers of the mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things. (Dyson, Gilder, Toffler & Keyworth 1994: 1)

In this publication a sentiment is voiced that fuelled much of the public discourse about the Internet throughout the latter part of the 1990s: the importance of physical things and material resources in the world was diminishing and giving way to a knowledge- and information-based society. The underlying idea proposed by the authors of the manifesto, Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler (all four outspoken futurists and Internet visionaries) is that eventually networked ICT would change our notions of space and matter altogether. As they put it, the human mind was about to conquer the "brute" material world.

In this manifesto they appeal to "the truest, highest calling" of their readers to explore the "land of knowledge" that cyberspace represents (Dyson, et al. 1994: 3). Like the conquistadors of a new continent the readers are called upon to create their own livelihood in this new world, "the latest American frontier" (Dyson, et al. 1994: 8). Dyson and the others conceptualise cyberspace as an exciting parallel world: it is a complementary level of reality where 'space' has acquired a new meaning. In this imaginary data space physical things do not play a role. Although it is a figurative construction, to the authors of the manifesto this environment is very real – it has its own economy, social structure, communities and regulations – and they argue that, in fact, this kind of reality will in time force people to readjust their notions of space and matter.

In short, 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' spells out two ideas about the significance of information technology for human experience. Firstly, ICT constitutes a radically new kind of space in itself and secondly, ICT applications such as cyberspace will somehow facilitate transcendence beyond the material world, or as Dyson and the others put it, ICT "shapes new codes of behaviour that move each organism and institution …beyond the materialist's obsession with energy, money and control" (Dyson et al. 1994: 3). The belief that ties these two notions together is that by means of technology humanity can rise above life as we know it, liberate itself from the shackles of matter and materialism, and eventually create a new civilisation where knowledge and information determine the shape of things in the world. We humans will by then have tamed space and gained control over matter.

Such strong conviction that ICT could bring about transcendence to a new plain of experience was a returning motif in many scenarios concerning the Digital Age. In *The Digital Sublime* Vincent Mosco discusses the sorts of

transformations in people's notions of place and space that were expected to take place under the influence of ICT. He touches upon a number of often-used expressions which point at the world-altering capacities of these technologies (Mosco 2004: 85-98). Three of these pop up frequently in literature about cyberspace and the Internet: "antispace", "the end of geography" and "the death of distance" (Cairncross 1997; Negroponte 1995; Mitchell 1995).

The two 'classics' in the genre of writing that anticipated great changes to notions of matter and space are the books *Being Digital* (1995) and *City of Bits* (1995), respectively by Nicholas Negroponte (who was mentioned in Chapter Two) and William Mitchell. In both works the authors lay out their visions of the imminent and inevitable digital revolution that will bring about a more immaterial kind of existence. Negroponte thus assures us that "the change from atoms to bits [units for digital information storage] is irrevocable and unstoppable" (Negroponte 1995: 4) and in a similarly enthused manner Mitchell speaks of the "…growing domination of software over materialized form" (Mitchell 1995: 5). The central message in both works is that cyberspace and the Internet are the heartlands of a newly emerging digital way of life: they represent what Negroponte refers to as 'Place without Space' (Negroponte 1995: 165). This is an immaterial place that has no physical form or definite location, or as Mitchell puts it, "The Net negates geography … it is fundamentally and profoundly *antispatial*. … The Net is ambient – nowhere in particular but everywhere at once" (Mitchell 1995: 8).

The important point here is that this insubstantial and ethereal but ubiquitous place has great impact on how humans relate to space and experience materiality. For instance, Mitchell puts forward the idea that (networked) ICT will change the way cities are structured, it will seriously transform urban interaction and in many contexts greatly reduce the importance of actual, physical contact between people. As he sees it, "immersion in electronically propelled bits will progressively reduce our reliance on bodily presence and material exchange, thus altering the ways in which we use physical space" (Mitchell 1995: 169-70). In the same vein, Negroponte foresees that, as the possibilities of cyberspace and the Internet are developed further, in the near future physical distances will be irrelevant for human contact: "Digital living will include less and less dependence on being in a specific space at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible" (Negroponte 1995: 165).

Negroponte's idea of "the transmission of place" clearly goes further than simple communication via the telephone or e-mail with others who might be physically far removed. His suggestion is that far-away locations themselves

will somehow be transported to us: with the help of a rather comical example he imagines that we will be able to experience distant places as if they were just outside one's window and smell the Swiss Alps and their "(digital) manure" when on the other side of the planet, in Boston (Negroponte 1995: 165).

In this vision of place and space in a time of 'being digital', ICT is typically presented as the undoing of the restrictions of material form and as the means for us humans to subjugate our physical environment to our own needs. Thanks to the new technology, what was once overwhelming and unyielding is now literally diminished in size and readily shaped and moulded. Physical distances have become negligible (Negroponte 1995: 178) and from Negroponte's prediction that: "The digital planet will look and feel like the head of a pin" (Negroponte 1995: 6) one gets the impression that the earth itself will become so small that humans can tower above it and be able to manipulate it without restrictions.

A comparable image of the growth of human control over the ever-shrinking world of physical things comes to the fore from an observation that Mitchell makes in the introductory chapter to *City of Bits* about the means of production and communication in the late 20th century: "More and more of the instruments of human interaction, and of production and consumption were being miniaturized, dematerialized, and cut loose from fixed locations" (Mitchell 1995: 4). In Mitchell's book and in many other works this line of thinking was often extended to the physical environment at large: spaces and objects were becoming smaller (miniatures like pins), somehow less material and less dependent on specific places.

If Mitchell and Negroponte's works can be described as visions of conquering and subjugating space and matter, then other authors have spoken of the 'information revolution' in even more dramatic terms. For instance in her book *The Death of Distance. How the Communications Revolution is Changing Our Lives* (1997) the British journalist Frances Cairncross does indeed declare "death to distance" and posit that wireless applications in particular are "killing locations" (Cairncross 1997: 2). As is the case with Mitchell and Negroponte, Cairncross' basic assumption is that technology has the power to "change the social *and* [italics added] physical world" (Cairncross 1997: 1). Cairncross too, speaks of the "loosening grip of geography" and the breaking down of national and social borders (Cairncross 1997: 3). Because of the references to death and killing, here the sense of control is stretched to the extreme: Cairncross appears to be suggesting that ICT and the Internet have extended us the capacity to altogether dispose of distance and what one can experience as place: physical dimensions, specific characteristics of a location and the presence of material objects.

The "overthrow of matter" of which the authors of 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' speak, was to manifest itself in the transformation of space and the subsequent "dematerialization" of all aspects of human activity: communication, travel and transport, production, consumption and many other facets of socio-cultural life. The belief in such far-reaching changes in the human experience attests to the hope to achieve a hitherto unknown way of life. Perhaps the most remarkable expression of such a desire to transcend life as we know it can be found in visions of cyberspace and the Internet as intangible "mind-space" (Hagerty 2000; Wertheim 2000), space that is not defined by specific physical locations but is made up of data and where one can dwell as a mind.

5.4 LEAVING THE PHYSICAL WORLD

One of the more passionate articulations of the idea of cyberspace as the realm of the mind can be found in the publications of the American 'cyber-guru' John Perry Barlow. In his 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' Barlow offers us an image of a new world that is no longer defined or confined by matter. In wording that was to become standard for writing on the subject he begins the declaration as follows:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of the Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. (Barlow 1996)

In this document, Barlow's specific aim is to lay out the rules of conduct for governance and commerce in the newly emerging cyberspace. But the more general, programmatic motive of this declaration is the establishment of "a civilization of the mind" (Barlow 1996). This is a new realm where the human mind and the products of knowledge enjoy a privileged status. In fact, Barlow foresees the possibility of overcoming the restrictions of the material world and transcending the physical world altogether.

In an earlier publication, entitled 'Leaving the Physical World' (1993) he sketches an image of cyberspace as a fundamentally non-physical domain. Barlow envisions the human mind roaming the digital realm and connecting with other minds, while the body, or the "meat" is left behind. This mind space implies: "humanity stripped of racial characteristics, pheromones, sexual identities, personal style, and, in fact, bodies" (Barlow 1993). To Barlow, the possibility of an incorporeal existence of the mind is real and it is in the area of virtual reality in specific that he anticipates the ultimate separation of body and mind. In fact, Barlow imagines that as the technology of virtual reality becomes more sophisticated, a reversed development to the

biblical act of word becoming matter will take place. He describes the work of virtual reality specialist Jaron Lanier as follows: "[Lanier and others] are developing methods to inject the body into the heretofore spiritual realm of the immaterial. Now, I realized, would the Flesh be made Word" (Barlow 1993). As Barlow sees it, a virtual, computer-simulated reality offers a way to a spiritual existence in which the body has become redundant and human experience at large is 'converted' into digital data.

In this statement Barlow is clearly inspired by research on computer simulation and virtual reality (VR) that had been gaining popularity in the early 1990s. Experiments with VR aimed at recreating the experience of three-dimensional space in a digital environment by visual simulation, sound effects and tactile triggers.[11] In theory VR equipment could facilitate full emersion of the human mind in any number of imaginary or recreated environments and create real experience in non-physical settings. In fact, its actual possibilities remained limited but the concept formed a rich source of speculations on disembodied existence and even gave rise to the thought that, with the help of this technology, complete control over the physical world was within reach. A breathtaking articulation of this idea can be found in the book *Wetware* (1991), a publication of contributions to the Wetware Convention (on virtual reality) held in Amsterdam as early as 1991:

> VR … is the transcendence in the religious sense of the spirit above the body. It means the liberation of the human body with its earthly troubles (stakes, cleavage, mutilation, separation of head and torso, etc.); it means absolute control over the outside world, even transcendence of it, because bodily contact with this outside world is avoided. It is a step closer to God, an attempt by the human to be the God itself, the height of immateriality. (V2 Organization 1991: 18)

Such speculations reveal an unmistakable desire to surmount the limitations of matter, to overcome human fragility, to take control and do away with the usual insecurities of existence. The weaknesses of the body are to be erased, thus granting humans an increasingly god-like status.

This line of thought forms the basic argument of what is known as post-humanism. Post-humanist thought holds that with the help of new technologies – information technology in particular – human beings can be transformed to the extent that they reach a state other than humanity as we

---

11 The equipment for viewing the simulated images, for navigating through the virtual space and for experiencing a sense of touch were goggles and helmets, and data suits or data gloves (these became iconic tokens of state-of-the-art VR research in media reports on the subject).

know it today. A key notion for post-humanist thinkers, such as the inventor Ray Kurzweil and the artificial intelligence specialist Hans Moravec is that as human interaction with computers and other IT intensifies, the relationship between the two will become ever-more symbiotic and will eventually result in "the end of the dominance of biological humans" (Moravec 1999: 131).

One of the boldest and most remarkable claims of post-humanist authors was that in the near-future humans would be able to upload the contents of their brains into computer systems and thus lead a disembodied and more spiritual life. For instance, in the book *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (1999) Moravec sketches a classic science fiction image of a bodiless "brain in a vat" (Moravec 1999: 169) and suggests the future prospect of substituting the inevitably perishable biological brain mass by technology: "Bit by bit our failing brain may be replaced by superior electronic equivalents, leaving our personality and thoughts clearer than ever, though, in time, no vestige of our original body or brain remains" (Moravec 1999: 170). A similar idea is put forward by Kurzweil in *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999). Under the header 'The New Mortality' Kurzweil lays out his vision of humanity at a point when it has risen above its usual corporeal concerns, ultimately conquering death itself:

> Actually there won't be mortality by the end of the twenty-first century. … Not if you take advantage of the twenty-first century's brain-porting technology. Up until now our mortality was tied to the longevity of our *hardware*. When the hardware crashed, that was it. … As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. *We will be software, not hardware.* Our identity and survival will ultimately become independent of the hardware and its survival. (Kurzweil 1999: 128-29)

The post-humanist world represents an ultimate vision of control over matter: in it, humans have conquered the laws of physics, distances and "hardware" (be they everyday objects, the economy or the human body). Barlow's dream of leaving the physical world has been realised: this is an all out digital world where different applications of computer technology are to create a heavenly existence. There, humanity can find its salvation, for in addition to a life that is plentiful and leisurely, the technology can grant us immortality.

In the *Penguin Dictionary of Religions* (1997) one finds the following description of salvation: "a state wherein a person is removed from peril or

threat into a haven of protection. … rescue from unfortunate existence, sin, evil, and the consequences of these negative forces" (Hinnells 1997: 443). Looking at publications by some of the more ardent ICT and Internet enthusiasts, one cannot help but recognise a dream of salvation that answers this description. From the speculations on virtual reality to Mitchell and Negroponte's musings on cyberspace or the PFF's prophecy of the Knowledge Age, the central thought common to views on information technology has been that the overthrow of matter will one day be of great import for human well-being. The conquest of the material world would mean victory over common sources of human misery: poverty, hard physical labour, sickness and bodily infirmity.

As De Wilde reminds us, the typical rhetoric of the Information Age has its roots in a long-standing Western philosophical tradition, according to which there is a clear hierarchical distinction between, on the one hand, the material and the corporeal, and on the other, the spiritual and the immaterial (de Wilde 2001: 9). It is the immaterial that is traditionally granted a higher value: while matter is fallible and transient, then the immaterial (whether referred to as knowledge, spirit or soul) is durable and associated with a higher, more truthful and noble reality. In the assessments of the significance of ICT and the Internet in the creation of wealth, in the elimination of heavy work and in conquering matter, the privileged status of the immaterial is evident. Knowledge and information technology are elevated to a pedestal. Computers and the Internet are granted inexplicable powers to relieve us humans from hardship and to deliver us to a more ideal existence.

5.5 FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

The dreams of conquering space and distances of which I have just spoken represent visions of freedom. They were concerned with the liberation of the human mind and with the release of our existence from the limitations imposed on it by the physical world. This sense of liberation was common to many stories about the Internet. In addition to the visions of gaining control over the material world, the discourse about the Internet was filled with hopes of individual empowerment and liberty. The article 'Birth of a Digital Nation' which appeared in a 1997 issue of *Wired* magazine gives us an insight into such visions of the Internet:

> The Net is revolutionary … It liberates millions of people to do things they couldn't do before. Men and women can experiment with their sexuality … citizens can express themselves directly, without filtering their views through journalists or pollsters. Researchers can get the

newest data … free from the grinding rituals of scientific tradition. The young can explore their own notions of culture, safe from the stern scrutiny of parents and teachers. (Katz 1997)

Here, the journalist Jon Katz describes the Internet as an agent that can help people to evade barriers that block personal expression and development: sexual inhibitions, intermediaries, institutions and bureaucracy, authorities and parental supervision. In addition to the notion that the Internet would advance personal development, several other authors also expected this new medium to bring about a general de-centralisation of power, allow direct participation in decision-making, and further democracy. As the sociologists Martin Hand and Barry Sandywell put it in their criticism of "e-topia", under the influence of the Internet, future civic life was imagined as "a continuous 'town meeting' where active citizens devote most of their time and energy to debating the public good to create a genuinely communitarian culture of self-reflexive civic subjects" (Hand & Sandywell 2002: 201). According to such e-topian thinking, the Internet would facilitate unknown freedom and create space for individual development. *Newsweek* summarises the ethics of the Internet as follows: "voraciously free expression, a drive for individual empowerment, a loathing for authority and a strong libertarian strain" (Levy 1995b). At long last, the so-called "control revolution" (Shapiro 2000) was to take place and make it possible for individuals to participate more actively in decision-making processes.

In his *The Control Revolution: How the Internet is putting individuals in charge and changing the world we know* (2000) the American author and lawyer Andrew Shapiro develops the idea that the Internet has brought about a great change in the processes and the very definition of control in our society. He reasons that as the opportunities to communicate (he mentions online petitions, publishing and chat rooms) and to do commerce via the Internet increase, so will an individual's control over his or her life (Shapiro 2000). As Shapiro sees it, the Internet holds the promise of lifting limitations set on people by gender, race, social class and financial circumstances, age or physical disability, and thus giving them the opportunity to realize their true potential without inhibitions (Shapiro 2000: chap. 4-5). He is particularly optimistic about the improvements in the political situation for the individual that this development would imply. The Internet would create space for political activism, subversive propaganda and experimentation with alternative identities, and thus help eliminate the rigid procedures and structures of the socio-political establishment (Shapiro 2000: chap. 6).

The assumption that the Internet would break down hierarchies and allow individuals to have a direct say in how politics and corporations are

run, was a returning theme. For instance, *Newsweek* imagined that networked computers had the potential to topple dictatorships:

> Obviously, the decentralizing nature of the computer poses a threat to dictators, who have to choose between keeping their countries in the digital dark ages (and suffering dire economic consequences) or liberating a technology that might dangerously open up the entire society. But the same dynamic confounds managers everywhere, as computers and networks amplify the powers of individuals and twist the corporate organizational charts. (Levy 1995a)

One cannot help but recognise an old vision of a long-awaited liberator that will eliminate oppressive systems and install a reign of freedom and independence. This quote and the rest of the article – 'Technomania' – reveal a conviction that one comes across in many stories about the Internet: a powerful and awe-inspiring phenomenon will bring about great changes in how we understand and experience the world. The technology in question will strike against the powers that be and empower the individual. An underlying idea that comes to the fore here is one that we have already encountered in the discussion of Alvin Toffler's notion of the Third Wave. One of the advantages that Toffler associated with IT was that it would release people from the clutches of 'the system' – standardisation and regulations – and thus allow society to become more humane and understanding of the needs of individuals. The Internet too was often referred to as the means of both doing away with the rules imposed on people from above and achieving greater individual liberty.

An exemplary illustration of this idea can be found in 'Cyberspace and the American Dream', the document published by the PFF that I have already discussed in previous paragraphs. Its authors envision cyberspace as the new American frontier, a fresh realm that has no established constraints and where everything is still possible. Parallels are drawn with the historical exploration and settlement of American virgin territories. As was the case with the American Northwest Territory in the 18th and 19th century and Oklahoma in the late-19th century, cyberspace is described as a place of uninhibited enterprise, self-determination and sufficiency, lacking restrictive systems and social hierarchies. Making use of Toffler's wave metaphor the authors suggest that new information technologies are responsible for the rise of a Third Wave civilisation. This is a new world of freedom and individuality: "As [the Third Wave] emerges, it shapes new codes of behaviour … inexorably beyond standardization and centralization" (Dyson et al. 1994: 3). Most importantly, the domineering authority of

administrative and regulative structures will be conquered: demassification "spells the death of the central institutional paradigm of modern life, the bureaucratic organization" (Dyson et al. 1994: 3).

In short, many stories about cyberspace and the Internet mirrored the frontier mentality, and networked computer technology came to be associated with the freedoms achieved by the first American settlers and the creators of the Republic. In a number of publications, one encounters the notion that networked ICT would be a key tool in realising the democratic and libertarian ideals of the American Founding Fathers. For instance, in several of their articles and manifestos the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) – most notably John Perry Barlow and Mitchell Kapor – develop the idea that the 'electronic frontier' will be the place where "Jeffersonian ideals" (Kapor 1993) can blossom. In the article 'Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading?', published in one of the first editions of *Wired* magazine*,* Kapor expresses the following opinion: "In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community" (Kapor 1993).

Kapor is referring to the political ideals of one of the central authors of the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776 and later president Thomas Jefferson, and he puts forward the idea that the Internet and what he calls the National Information Infrastructure can play an influential role in realising these ideals. In 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' (1996) John Perry Barlow too refers to Jefferson, as well as Washington, de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill as those whose ideas are to serve as the formative ideology of the online world (Barlow 1996). This document is his modern take on the *Declaration of Independence*, where he designates cyberspace as a place of sovereignty, freedom of speech and release from restrictions imposed by race, gender, the human body, social status etc.

There are two dimensions to the visions of freedom that I have just described. On the one hand, manifestos like Barlow's 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' or 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' present the online world as an alternative universe. In this parallel realm, rules and social conventions apply that differ from the offline, 'real' world. Cyberspace is conceived of as an ideal place: "more humane and fair than the world your [industrialist] governments have made before" (Barlow 1996). People can retreat to this place and experience true freedom. On the other hand, there is the idea that what is happening in cyberspace can serve as a model for society at large and that the Internet can liberate people. The use of new technologies, so goes the argument, can help individuals to break free from bureaucracy and rigid social structures. In both cases, networked

computer technology is linked to the hope of deliverance from constraints. It represents a better life where individuals are not regimented and ruled by authorities.

5.6 COMMUNITY AND HARMONY

Connected to the visions of liberty and equality was the notion that the Internet could greatly enhance a sense of community and civic harmony. The underlying line of thinking behind this idea was that new technologies and networks like the Internet would be responsible for the rise of what *Wired* magazine refers to as the "Age of Access". As the authors of the article 'Speak the Future' put it, this was to be an era where ever more people could be in touch with others and have contact with places and databases across the world (Taylor & Wacker 1997). The rich flows of information and the freedoms facilitated by the Internet – free access to knowledge, the freedom of speech and direct participation in the public debate – would lead to better mutual understanding among people of different backgrounds and localities.

An example of such reasoning can be found in the book *The Road Ahead* (1995), in which Bill Gates of *Microsoft* lays out his vision of the new realities that 'the information revolution' was to bring about. Among other things, Gates foresees that the new communications technologies will bring tolerance and inspire more shared activities. He imagines that: "the information highway will break down boundaries and may promote a world culture, or at least a sharing of cultural activities and values" (Gates 1995: 299). In *The Death of Distance* Frances Cairncross puts forward similar ideas. She posits that because the Internet can bridge great distances and grant people knowledge about other cultures, it can contribute to social cohesion worldwide. She even suggests that the Internet has the potential to act as "a force for peace" and that better communication and greater democracy will discourage countries from fighting (Cairncross 1997: 259). As she puts it:

> Not only will government leaders be better able to communicate, but ordinary citizens everywhere will also become more familiar with the ideas and aspirations of people the world around. The citizens of one country may come to understand those in other countries a little better, and the glue that binds humanity will be strengthened. (Cairncross 1997: 259)

Cairncross goes on to argue that as an inexpensive but rich and independent medium, the Internet "will be a strong antidote to prejudice, nationalism, and war-mongering" (Cairncross 1997: 260). The authors of 'Cyberspace

and the American Dream' also speak of networked computer technology as an important source of social cohesion: "Rather than being a centrifugal force helping to tear society apart, cyberspace can be one of the main forms of glue holding together an increasingly free and diverse society" (Dyson et al. 1994).

Finally, Howard Rheingold's book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) offers one of the more wholehearted praises of the Internet and other forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) as a way of bringing people together. In the book, Rheingold gives an account of his experiences with the *WELL*, one of the first virtual communities of which I spoke in Chapter Four. He expresses the thought that communications platforms of this kind can play an important role in generating more meaningful contacts between people, encouraging the creation of new communities and giving rise to 'grassroots movements'. His definition of such communities itself reveals a belief in the potential of the new technology to generate emotional bonds between people: "virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1993: 5). To Rheingold CMC and virtual communities are means of recovering collective knowledge and a sense of togetherness. He observes that "groups of people are using CMC to rediscover the power of cooperation, turning cooperation into a … merger of knowledge capital, social capital, and communion" and posits that networks of computers "recapture the sense of cooperative spirit that so many people seemed to lose" (Rheingold 1993: 110).

In such visions of community-building and mutual understanding as those above, we encounter a typical dream of progress through enlightenment. The thoughts articulated by the authors whom I mentioned, were all founded on the premise that ready access to knowledge and the freedom of expression will lead to the betterment of humanity, make the world a friendlier place and bring greater concord into social relations across the globe. Due to its inherent quality as an interlinked means of communication, the Internet was to play a crucial role in realising this ideal of harmony and unity.

5.7 WEALTH AND LUXURY

From around 1995 to 1996, the period when the first Internet-related companies – most notably, *Netscape* – made their highly successful debuts on

the American financial markets, this new technology was associated with perplexing wealth. The dazzling riches made by those involved in the Internet industry captured the imagination of the popular media. Looking at articles covering the Internet in general interest magazines and newspapers between 1995 and 2000, the theme of Internet-wealth and overnight-fortunes took up a large chunk of the discourse.

In the article 'High stakes winners' *Time* magazine introduces the reader to "the get-incredibly-rich-quick-crowd" of "instant millionaires and billionaires", among them Marc Andreessen and James Clark of *Netscape* (Collins & Hequet 1996). Its authors are clearly in awe of the riches made by the two: they report that on the day of *Netscape*'s entry to the American stock exchange the two founders were suddenly respectively "worth" 58 and 566 million dollars (Collins & Hequet 1996). But it is the speed of the process at which such Internet-wealth was made that impresses the authors of the story even more than the actual millions. As the journalists say, "Getting rich quick is one thing; these are cases of getting incredibly rich immediately" (Collins & Hequet 1996). The article emphasises that something historically significant appears to be happening and quotes a professor of history at Columbia University making the following statement:

> I don't think there was ever a period when wealth was created so instantly through the market as it is today … Certainly there were many people who rose from modest wealth to vast riches over a lifetime at the turn of the century … But it was nothing like the people today who are worth a few hundred thousand dollars one day and take their companies public the next and become billionaires. (Collins & Hequet 1996)

Many other stories in the press reveal the same sense of amazement. In September 1999 the American business magazine *Fortune* published a list of forty richest Americans under the age of forty. With the exception of only a few names, the list consisted largely of young Internet and ICT-billionaires, such as Jeff Bezos of the online booksellers *Amazon.com* with $5.74 billion, Pierre Omidyar, one of the founders of the auction website eBay, with $3.69 billion, and David Filo and Jerry Yang of the search engine *Yahoo!* with respectively $3.12 billion and $3.05 billion to their names. The article 'The Young and The Loaded' that accompanied the list marvels at the "unfathomable sums" (Warner 1999b) owned by those on it and it sketches a picture of the kind of wealth in question with some iconic tokens:

[Henry Nicholas, one of the founders of the microchip producer Broadcom, seventh place on *Fortune's* list] has bought a Lamborghini and a Ferrari, and at press time he was bidding for the Anaheim Angels and Mighty Ducks [respectively, professional baseball and ice hockey teams]. He's also planning to acquire a personal jet. (Warner 1999b)

Particularly strong symbols of the wealth that the Internet was deemed capable of generating were the Silicon Valley and its residential areas in California. In articles with titles such as 'Silicon Heaven' (Kaplan 1999) and 'Valley of Dollars' (Hamilton 2000), images of the luxury lifestyles of those who were "striking Internet gold" (Hamilton 2000) were sketched. The *Newsweek* journalist David Kaplan offers the readers a characteristic account of life in the wealthy towns of the Silicon Valley: mansions, luxury cars and private airplanes, excesses in food and clothes, and glamorous parties and charity functions (Kaplan 1999).

The gist of many similar stories was that the Internet appeared to be changing people's lives and giving them access to great wealth. Articles like those just mentioned presented it as the explanation to seemingly inexplicable and instantaneous wealth. As the journalist Melanie Warner puts it, the rules for making a fortune had changed: "All you need to do these days is start an Internet company and crown yourself CEO" (Warner 1999b). But the press was not just fascinated by famous entrepreneurs, stories of ordinary people making extraordinary profits out of stock market transactions with the so-called dotcom shares became a favourite among articles about Internet wealth. For instance, *Forbes* features a number of amateurs – among them a rancher and a university professor – whose investments in Internet-related companies yielded returns ranging from 80% to 162% within a single year (Schrifrin 2000). In another article – 'Technology's very richest' – the same magazine sketches a profile of the "digital common man", making more than a comfortable living on the Internet and ICT stock market: "He pulls down $1,200 a day. We can just see him pulling up to U.S. Steel or Rubbermaid [both prototypical American factories] in a sleek Jaguar XK8 convertible … hopping over the side of the car like James Bond" (Forbes 1997).

Such reports attested to the mysterious powers of the Internet to bring luxury to ordinary people, to generate large amounts of money with little effort and to fulfil a common dream: freedom from the obligation to work. They were often filled with excitement but looking at the articles that I have just quoted, it is striking that little attention is paid to the products and services that the Internet businesses in question actually provided and what

their profits were. Many of these stories seem oblivious to what the precise sources of the newly-found Internet riches were; and they exhibit a way of thinking that can be described as magical.

Let us recall the definitions of magic that emerged from the discussion in Chapter One, where I spoke of Aupers' and Stahl's accounts of the projection of magical powers to computer technology. Both authors recognise magical thinking in instances where inexplicable and mystical powers are attributed to computers. They point out that, as instruments of magic, computers are typically deemed capable of extraordinary deeds and their workings are largely incomprehensible to their users. Such magical forces are thought to be beyond human control but there is the assumption that one can manipulate them so as to receive favours. As was said, the Internet was approached as a force that could change lives and grace people with riches but little explanation was given as to why the technology in question should have such powers. Often, this capacity was attributed to a series of magical words, which were not always clarified. In addition to 'the Internet' itself, words and phrases such as dot.com, World Wide Web, cyberspace, bandwidth, chips or integrated circuits served as the means of accounting for Internet wealth. To use an exclamation quoted by *Forbes* magazine: "the mighty progression of chips and bandwidth. It's what propels the economy" (Karlgaard 1999).

5.8 ULTRAPROSPERITY

The notion that the Internet and the related ICT industry could be the agents behind an economic miracle was a common theme in many media reports about the Internet. Not only were individual traders, entrepreneurs and scientists making a fortune, according to several authors society at large was about to be transformed and the economy well on its way to an exceptionally prosperous era.

In the article, 'The Roaring Zeros' (1999) Kevin Kelly draws a parallel between the prosperous roaring twenties and the expected affluence of the 21st century. He makes the following prediction: "The good news is, you'll be a millionaire soon. The bad news is, so will everybody else" (Kelly 1999). As Kelly sees it, new scientific inventions, including "the Web" will be responsible for unknown wealth and he tells us to get ready for "the Beginning of Prosperity As We Have Never Known It" (Kelly 1999). Kelly predicts the imminent dawn of an "age of ultraprosperity", decennia of ever-growing riches and economic ease for all layers of society: "Prosperity not just for CEOs, but for ex-pipe fitters, nursing students, and social workers as well" (Kelly 1999). Among other things, he foresees an increase in numbers

of millionaires, more leisure time, "awesome" government budgets and rich innings at the stock exchange.

The ideas laid out in the 'Roaring Zeros' and several of Kelly's other publications reveal a dream of an unprecedented economic miracle in which information technology plays a key role. In the bestseller *New Rules for the New Economy* he expresses his enthusiasm as follows:

> The Network economy will unleash opportunities on a scale never seen before on Earth. But the network economy is not utopia. It is a unique phase of economic development much like adolescence – a thrilling, disorienting and never-to-be-repeated time. (Kelly 1998: 156)

In this book, Kelly articulates a belief that typified many visions concerned with the effects of the Internet on the economy: computers and networked communications systems such as the Internet would grant humanity access to inexhaustible sources of wealth. These technologies and networks would be the triggers of an extensive period of economic boom, a time of increasing productivity and widespread wealth that cannot, by design, be threatened by recessions or an end to the circle of consumption. In the new economy of which Kelly speaks, wholly new laws of supply and demand would apply: the value of the unique and scarce would be replaced by what he calls "the law of plentitude [*sic*]" (Kelly 1998: 41). Kelly has in mind a principle according to which increase in production would imply the rise in the value of the product in question (Kelly 1998: 40). As he puts it, "Plentitude, not scarcity, governs the network economy. Duplication, replication, and copies run in excess. Whatever can be made, can be made in abundance" (Kelly 1998: 39).

In the same vein as Kelly the American economists Schwartz, Leyden and Hyatt, in their book *The Long Boom. A vision for the coming age of prosperity* (1999), regard ICT as the foundation of the New Economy. They link the rise of the personal computer and other ICT to "a vast economic expansion that could go on for decades, spreading prosperity around the world and lifting billions into middle-class lifestyles" (Schwartz et al. 1999: v). What the authors describe as the 'Long Boom' in the title of their book is conceived of as a forty-year period of uninterrupted economic growth. They argue that since the 1980s the computer has been transforming the world; together with communications networks it is presented as the force, or "the Great Enabler" that "significantly increases the productive capacity of our economy and promises to bring much more" (Schwartz et al. 1999: 2). As Schwartz and the others see it, networked computer technology, like the Internet, will be the key to ever-greater *global* economic growth, eventually

bringing Western standards of living to the rest of the world (Schwartz et al. 1999: 55-57).

The underlying thought on which this and similar narratives about "the age of prosperity" were based was that with the introduction of new ICT, traditional means of production and the heavy industry in particular were losing their one-time supremacy. For instance, in *The New Rules of the New Economy* Kelly puts forward the idea that the so-called "soft" industry is gaining the upper hand over the hard economy:

> The principles governing the world of the soft – the world of intangibles, of media, of software, and of services – will soon command the world of the hard – the world of reality, of atoms, of objects, of steel and oil, and the hard work done by the sweat of brows. Iron and lumber will obey the laws of software, automobiles will follow the rules of networks, smokestacks will comply with the decrees of knowledge. (Kelly 1998: 2)

In this quote, Kelly argues that in the new economy, material resources and capital will be replaced by knowledge as the main foundation of the economy. A line of reasoning that ensued from this idea went as follows: as material considerations no longer define the economy, existing economic laws would become redundant and eventually, there would be an end to scarcity in the world.

5.9 THE END OF WORK

Inherent to such theories concerned with a "soft" economy as Kelly's was the belief that information-based work, where ICT is applied, would dominate physical labour. As Kelly's vision of future industry reveals, "the hard work done by the sweat of brows" would be relieved by the mind's work (Kelly 1998: 2); computing and networked IT implied a release from sweaty drudgery. Or, as Tapscott puts it in *The Digital Economy*: "in the new economy, more and more of the economy's added value will be created by brain rather than brawn" (Tapscott 1995: 7). Tapscott foresees the rise of so-called knowledge workers in all sectors of the economy. As he sees it, even "agricultural and industrial jobs are becoming knowledge work" (Tapscott 1995: 7). That is, the physical aspect of labour becomes increasingly marginal, and ever-greater value is attached to the immaterial side of work.

Not only did the publications concerned with work in the digital era suggest the emergence of physically less demanding work, they also circulated the exhilarating thought that thanks to the new technologies, it was no

longer necessary to go to work at all. For example, in the introduction to *City of Bits* Mitchell describes the experience of not having to work at his office:

> [In the early nineties] I discovered – as did many others – that I no longer had to go to work. Not that I suddenly became idle; it's just that the work now came to me. I did not have to set out every morning for the mine (as generations of my forebears had done), the fields, the factory or the office. (Mitchell 1995: 3)

Mitchell's simple point is that portable computers and Internet connections make it possible to work at a distance. But he is also expressing a sense of relief: he is delivered from obligations associated with work and no longer dependent on crude, physical work – the mine and the fields. Matter, physical space and bodily exertion are surmounted. Harking back to Alvin Toffler's visions of work in the age of the Third Wave, of which I spoke in the previous chapter, both Mitchell and Tapscott expect work to become more flexible and pleasant. In fact, 'new' work does not look much like work anymore. As Tapscott puts, under the conditions of the knowledge economy, the work environment will be friendlier, it will take the individual into greater account and human labour will no longer be a commodity (Tapscott 1995: 47). All in all, he finds that greater personal fulfilment can be achieved through knowledge work (Tapscott 1995: 48).

The sorts of expectations regarding the economy as I have just discussed all embodied dreams of deliverance from poverty and hard physical labour, and they spoke of transcendence to a new life of ease and prosperity. They attested to a belief that the Internet and related technologies were playing an important role in improving the human condition materially. A common motif in the ideas to which I have referred was a strong conviction that the technology in question represented an extra-ordinary force that can transform society. The Internet, so went the argument, was putting us humans in a position to generate money seemingly out of nothing, and it was helping us to overcome material constraints and change economic laws. It was also deemed capable of creating greater affluence than there had ever been before and granting access to wealth to ever-greater numbers of people.

In short, if we agree with authors like Kelly, Tapscott, Mitchell and Schwartz and others, then the Internet had powers that exceeded human capacity. It was envisioned like a deity that towers above us, directing our lives. A most explicit affirmation of such an understanding of technology can be found in the passage from Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy* that was quoted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. In it, Kelly speaks of technology as an omniscient, transcendent force that knows what is best for

us, humans and which we obey without question. As he puts it, it steers our lives, provides us with "firm beliefs" and defines modern societies (Kelly 1998: 160).

5.10 THE RELIGIOUS DREAMS OF THE INTERNET AGE

The hopes that the Internet inspired spoke of a deep-seated wish to achieve (or to return to) an ideal, Paradise-like state of being. In this mode of existence humanity would be freed from the constraints of life as we know it, be they physical, financial or social. In his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* Mircea Eliade refers to such longing for a different order of existence as "nostalgia for paradise" (Eliade 1958: 383). He describes this sentiment as "the desire to be always, effortlessly, at the heart of the world, of reality, of the sacred, and briefly, to transcend, by natural means the human condition" (Eliade 1958: 383). The discourse about the Internet was marked by precisely this hope of a renaissance and deliverance to a better place: the desire to transcend and to be liberated marks the dreams discussed above. I shall recap some of the religious notions that came to the fore from the discussion in this chapter.

First of all, in the publications that I discussed, technology was approached as a sacred object. Characteristically, the Internet was associated with logic and ontology that radically differed from the familiar. It represented a completely new way of thinking about society, human relations, the economy and materiality. As Kevin Kelly formulates it, the technology in question transcends humanity: it is of another order than what we humans know (Kelly 1998: 160). Consequently, the Internet and related technologies were revered as astounding entities of exceptional might. To use a word term suggested by Neil Postman, they were deified. This term was mentioned in Chapter Two, where I pointed out that technologies that are deified typically command great authority and are regarded as powerful forces, capable of solving humanity's problems. To speak of technology as "the Great Enabler" as Peter Schwartz and his co-authors do, or to refer to it as something that shapes our society and destiny, as Kevin Kelly does, is to attribute it such a special status. In the stories about the capacity of the Internet to bring us wealth, help us to tame space and make the world a freer and friendlier place, this technology is portrayed as a benign force that is bound to improve human existence. It is even deemed capable of giving birth to a new kind of reality, one in which we can leave the physical world behind, as Barlow saw it.

Moreover, let us recall Durkheim and Eliade's descriptions of the sacred as something that is of supreme value to a group. Sacred objects stand at the top of the hierarchy of matters that are important to it. While the profane is

changeable, vulnerable and uncertain, the sacred is steady and unquestionable: it has its own, autonomous course. When the authors of 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' describe the exploration of cyberspace as "the civilization's highest, truest calling" (Dyson et al. 1994: 3), they establish the online world as something of the greatest importance for our whole civilisation. Here, the technology in question is associated with a vocation, a "calling" and as Kelly puts it, we must listen. To conceive of ICT as the "irrevocable and unstoppable" agent of change (Negroponte 1995: 4) or describe it as a force that will determine "the principles governing the world" (Kelly 1998: 2) is to see it as an independent and influential force that cannot be doubted.

A second feature that attests to the presence of religious ideas in the narratives about the Internet is the notion that it can save us from discomfort and ward off things that we fear. These stories were fuelled by utopian hopes of a better world, and the ideas that the Internet and related technologies would help humanity overcome its fragility, poverty, material limitations, sickness and even death speak of a strong belief that technology can act as a redeemer and improve the human condition. The promises to grant us access to a cornucopia of riches, to liberate us from dictators and bureaucracy, to undo the threat of war and bring back a sense of brotherhood and understanding were promises of salvation.

Finally, as has been said a number of times, the notion of transcending life as we know it with the help the ICT defined a great part of the discourse about the Internet. Dreams of far-reaching transformations in the economy, in social conduct, in our experience of life and in our attitudes towards matter attest to the hope that thanks to the implementation of networked information technology, society would be lifted above its *status quo* to a new kind of existence. Such aspirations reveal the desire to transcend the frameworks of meaning with which we are familiar and overcome the usual limitations of humanity.

The expectations projected onto the Internet by the most fervent pundits did indeed carry the notion that this was a wondrous and all-powerful force that was bound to improve society. Exemplary declarations of such trust in the ability of the Internet and related technologies to change the world and realise long-standing dreams can be found in the American ex-Vice President Al Gore's information superhighway speeches. Throughout Gore's terms in office, the Internet and the knowledge economy were important points on his political agenda. In several of his public appearances, he spoke of the Internet in particular as the medium that would make the world a better place. For instance, in a speech given at the International

Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 1998, Gore articulates his optimism about the Internet, or "the Global Information Infrastructure" as follows:

> For all the stunning capabilities of the Global Information Infrastructure, we must remember that at its heart it is a way to deepen and extend our oldest, and most cherished global values: rising standards of living and literacy, an ever-widening circle of democracy, freedom, and individual empowerment. And above all, we must remember that – especially in this global economy and Information Age – we are all connected, from Minnesota to Mongolia, from Madrid to Mali. (Gore 1998)

In this quote, Gore expresses hopes that marked many narratives about the Internet as we can find them in the popular media, books and other kinds of publications by enthusiasts. Gore attributes the Internet the power to improve quality of life, liberate individuals and facilitate democracy, allow better connectivity, and play a role in diminishing the importance of distances and geographic boundaries. He speaks of the same dreams as those discussed in this chapter: redefinition of space, freedom and empowerment, harmony of mankind, and greater wealth.

It is in the context of such visions of radical transformations in the economy, civic life, politics and notions of the human condition at large that we encounter religious thinking: ideas about transcendence, salvation, and the attribution of divine powers and sacred status to an object. However, this kind of religiosity was primarily implicit, not linked to any specific religious community or teaching. Rather, the sort of implicit religion inspired by the Internet expressed itself in the belief that this technology could facilitate transcendence to new ways of existence and provide meaning and purpose to humanity.

5.11 CONCLUSION

The Internet certainly excited the public because of all the novelties it offered, but the Internet discourse in the media and other publications throughout the second half of the 1990s more importantly offered a very optimistic perspective for understanding the world. The visions of an Internet age discussed in this chapter pointed to an imminent future were many of the existing uncertainties would be replaced by security, comfort and wealth. They sketched an image of technology as an anchor of ultimate meanings to which ideas about what is desirable and important to modern

Western societies could be attached and, as I argued, they served as vessels of implicit religiosity.

Religiosity manifested itself in the tales of paradigm change that envisioned the rise, or transcendence, of mankind to a different, better kind of existence. And representations of the Internet as a force capable of diminishing distances and controlling matter were based on an implicitly religious notion of the existence of a superhuman entity. Similarly, granting the Internet the role of an agent of freedom and equality also had religious significance, as it linked technology to hopes of salvation. Furthermore, the techno-utopian dreams related to the Internet gave rise to collective emotions, provided shared objects of admiration and (re)articulated values that constitute the modern Western worldview, such as freedom, equality and progress.

Throughout the 1990s the sorts of ideas about the Internet and its influence on society that were the subject of this chapter were propagated by a variety of evangelists, gurus, entrepreneurs and whiz kids, many of whom became known as charismatic visionaries and leaders. To a great extent, the excitement about the Internet and the so-called dotcom firms fed on prognoses made by such pundits and visionaries. The popularity of the Internet owed much to their efforts and to the star status of some of the scientists and business people active in the industry. In the next chapter I shall pay attention to a number of people who were responsible for spreading the belief in the Internet, and I shall focus on their status as charismatic individual

CHAPTER 6
WHIZ KIDS, GENIUSES, VISIONARIES AND CYBER-GURUS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

With the popularisation of the Internet a curious celebrity culture of computer specialists, e-business in-novators and prominent pundits was born.

In the press, biographies and other publications dedicated to the Internet, a number of individuals came to have a special allure that is normally associated with royalty, musicians or sports and film stars. A fine example of the sort of fascination and esteem that Internet celebrities commanded can be seen on the cover of a 1996 edition of Time magazine.

Under the heading 'The Golden Geeks', we see the blond, barefooted Marc Andreessen of Netscape seated

Figure 2. Front cover image *Time*, vol. 147(8), 04.02.1996.

on a gilded rococo throne. In this regal setting and with his pleasant, young looks he is quite the charming pinup. With curiosity typical of royalty watchers and gossip papers the magazine poses a series of questions about the 'golden geeks', or Internet specialists like Andreessen: "Who are they? How do they live? And what do they mean for America's future?"

Those involved in the creation and promotion of the Internet fascinated the press because of their special knowledge and insight, their instant wealth and their luxury lifestyles. Moreover, as the *Time* cover suggests, the golden geeks also appeared to be capable of shaping the future. Several of the protagonists of the Internet hype acquired the fame of having unusual powers and they were attributed a certain charisma. This reputation fed on legends, comparisons with saints and deities and the use of terms like guru,

visionary, prophet, genius, wunderkind, and so on. If the Internet was revered as the bringer of a new way of life, then those who worked with it were often admired for their prophetic knowledge, their intimate contact with this special force and their ability to influence it. These legendary heroes, visionaries and teachers greatly contributed to the elevated status of the Internet: they legitimised belief in its exceptional powers and they propagated it with much conviction and verve. In this chapter, I shall look at the charismatic sentiments that the geniuses and visionaries in question inspired and consider their role as anchors to which faith in the Internet was fixed.

6.2 CAST OF CHARACTERS

The protagonists of the Internet craze can roughly be divided into two (sometimes overlapping) groups: on the one hand, compelling masterminds and geniuses, and on the other, a variety of visionaries and enthusiastic storytellers. Following Weber's classification of various kinds of charismatics according to their achievements and tasks, these two categories correspond respectively to his heroes (Weber 1978: 245) and to the prophets as outlined in his discussion of the sociology of religious groups (Weber 1978: 447). The status of the special skills and obscure knowledge of the computer specialists who created and developed the Internet mirrors that of the shamans, virtuosi and heroic warriors mentioned by Weber (Weber 1978: 243-45). Furthermore, there are several other parallels between the advocates of the Internet and the ancient prophets and gurus as described by Weber.

In his chapter on 'Religious Groups' in *Economy and Society* (1978) Weber explicitly differentiates between those associated with charisma and other "sundry purveyors of salvation" (Weber 1978: 442-450) but he concedes that many of the typical functions fulfilled by charismatic individuals overlap with those of various other social reformers, leaders, teachers or otherwise exceptionally skilled individuals. He provides a number of criteria that nonetheless demarcate the charismatic: personal calling or acting upon a revelation of some description, validation through references to realms, objects or knowledge beyond the reach of ordinary experience, and emotional, zealous preaching. Weber emphasises the irregular nature of charisma and he repeatedly points at its antagonism with the generally accepted standards of society (Weber 1978: 244; 246; 1111; 1115). He describes charisma as a force that sabotages rational economic activity, social hierarchies and existing law and order. It is typified by a rejection of systematic economic and financial relationships, a general refusal to comply with bureaucracy and other established forms of structured social

116

organization, and, related to that, a revolutionary impact and ability to bring change to the *status quo* (Weber 1978: 1113).

At its heyday, the discourse concerning the Internet was populated by individuals who embodied the sort of marginality just described and took it upon themselves to be the kind of euphoric, revolutionary force that Weber associates with charisma. Focussing on a number of emblematic individuals, I will now look at two types of charismatics: the geniuses and the visionaries, or in Weber's terms, the heroes and the prophets of the Internet era.

6.3 HEROES AND GENIUSES

The first group – heroes and geniuses – consisted of computer scientists, web designers and e-business innovators who were venerated in the press for their virtuosity, their ability to create great wealth, their special knowledge and their obscure skills. Since the 1980s, enthusiasm for information technology had generated a number of celebrity computer specialist and entrepreneurs, most notably Bill Gates of *Microsoft* and Steve Jobs of *Apple Computers*. Both Gates and Jobs interested the American and international press a great deal and they were featured in articles and on covers of magazines as ingenious and wealthy innovators. By now both men are known as quintessential Silicon Valley titans. The fame and fortune that they have enjoyed owed to their role as key figures in the popularisation of the personal computer from the early 1980s onwards.

In the mid-1990s several new stars were born whose eminence was linked to their reputation as the creators and innovators of the Internet in specific. Such celebrities came to symbolise the Internet and the hopes attached to it. Three individuals in particular were subject to intense attention from the popular media: *Netscape's* Marc Andreessen, Tim Berners-Lee, one the main inventors of the World Wide Web, and Jeff Bezos of *Amazon.com*. During the second part of the 1990s, all three enjoyed very high regard from the public. In addition to being featured on the covers of magazines, their fame was crowned with such honours as Berners-Lee's title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and later knighting, and the election of Bezos as *Time* magazine's Person of the Year in 1999.

In the narratives about the Internet, Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos each had a specific persona. Andreessen, the young, attractive and amicable boy from the country is thus attributed the role of a pop star-like pinup. His successes in the world of ICT and his newly acquired wealth were translated into the vocabulary of the rich and famous celebrity lifestyle: he was interviewed by *Rolling Stone* magazine (Goode 1997) and featured in such popular publications as the international men's magazine *GQ* (Deutschman 1997) or the American gossip weekly *People* (*People* 1995; 1999; Miller

1996). Berners-Lee, on the other hand, was often portrayed as a modest, enigmatic and somewhat unworldly scientist. He was referred to as the father of the Web and a "god to young Web-heads around the world" (Reiss & Levine 1999: 317), someone to be idolised by the younger generations. As the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* put it: "Tim is the unsung hero who invented the World Wide Web" (Shrimsley 2000). Finally, Jeff Bezos' reputation was that of a shrewd and daring but "pathologically happy and infectiously enthusiastic" entrepreneur (Quittner 1999b). From several stories about him in publications as varied as *Wired, Newsweek, Time, Playboy, People* and the British tabloids *The Sun* and *The Mirror* an image of Bezos emerges as a casual and friendly modern-day businessman with ideals (Bayers 1999, Levy. 1999; *Playboy* 2000; Quittner 1999b).

Looking at how Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos were portrayed in the press and their biographies, a number of dominant themes come to the fore, despite their differences. Firstly, the key motif in many stories was their role as creators of a new era who were strongly committed to bringing enlightenment to the people. Secondly, much attention was paid to deviation from the ordinary: their unusual characteristics, exceptional skills, intelligence and foresight. Finally, the success, wealth and fame that all three had achieved were great sources of fascination and they too marked the three men as extraordinary, powerful figures.

6.4 CREATORS OF A NEW ERA

In his discussion of charismatic authority, Weber refers to charisma as a revolutionary force and he qualifies the charismatic as someone who carries the promise of changing the world and bringing well-being to people (Weber 1978: 245; 1114-1116). He associates charisma with renewal – either the proclamation of existing revelations with new effervescence or the declaration of fully novel ideas (Weber 1978: 439-440). In the stories about the Internet as we encounter them in popular literature, Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos were portrayed as such revolutionaries who represented exciting, new ways of thinking and seeing the world. Characteristically for the rhetoric of the Internet hype, Bezos, Andreessen and Berners-Lee were all said to have been the cause of revolutions and 'seismic' or 'paradigm shifts' (Cooper 1999; Ehrenhaft 2001: 6; Quittner 1999a&b; Tetzeli & Shaifali 1996).

Business Week thus compares e-business to space travel and describes Jeff Bezos' enterprise as "a rocket ride … one certain to transform everyday life far more than Alan Shepard's [the first American space traveller] first flight in space" (Hof 1999). Similarly, *Forbes* describes Berners-Lee as someone who has "changed the world" and is set to "shape the development of technology and change the course of civilization" (Reiss & Levine 1999). Berners-Lee's

own conviction that that this budding medium would transform society was popular and it was echoed in much writing about the Internet (Wright 199). Finally, as *Time* magazine formulates it in one of its articles about Jeff Bezos, he had "helped build the foundation of our future" (Cooper 1999).

Reports dedicated to the heroes of the Internet were filled with imagery of the dawning of a new era, of enlightenment and deliverance. The impact of their work was thought to have earth-shattering effects and, although there were exceptions, the emphasis in the press and dedicated publications was often on the better times to come, mingled with tokens of admiration and appreciation for those responsible for it. For instance, several sources describe Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the basic prototype of the World Wide Web, as "Gutenbergian" and a number of authors make the prognosis that Berners-Lee's work would have the same impact on society and culture as Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the fifteenth century (Maney 1999; Naughton 2000; Reiss & Levine 1999; Quittner 1999a; Wright 1997). In this manner, *USA Today* draws the following conclusion about Berners-Lee: "If Gutenberg the inventor has a modern counterpart, it's Tim Berners-Lee" (Maney 1999).

The article 'The man who invented the Web' in *Time* also puts forward the idea that the Internet would play an equally important role in the history of humanity and have as far-reaching effects on the human mind as print (Wright 1997: 64). In the article 'St. Tim of the Web' *Forbes* magazine adds the association with Prometheus as well as Christian holy men to the comparison with Gutenberg. Here, the authors refer to Berners-Lee as a heroic and enlightening Titan. This Prometheus has allowed ordinary people access to the mysteries of science and engineering by adding to the Internet "the one thing the Net lacked: a human face" (Reiss & Levine 1999). *Forbes* describes Berners-Lee as a man with a mission. As an earlier article in the same magazine makes clear, without him the Internet and its various riches would never have seen daylight (Daly 1996) and all the great changes to come would have been impossible.

Personal mission and strong commitment to advancing great changes in society were returning themes in stories about the heroes and geniuses of the Internet. To Weber, such devotion to a calling or "a spiritual duty", rather than personal gain, was a characteristic attribute of charisma (Weber 1978: 244). To a certain extent, the appeal of the Internet specialists of whom I have been speaking also owed to their image as individuals whose work was primarily motivated not by profit but by dedication to a cause. For instance, in the article 'An Eye on the Future' *Time* speaks of "Bezos' early and fervent belief in the Internet – that it would rock retailing, that it would change the way we live" and, referring to *Amazone's* style of business, its author exclaims:

"It's dotcommunism!" (Quittner 1999b). The underlying message of the article is that Bezos' mission should be seen as a utopian ideology and Bezos himself as an enthused bringer of a revolutionary vision.

A similar image of a dedicated utopian thinker comes to the fore from an interview in *Forbes* magazine in Berners-Lee gives his reasons for releasing his creation, the World Wide Web for free and losing out on a potential fortune. Rather than aiming for financial gain or personal fame, Berners-Lee's main motive is to follow "a vision encompassing the decentralized growth of ideas, technology and society" (Reiss & Levine 1999: 416). Finally, an exemplary story of personal mission and impassioned involvement with the Internet can be found in the children's book *Marc Andreessen. Web Warrior* (2001), where Andreessen is portrayed as a persevering combatant in the so-called web-wars between *Netscape* and Bill Gates' *Microsoft*. From the account of Gates', "aka Goliath" (Ehrenhaft 2001: 70), "attack" on *Netscape*, Andreessen emerges as the weaker but persistent David figure. Long working hours, sleepless nights, great energy and "technological vision" mark him as a heroic character, set "to improve upon his dream of bringing the Internet to the people" despite the obstacles (Ehrenhaft 2001: 75).

6.5 MARGINALITY AND GENIUS

As Weber saw it, the legitimacy of charismatic individuals and the recognition of their mission by their followers is rooted in the deviation of the individuals in question from the norm: their special knowledge, unusual qualities or abilities that are considered to be beyond the reach of ordinary people (Weber 1978: 241). As he says, charisma is born when followers "surrender … to the extra-ordinary and unheard-of, to what is alien to all regulation and tradition" (Weber 1978: 1115). In this manner, the trust in the capacity of such individuals as Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos to transform the world was anchored to their marginality. Three features that set them apart from ordinary people can be highlighted: their genius, wealth and unusual ideas.

Firstly, remarkable intelligence at an early age, academic excellence and prescience of developments in business, technology and society on the whole were signs of genius in all cases. Andreessen, the "uber-superwunder whiz kid of cyberspace" (Kaplan 1995), was thus portrayed as a youth of intimidating intellectual capacity (Tetzeli & Shaifali 1996) who had first shown his abilities as a "technical wizard" when still an undergraduate at the University of Illinois (Alexander 1995; Corcoran 1996; Lynn 1998). In several stories, Berners-Lee's lineage from a family of computer scientists and his academic career at Oxford University and MIT were presented as markers of his brilliance (Quittner 1999a; Shrimsley 2000; Stewart 2001; Wright 1997).

Similarly, Bezos' *summa cum laude* degree from Princeton University (Leibovich 2000; Corrigan 1999) and his notable intellect as a child were the subjects of a number of articles about him (Leibovich 2000; Smith 2001).

Not only were the heroes of the Internet admired for their exceptional intellectual ability, they were also thought to excel in foresight. For instance, Andreessen is often referred to as a "(technology) visionary" (Tetzeli & Shaifali 1996; Ehrenhaft 2001; *The Economist* 1995b), Berners-Lee emerges from the sources as someone capable of making mysteries clear and bringing enlightenment to the masses (Reiss & Levine 1999), and *Time* describes Bezos as a "man who can see the future" and "feel the vibrations [of changes to come in the economy] long before the rest of us do" (Cooper 1999). To use Weber's formulation, Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos were all deemed to be "the bearers of specific gifts of … the mind that are considered supernatural (in the sense that not everybody has access to them)" (Weber 1978: 1112). Their attraction, authority and elevated status lay in their unusual knowledge and their insights into the future.

Secondly, the money made by the Internet geniuses and the luxury that it provided also marked them as extraordinary and fascinating characters. If Berners-Lee with his humble car and lack of glamorous accoutrements – *Time* summarises his humility with two symbols: "a 13-year old Volkswagen Rabbit" and "a smallish, barren office" (Wright 1997: 65) – had certain magnetism as an ascetic, then Bezos and Andreessen's multi-millionaire status was further proof of their natural talents. Both were featured on lists, such as *Fortune*'s 'America's Forty Richest Under 40', *Time*'s 'Top Fifty Cyber Elite', *Newsweek*'s '50 People Who Matter Most on the Internet' and *Forbes'* 'America's 400 richest', and admired for their speedy careers, which had brought them the plentiful rewards they deserved against the odds. For example, Marc Andreessen's wealth and fame were often pitted against his humble origins in small-town Wisconsin (Ehrenhaft 2001; Sandberg 1995; Tetzeli & Shaifali 1996; Lynn 1998). His newly acquired wealth – which, depending on the reporter, varied between $50, $52 and $58 million (respectively *People* 1995; Sandberg 1995; Collins & Hequet 1996) – was contrasted to the modest salary he had earned not long before. As *People Magazine* puts it, "Two years ago, Marc Andreessen was pulling in $6.85 an hour toiling at a University of Illinois computer lab. On Aug. 9, the 24-year-old software developer was worth more than $50 million" (*People* 1995).

A similar narrative strategy is used in stories about Bezos: his path to success is set off against his (step)father's background as a Cuban refugee. His will to create something new at great risk is contrasted with the comfortable position as a Wall Street financer that he left to fulfil his mission (Sherman 2001). In its 'cover' article on the occasion of Bezos' nomination as the

121

Person of the Year *Time* refers to his "200 billion nickels" as compensation for his services to society (Cooper 1999). In both cases wealth functioned as a modern day attribute of grace. Not only was it a sign of these individuals' special significance because of the unfathomably large sums but also because of the extra-ordinary and even mysterious manner by which they had acquired them.

Thirdly, the non-conformity that all three individuals displayed in doing business and making money was an important feature of several publications. For instance, Andreessen and his company *Netscape* are described as "off-the-wall and wacky" (Ehrenhaft 2001: 55). Their strategy of giving their product, the web browser *Netscape Navigator* away for free was an eccentric notion that "changed the face of business" (Conlon 1996).

Similarly, as I mentioned before, Berners-Lee – the man "who still rides his bicycle to work and believes in giving away his epochal work for free" (Reiss & Levine 1999) – was regarded with amazement for distributing his creation without personal gain. In several articles about him authors emphasised that while Andreessen, Bezos and many others involved in the industry had become fabulously rich from commercial applications of their ideas, Berners-Lee "refused to cash in" (*The Mirror* 2000) and made the basic World Wide Web browser that he had designed available to others at no cost (Maney 1999; Quittner 1999a; Reiss & Levine 1999; Shrimsley 2000; Wright 1997).

In Bezos' case, journalists pointed out that his ingenious idea of online commerce was originally seen as unviable and even "crazy" by the financial and commercial establishment (Cooper 1999, Levy 1999). As was the case with many other e-businessmen of the time, Bezos' idiosyncrasies and his innovative approach towards retailing inspired curiosity among commentators. The most puzzling aspect Bezos' enterprise (and other, similar dotcom businesses) was the discrepancy between the successes of his company, his personal wealth and the great financial losses that *Amazon.com* was suffering. Accounts of the history of *Amazon.com* often point out that Bezos' company was yet to make a profit (Buechner et al. 1998; Kadlec 1999; Smith 2001). Nonetheless, *Amazon.com* was highly esteemed (for instance, in 1999 *The Financial Times* included it on a list of "world's most respected companies" (Corrigan 1999), and in several articles the notion was put forward that it had caused a historical shift in the business world (Bayers 1999; Leibovich 2000; Quittner 1999b).

Weber describes charisma as an "anti-economic force" (Weber 1978: 234) that contradicts the standard of economic and financial relationships. He remarks that this does not necessarily imply that charisma is disassociated from property or that it rejects wealth. Rather, he links charisma to unusual

economic activity, such as bribery, begging and war booty (Weber 1978:). The business ideas, methods of trade and industry that the engineers and entrepreneurs whom I have discussed created, belong to the same category of unconventional ways of generating a livelihood. As has been pointed out in previous chapters, in the course of the 1990s information and communications technology became associated with a whole new socio-economic paradigm. This New Economy would be based on the exchange of data and services, and follow completely different laws than those of our familiar, matter-based economy. Because its main engines – knowledge and high-technology – were in their essence so different from the capital that lay at the basis of economies in previous times, the New Economy was deemed to transcend the material world as we know it and create new means of wealth. Online entrepreneurs like Bezos and creators of Internet-based application like Andreessen and Berners-Lee were prime symbols of this new and exhilarating way of making money out of information technology.

Significantly, the marginality that typifies charisma is limited. As Ter Borg argues, however alien or mysterious, objects of charisma always allow for some recognition, so that followers can identify with the object of their fascination (Ter Borg 1991: 90). It was precisely this aspect of social marginality, coupled to identification with the objects of charisma, that made the geniuses of the Internet era so appealing. Their normality, sincerity and humanity were frequently highlighted in the stories about them. Accounts of their middle-class backgrounds, casual attire, unpretentious nature and homely friendliness made identification with these charismatic figures possible. For example, from the personal details about Andreessen one learns that he is an ordinary, slightly unkempt, young man from a small town in his twenties who likes fast-food and has a girlfriend (Alexander 1995; Ehrenhaft 2001; Goode 1999; Tetzeli & Shaifali 1996). Similarly, both Bezos and Berners-Lee are portrayed as casual and personable family men with a dislike of formalities (Leibovich 2000; Quittner 1999a&b; Shrimsley 2000; Wright 1997).

In other words, the unusual gifts, achievements and revolutionary ideas for which all three men were known, were usually set off against aspects of their lives that they shared with ordinary people. They embodied an amalgamation of the familiar and easily conceivable with the exceptional and super-human that is characteristic of the charismatic.

6.6 PROPHETS AND VISIONARIES

If Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos can be described as the heroes and leading stars of the tale of the Internet, then this story also had its raconteurs. These were Internet aficionados, visionaries and pioneers who represented a

heterogeneous collection of business people, scientists, journalists, and policy- and opinion-makers. These enthusiasts proclaimed their ideas in popular media, books and pamphlets and played an important role in shaping the buoyant discourse about the Internet. A number of the advocates of the Internet have already been mentioned in previous chapters: the American ex-vice president Gore, the MIT professors Mitchell and Negroponte, the writers Rheingold and Tapscott, the editor of *Wired* Kelly, the authors of the manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth and Toffler, and Barlow and Kapor of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). Looking at reports in the popular press, two of these enthusiasts – George Gilder and John Perry Barlow – became particularly well-known as "gurus", "seers" and "prophets" of the Internet (Dougherty 1995; *The Independent* 1995; *Independent On Sunday* 1996; McClellan 1998; Pearl 1995).

Indeed, in a number of respects, both fitted in Weber's notion of the charismatic leader and teacher, or prophet. In his discussion of different types of prophets, Weber touches upon three defining characteristics that distinguish them from others who proclaim a teaching: following a personal call that is inspired by visions or special insights (Weber 1978: 440), fervent preaching (Weber 1978: 445) and promises of salvation and radical changes to the *status quo* (Weber 1978: 446). Both Internet promoters displayed these features: in their often enthusiastic publications and talks, both expressed a strong belief in the positive role of the Internet as an agent of social change. Both were also known for their personal dedication to spreading the word about this and other new technologies, and both became famous for their passionate 'evangelisation' (*The Economist* 1995b, Malone 2000, Pennar 1997).

6.6.1 George Gilder

One of the more fanatical visionaries of the Internet era, George Gilder was treated to titles such as "messiah", "techno-evangelist", "prophet" and "John the Baptist of the Digital Age" in different articles (*The Economist* 2000b; *The Guardian* 2000; Rothstein 2000; White 2000; Malone 2000). A former speechwriter to Ronald Reagan, Gilder was himself a very active public speaker and a prolific writer. In 1994, he had collaborated with other members of the Progress and Freedom Foundation on the manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream', which I discussed in Chapter Four. Many of the ideas put forward in that publication would later be developed further in articles in *Forbes* and *Wired*, in Gilder's many speeches and in his book *Telecosm: How Infinite Bandwidth will Revolutionize Our World* (2000). Gilder also published a monthly newsletter where he conveyed his ideas on

information technology and gave investment advice. He adhered to the same strong techno-utopian belief that marks 'Cyberspace and the American Dream': radical changes in society thanks to networked information technology, the arrival of a new, thriving era and "the overthrow of matter" were the key themes of his works.

Fittingly for a modern-day prophet, Gilder's was a vision of a radically new socio-economic system that promised deliverance from scarcity and the limitations of matter (Gilder 1996). He foresaw a prosperous future where the Internet and other ICT would reduce the importance of material wealth and shift the emphasis to spiritual values. In his article 'The Soul of Silicon,' which is a version of a speech originally given by Gilder to Pope John Paul II in 1991, he puts forward the following notion:

> The true capital of the current capitalist economy is not material. It is moral, intellectual, and spiritual. ... Today ... the global network of telecommunications carries more valuable goods than all the world's supertankers. (Gilder 1998)

It was this spiritual and emotional dimension of both his ideas and style that earned Gilder the reputation of a technology prophet. He was known for his impassioned evangelism and dedication to spreading his visions of the future. In the article the "Gildered Age", the *Forbes* journalist Michael Malone gives an account of Gilder's efforts to evangelise: "George sets around the world now, often dazed from jet lag, talking to government leaders, giving three speeches on three continents in the same number of days" (Malone 2000). Others have described his fiery oratory: according to an article in *Wired*, during his speeches Gilder is "electrified, practically speaking in tongues" (Bronson 1996). Similarly, in the article 'The accidental messiah', a journalist at *The Economist* describes his writings as: "Dense, intensely technical evangelism, endowed with the messianic fervour of a true believer in a better tomorrow thanks to technology today" (*Ec The Economist* 2000a).

It was not unusual for Gilder to articulate this techno-utopian belief in language that was charged with religious connotations. As several articles about him point out, in his publications and public appearances Gilder spoke of the religious significance of new technology and readily used biblical imagery to describe its impact (*The Economist* 2000a; Rothstein 2000). For instance, *The New York Times* refers to one of his monthly newsletters in which Gilder poses the following question about a future when people have access to unlimited Internet traffic (or bandwidth): "After the floods of bandwidth who will greet the dawn and the dove?" (Rothstein 2000). In the same inspirational vein, in his book *Telecosm*, Gilder sketches an image of the

flow of information on the Internet as something angelic: "information flashes around the net on wings of light" (Gilder 2000: 142). In statements like these, Gilder presented technology as a heavenly boon and in fact, as something that had a special message for humanity. Quoting the computer scientist Carver Mead, Gilder advised his readers in *Telecosm* and other publications to pay attention to technology and to follow its guidance: "We must listen to the technology" (Gilder 1993; 2000: 158).

If Gilder spoke of technology as an independent force that must be obeyed, then he himself was known as someone who was in direct contact with it. In fact, *Forbes* even describes Gilder as someone who is so closely connected to technology that he himself "is pure technology. … Nothing but the Net" (Karlgaard 2000). Gilder claimed to have insights into the internal rationale of information technology and to know its laws. He frequently referred to two laws – "the law of the microsm" and "the law of the telecosm" (Gilder 1995; 1996b; 2000) – as the guidelines for understanding technology. With the former, the law of the microcosm, Gilder posited that the efficiency of computers would increase as computer chips decreased in size, thus making computing ever-cheaper (Gilder 1993; 2000). The second law (that of the telecosm) decreed that the capacity for communication would grow exponentially (Gilder 1993; 2000: 87). Or as Gilder put it:

> The law of the telecosm dictates that the higher the frequency, the shorter the wavelength, the wider the bandwidth, the smaller the antenna, the slimmer the cell and ultimately, the cheaper and better the communication. The working of this law will render obsolete the entire idea of scarce spectrum and launch an era of advances in telecommunications comparable to the recent gains in computing. (Gilder 2000: 87)

As is the case in the quote above, Gilder's formulations were often elaborate and opaque, so that there was a certain mystique to his writings. But the message that Gilder usually attempted to force through was that technology has a certain path in mind for humanity and that it will take us to a better, freer way of life. In one response to his critics he tells us what he expects of the laws of technology:

> [The critics] miss the centrifugal force of the Law of the Microcosm, overthrowing all monopolies, hierarchies, pyramids and power grids of established industrial society and endowing individuals with the power to be transcendent and free. (Gilder 1995)

Gilder was a convinced prophet of a "new paradigm" and his vision of the future was extremely optimistic. Unsurprisingly, his ideas were occasionally met with criticism and a call to "slow down" (Stephen Manes in *Forbes* 1995). However, many commentators put Gilder on a special pedestal as one of the few Internet enthusiasts who was truly knowledgeable and trustworthy. According to the usually sceptical *The Economist*: "What distinguishes him [Gilder] from other wired pundits is his understanding of the technology, from the atomic level of semiconductors to the economics of wire-laying. He does his homework" (*The Economist* 2000b). In the same vein, in a long article in *Forbes,* Larry Tesler, who was the Vice President of *Apple* computers at the time, confirms Gilder's expertise and foresight: "To report technology history accurately is a difficult task requiring percipience, perspiration and perspective. Gilder has done it" (*Forbes* 1995).

6.6.2 John Perry Barlow

While George Gilder and other members of the Progress and Freedom Foundation had connections with such figures of the political establishment as Ronald Reagan and the Republican Senator Newt Gingrich, the "digital visionary" John Perry Barlow and his Electronic Frontier Foundation were associated with the counterculture. Barlow's past as a cattle rancher in Wyoming and his collaboration with rock band *The Grateful Dead* as a lyricist gained him the reputation of a non-conformist. He became known as an underground "folk hero" (Wright 1993: 19) and was profiled as a "hippie mystic" (Bottoms 1995; Dougherty 1995; Gerstner 1995; Gilder 1996b).

Barlow can be described as one of the pioneering advocates of the Internet: as early as 1990, together with Mitch Kapor and John Gilmore, he had founded the EFF, which was designed to act as a watchdog on such civil liberties issues as freedom of speech, privacy and access to copyrighted material on the Internet. But he became best known for articles and interviews where he expressed his belief that cyberspace and the Internet were a means of rediscovering a sense of community and returning to a more spiritual way of life. In Chapter Four I referred to two publications – 'Leaving the Physical World' (1993) and 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' (1996) – in which he articulated his vision of cyberspace as a place of freedom from limitations set on people by governments, corporations, laws and their own bodies. As Barlow saw it, an environment like this would let our minds roam the world and allow us to form a commons with likeminded others. He foresaw that the Internet would facilitate a growing sense of equality and diminish the role of social

hierarchies. Although Barlow was careful not to make overly utopian statements, his vision of the Internet and information technology at large was generally very hopeful. In the same vein as several other Internet enthusiasts, Barlow attributed great transformative powers to the Internet, comparing its significance for humanity to that of the ability to control fire.

In characteristically rousing, epic terms he makes the following prediction about the impact of the Internet:

> The Internet ultimately will transform what it is to be human more than any other technological development since fire. The Internet is not a machine, it's a life form … in terms of the way the world is organized cosmologically, this is certainly the most sweeping change that has taken place in the West since Moses. Monotheism is about to be replaced by something that looks a lot like pantheism, and that's a profound change. I honestly believe that there will probably not be anything that looks like a federal government left on this planet in about 50 years. And there will probably not be any large human organizations in less than that. (Barlow in Gerstner 1995)

In this quote, Barlow displays himself as a passionate, committed prophet of a new era. In an intricate analogy, he takes us back to the times of the Old Testament and places himself in the tradition of biblical prophecies. Like a modern-day Moses, he offers us a revelation that is to change our cosmology. Alluding to Moses' allegiance to a single god as the key to understanding the universe and its laws, Barlow suggests that after thousands of years of monotheism, our worldview will no longer be anchored to a single force. The Internet will shake up the hierarchies and power structures that have thus far constituted our society. As a result, he suggests, humanity will undergo far-reaching changes in its understanding of the world.

If Weber associates the prophet with a calling that is grounded on faith in a vision, then in Barlow's case we can speak of both strong belief in the powers of the Internet and a sense of personal commitment to communicating his ideas to others. Characteristically, Barlow took it upon himself to spread the word about the Internet and prepare people for the great changes to come. He describes his mission as follows:

> I go around and tell people that something really weird is happening. Some fundamental shift is taking place that will have many consequences that I cannot imagine. But I think it's time we all started

thinking about those consequences so that collectively we can make the little decisions that need to be made. (Barlow in Tough 1995)

Barlow's message was one of the inevitability of technological development. He conceived of the Internet as an independent, changeable organism that was following its own will and was beyond complete human control. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* he tells the readers to: "Think of it [the Internet] as alive, growing and shifting endlessly, never maintaining one form for more than an instant" (Barlow in McCoy 1994). As Barlow saw it, this life form represented a strong independent force that would fulfil a certain destiny, and in several articles he foretold that the changes that the Internet was to bring with it would come no matter what (Barlow 1995; Tough 1995). Befittingly for a prophet, Barlow had great trust in his own vision of the future. With a reference to Karl Marx he presents himself as an unswerving ideologist: "I think I have the same sense of inevitability that Marx must have had all the time because I'm so certain I'm right about a lot of this stuff" (Cobb 1998).

To Barlow, his first encounters with the Internet represented a seminal leap of understanding and the story of how he came to realise the importance of this technology was a recurring feature in his articles and interviews. This is a familiar tale of conversion from ignorance to awareness; in Barlow's case from resisting technology to embracing it as a way of gaining important insights about human existence and its future. In dialogue with Sven Birkerts, the author of *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), Barlow talks about his path to acceptance:

> There was a long period when I adhered to your point of view, which is that the only way to deal with the information revolution is to refuse it. And, as I say, I spent seventeen years driving a four-horse team around, living in very direct contact with the phenomenal world and my neighbors. And what I finally concluded was that there were so many forces afoot that were in opposition to that way of life that the only way around technology was through it. I took faith in the idea that, on the other side of this info-desert we all seemed to be crossing, technology might restore what it was destroying … if we're going to get back into an experiential world that has substance and form and meaning, we're going to have to go through information to get there. (Tough 1999)

Here and in other publications, Barlow's rhetorical strategy in talking about his personal commitment to the Internet is to first sketch his past as a rancher and to allude to the difficulties that forced him to leave the profession. The earthy life of a cowboy and the conviviality of his rural community are pitched against the onslaught of modern technology. He then speaks of his newly found faith in information technology in terms of a conversion experience: he presents us with his vision of it as a force that can help him (and others) recover the ideals and values that have been lost. As Barlow puts it in the quote above, information technology can bring us back to a lost world of "substance" and "meaning".

To Barlow, new information technology and the Internet in particular had profound spiritual significance. This becomes evident from the sense of awe and the references to the Internet as either a deity or a divine creation that one encounters in several of Barlow's publications. For instance, in one of his articles in *Forbes* Barlow recounts his discovery of the Internet as follows: "I have a difficult time describing how it actually felt. But it was just, suddenly, I got it. … This is the nervous system of the planet. What hath God wrought? I still feel that way. I think something truly profound is taking place here" (Barlow 1997). In other articles, Barlow refers to the Internet as a magnificent force that was not to be trivialised (Tough 1995) and in an interview entitled 'Can the Internet Save Souls' in *USA Today* he literally poses the question whether the Internet could be described as 'God':

> Is TCP/IP (the dominant Internet communications protocol) another name for God? Because in essence, this is a way that you're finding a unity between people. . . . There's a concept of good and light in the world, and (the Internet) can be the means toward that end. (Barlow in Miller 1997)

Barlow was one of the more colourful storytellers to contribute to the discourse about the Internet in its early days. His background as a rancher and *Grateful Dead* lyricist made him an oddity in the world of ICT. His ideas about cyberspace as 'soul space' were unusual and his predictions as to the significance of the Internet for society were daring. Above all, Barlow played an important part in turning the Internet into a fascinating, emotional matter. Like George Gilder, Barlow too spoke of the Internet in language that was charged with religious connotations. He created analogies between new technology and divine forces and suggested that the Internet could be the source of spiritual experiences. He profiled himself as spiritual leader and in this role Barlow's mission was to bring the Internet to the

people, or as he put it, "wire the consciousness of the planet with the Internet" (Cobb 1998).

6.7. BRICOLEURS AND THE CULT OF GENIUS

In *The Digital Sublime* Vincent Mosco refers to a number of enthusiastic advocates of the Internet as "bricoleurs", or mythmakers. As he puts it, a bricoleur is "someone who ... pulls together the bits and pieces of technology's narratives, to fashion a mobilizing story of our time" (Mosco 2004: 36). Cyber-visionaries like George Gilder and John Perry Barlow were such 'techno-bricoleurs': they constructed narratives about the meaning of our lives – what defines our existence, what our ideals are and where the world is headed – around cyberspace, the Internet and other information technology. In their visions and prophecies both Gilder and Barlow attributed the Internet immense powers and magical qualities, and they thus contributed to the myth, mystique and wonderment that surrounded this technology. In their enthusiastic manifestoes, speeches and interviews, the Internet became something to believe in. Their extravagance and passion in spreading its message added to the excitement, and their idiosyncrasies and reputation as seers and true believers in the capacities of the Internet validated the often very high expectations regarding this technology.

Mosco describes the optimistic tales relating to cyberspace and the Internet as the latest addition to the tradition of technological mythmaking in American history (Mosco 2004: 36). A part of this tradition is the public celebration of scientists and inventors, what the American historian Leo Braudy calls "the cult of the inventor" in his *Frenzy of Renown* (1986) (Braudy: 418). This 'cult' implies the glorification of a sole mastermind (Braudy's examples are Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin) whose genius and toil give birth to ideas, appliances and scientific breakthroughs that are thought to improve human life and give rise to wholly new ways of understanding the world (Braudy: 418). The individuals who came to be regarded as the heroes and geniuses of the Internet were subject to precisely this kind of treatment. They were honoured as men of exceptional intellect and ability, and regarded as revolutionaries capable of changing society.

The fame and glory that Andreessen, Berners-Lee and Bezos enjoyed was rooted in their ingenuity and originality as well as their resolve and reputation as independent entrepreneurs. All three thus fitted in another long-standing (American) tradition of which Braudy speaks: one that venerates the self-made man and attaches special significance to financial success. Braudy shows that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards success coupled to self-reliance, extraordinary aptitude and material wealth has been granted a spiritual meaning. The fame and rags-to-riches success stories of

such self-made men as Carnegie and Rockefeller came to symbolise key values of the era: progress, resourcefulness and democracy (Braudy 1986: 510, 512). The fortunes of these commercial magnates were regarded as signs of hard work and "spiritual self-possession" (Braudy 1986: 511). As Braudy puts it:

> Success was a spiritual concept. It came entirely from within the self and it built from the ground up, both financially and psychically. The individual's prime resource was 'character', which itself was not innate so much as self-controlled and self-created. (Braudy 1986: 512)

Braudy draws parallels between the attitudes towards the nineteenth century self-made men and contemporary film stars, and he points out that both have been attributed spiritual qualities that somehow elevate them above ordinary individuals: "In the church of secular achievement, they are both among the saints" (Braudy 1986: 512).

He suggests that it is not so much the specific activities that a film star or a celebrity businessman may pursue that give them this select status, but their special talents and unique characteristics. The comparison can be extended to the treatment enjoyed by the late twentieth century Internet heroes. Much like the nineteenth century industrialists and inventors, the geniuses of the Internet served as the embodiments of ingenuity and progress, and they too were revered as self-made men of exceptional character. Several had risen to greatness from ordinary backgrounds, proven their special talents against the odds and were admired in the press for their perseverance and commitment.

6.8 CONCLUSION

While the popular press functioned as the main stage where the Internet hype flared up and spread, the geniuses and cyber-gurus of whom I have been speaking kept the passion for the Internet going. Both the heroes and advocates of the Internet were exceptional characters and to a greater or lesser extent all five men mentioned in this chapter were granted a certain charisma. All were known for their originality, genius and foresight, and all fascinated because of their particular eccentricities and bold statements about the Internet. All five were also marked by their enthusiasm for this new medium and their strong belief in its positive, revolutionary impact. A sense of personal, intensely emotional commitment to the Internet characterised them all and, judging by the great interest that international media displayed in them, both the makers of the Internet as well as it promoters had a faithful following.

That this was the case became most obvious in the course of the so-called dot-com hype, an investment boom in Internet businesses and related technologies. This boom and the intense media attention that accompanied it showed that narratives about the Internet and its promises captivated large numbers of people and gave rise to exhilarated mass action; among other matters a rush to buy shares in newly established Internet firms by both adventurers and serious investors. The charismatic status and seeming reliability of both Internet geniuses such as Andreessen and prophets like Gilder gave weight to even the highest expectations regarding the value of Internet businesses and their potential for generating great wealth. The dot-com boom is the topic of the next chapter. It represents the climax of the Internet hype and grants one a view of a particularly telling expression of the effervescence and the sort of implicit religiosity that the Internet inspired

CHAPTER 7

DOTCOMS & THE PEAK OF THE INTERNET HYPE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the course of the late-1990s the dotcoms, a neologism applied to businesses selling Internet-related products and services (many of which had names with the suffix .com), became the subjects of a feverish investment craze. This boom on the market was the climax of a more general fascination with the Internet that preoccupied the popular media and the public debate at the time. In comparison with previous examples of financial bubbles and crazes, the dotcom boom lasted relatively long, spanning over roughly six years.

The defining markers of this period were the introduction of the *Netscape* Internet browser to the stock market in 1995 and the deflation of the investment bubble after the market peak in March 2000. This was long enough for some commentators to speak of a lasting "age of prosperity" (Schwartz et al. 1999) or of an emerging "law of plentitude", characteristic of the network economy (Kelly 1998: 39-49), and to suspend what were hitherto seen as realistic evaluations of economic development. The enthusiasm for dotcom firms among investors, traders and the media attested to a strong faith in the Internet, which was largely based on highly optimistic expectations of its significance as the agent behind what one commentator has described as "one of the biggest socio-economic changes to hit the planet" (Paternot in the video *Public*).

The dotcom hype forms a gripping example of irrational behaviour, great emotionality and even magical thinking in an age that has been repeatedly declared rational and devoid of enchantment (Weber 1978; Wilson 1975). Moreover, this hype was a manifestation of what has been described as implicit religiosity: ideas, beliefs and sentiments that function as sources of meaning, referring to some form of transcendent force or idea as their anchor though they are located outside traditional faith-based institutions. This was an outburst of shared exhilaration that tapped into the themes of ultimate meaning that were discussed in Chapter Two. It confirmed the special status of technology and the great emotional relevance of consumerism to modern societies, and it attested to faith in progress. This hype was rooted in strong belief in the extra-ordinary powers of the Internet and, typically for an implicitly religious phenomenon, the narratives that gave body to it linked the Internet and the dotcom economy to a specific

meaning and purpose. These stories spoke of great wealth and radical changes to society and thus created a framework that could indicate where the world was headed and what the point of human existence was. In what follows I shall first sketch the main features of this hype and then proceed to explore its implicitly religious facets. I shall show that in this case, religiosity displayed itself in collective activity, in overly optimistic narratives and, above all, in providing a clear frame of reference for giving meaning to the world.

7.2 THE DOTCOMS ON THE STOCK MARKET

Central features of the dotcom hype were the impressive Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), or occasions when companies first offer their shares for sale to the public on the stock exchange, by often little-known companies, first on the American NASDAQ index (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations) and later on the European markets. In the late-1990s the NASDAQ in particular was *the* stage where dotcom firms came into view as serious participants in the financial markets and where many flourished. Despite the fact that almost none of the dotcoms made a profit and many were run by inexperienced, young businessmen, very high expectations were attached to the whole branch.

One of the first triggers of 'net mania' was the market debut of *Netscape* in 1995. I have already referred to the company and its founders Jim Clark and Mark Andreessen in the discussion of the hopes of great prosperity associated with the Internet. According to *Time* magazine, on its first day of trading *Netscape* had made a gain of 108%, at the time placing it in a list of 10 most successful entries to the NASDAQ ever (Adams 1995). News of such a successful IPO generated ever-greater interest in *Netscape* as well as other Internet firms. According to *Fortune,* the rush to buy *Netscape* stock was even met with shortages and characterised by desperate attempts by individual buyers not to miss out on the opportunity to invest in the company (Serwer 1996). *Netscape* grew fast and rapidly acquired a large client base. As *Time* remarks, up until the challenge from the rival *Microsoft Explorer* in 1996 "*Netscape* had enjoyed a comfortable dominance of the infant Internet world" (Cooper 1996).

A year later, the web portal and news and e-mail service *Yahoo!* enjoyed a similar triumph on the market. Worth $1 million when it was founded in 1995, it made $850 million on its first day on the market in 1996, and was reported to have a value of $8 billion in 1999 (Kaplan 1999). Just as *Netscape* had expanded extremely fast, so did *Yahoo!* quickly become a large international service. According to *Newsweek*, by 1998 30 million people a month used *Yahoo!* (Levy 1998). By 1999 the combined personal wealth in

shares of its young founders David Filo and Jerry Yang was worth $5 billion, placing them on lists such as *Fortune* magazine's '40 richest Americans under 40' and *Newsweek's* 'sixty richest people in the world' (Kaplan 1999). As the director of *Yahoo!* and Silicon Valley investor Michael Moritz observed, the extremely high valuations of dotcom firms like *Yahoo!* "mesmerized all sorts of people" to the extent that demand for shares in such firms remained insatiable (Nocera 1999).

Throughout the last years of the 1990s scenarios comparable to the *Netscape* and *Yahoo!* IPOs repeated themselves frequently. Stephan Paternot's book *A Very Public Offering* to which I referred in Chapter Four provides an edifying insider's account of the initial successes of one such start-up. Starting out as a chat room and platform for Internet communities, Paternot's company *theGlobe.com* was a typical dotcom firm. Like *Yahoo!* and later *Google*, it was founded by two American students. Initially a hobby-like operation run from university accommodation and first financed with family funds, it found backing from Silicon Valley venture capitalists and grew to be worth millions of dollars. The company's entry to the stock market in 1998 inspired such a rush among buyers that its worth increased 600% in one day, a record at the time. Paternot and Krizelman were suddenly millionaires, owning a $100 million in shares. In the months following the IPO their enterprise expanded extremely fast but the firm continued losing money rather than making a profit and to many it was unclear what the product or service of *theGlobe.com* precisely detailed. However, this seemed to rhyme with the idea behind the new, Internet economy that tangible products and results were no longer central to economic growth. As the *Industry Standard* observes in its comment on one of Krizelman and Paternot's appearances on television, the fact that they "had nothing tangible to show the audience … only added to the dreamlike quality of their success" (Anderson 1999).

7.3 THE DOTCOMS IN EUROPE

The dotcom craze was not solely an American affair. By the end of the 1990s Europe was as enamoured with the Internet as the United States. The fame and reputation of companies such as *Netscape*, *Yahoo!* and *theGlobe.com* had crossed the Atlantic *and* Europe had its own dotcom tales. For instance, in Britain the holiday and entertainment booking site *Lastminute.com* became the focus of a typical story of infatuation with Internet firms. Although it had only been in business less than two years 200.000 investors bought shares in the company on the very day of its public debut in March 2000, according to *The Guardian* (Wilson 2000). The "paper fortune" – in shares – made by Lastminute.com after the first day on the London market was estimated at £150 million (Murphy 2000). Its founders Martha Lane Fox, the "unofficial

icon of Britain's burgeoning Internet frenzy" (*The Economist* 2000), and Brent Hoberman received star treatment that was typical of the enthusiasm for dotcom firms. There were appearances on the *BBC* and many articles in the press, journalists marvelled at their inexplicable wealth (*BBC News* 2000; *The Economist* 2000c; McGregor 2000; Warner 2000) and their portraits were among those of successful business people featured in the photo exhibition 'Management Tomorrow: 21 leaders for the 21st century' at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

In the Netherlands, Michiel Frackers and his companies *Planet Internet* and *BitMagic* caused excitement, albeit of a more modest kind than the American craze. Again a young Internet specialist, Frackers, had succeeded in acquiring considerable financial backing from a large corporation – the Dutch telecom company *KPN* – for his business plan for the Internet service provider *Planet Internet*. The introduction of the company in the Netherlands was welcomed with considerable media interest (all of the major national newspapers and magazines featured the company) and Frackers' innovative ideas as well as his newly acquired personal wealth were popular journalistic fodder (Abels 1997; Monden 1997; Ramdharie 1999). "Whiz kid" Frackers (Ramdharie 1999) came to symbolise the promises of the Internet, which were central to the dotcom hype. The image that emerges from several articles about him is that this new technology had granted access to centres of corporate power, wealth and fame to Frackers, an unassuming young local (Abels 1997; Monden 1997; Ramdharie 1999; Rosenberg 2000). Dreams of opulence, exciting new business ideas, uninhibited creativity and autonomy fuelled the dotcom hype in both America and Europe, and Frackers and the other so-called 'Internet kids' seemed to be realising these aspirations.

7.4 POPULAR CULTURE PHENOMENON

Although initially the main arena of the dotcom craze had been the financial markets, the hype quickly spilled over to the world of popular culture. As "the chic new dot-com geeks" (*Town & Country* 2000) and their firms entered the pages of lifestyle and fashion periodicals, they became subjects of general public interest. American and international glossy magazines, such as *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town & Country*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* all covered subjects dealing with the dotcom industry: the successes of Internet firms on the financial markets, the dotcommers as eligible bachelors, their wealth, lifestyles, hobbies and clothing, the "wonder women of the Silicon Valley" (Edwards 2000) and so on (Bowe 2000; Brown 2001; DuBois 1999: Peretz 2000; *Playboy* 2000; Sales 2000: Van Meter 2000).

The above-mentioned *theGlobe.com* and its founders Paternot and Krizelman are fine examples of dotcom stardom that crossed over to the popular culture. As Paternot says, his company came to represent "the quintessential Internet story" in the press, and he and Krizelman became "the global poster boys of Internet excess" (Paternot 2001: 160). According to Paternot, in the three months following its Wall Street debut in 1998 their company was mentioned on 1200 occasions by different American media outlets (Paternot 2001: 163). Combined with their youth and billionaire status, Paternot and Krizelman's successes at the stock exchange became a point of great interest for the press. They were featured as rich, young geniuses in articles with titles, such as "They're rich (and you're not)" (Bryant 1999), and there were appearances on *CNN*, *MTV*, various television breakfast shows and the European press from *Der Spiegel* to the *BBC* (Paternot 2001: 160-171).

In addition to the glorification of the dotcom industry by the press, advertisement of Internet firms at televised mass events was an important factor in instilling awareness of the dotcoms to a broader audience. The most clamorous of those was the Super Bowl game in American Football in 2000. The Super Bowl is a key event in contemporary American popular culture; in addition to the actual sports match its intermission and specially produced ads include appearances by film and pop stars. Its televised broadcasts have a large audience and the commercial messages featured have a status of entertainment *an sich*. At the very height of the dotcom craze in February 2000 new businesses such as *Pets.com*, *Monster.com* and *E*Trade* profiled their brands as a part of this mass-scale event and advertised themselves to millions of people (*Business Week* estimated the audience of the Super Bowl weekend in 2000 at 135 million; Hyman 2000).

Not only did the companies in question acquire fame by becoming a part of the event, they had the chance to present themselves as prosperous and thriving. According to the website dedicated to the Super Bowl commercials, the average cost of a 30 second advertisement in 2000 was $2.1 million.[12] Such signs of affluence contributed to the hyperbolic interest in dotcom companies and confirmed the reputation of Internet firms as money-makers. Their exaggerated spending on ad-time during the Super Bowl caught the attention of journalists (Berger 2000; Gledhill 2000; Hyman 2000) and captions, such as "Online Ad Blitz on Super Bowl Sunday" *(Wall Street and Technology* 2000) and "Internet firm to pay $2.5 million for 30 Seconds" (Takaki 2000) added fuel to the exuberance about the dotcoms.

---

12 http://www.superbowl-ads.com

7.5 THE MAGIC OF THE DOTCOMS

What Stephan Paternot describes as "the head-spinning magic of inexplicable Internet stock evaluations" (Paternot 2001: 160) dazzled and amazed many. The successes of the dotcom firms made a great impression but the workings of this market were perplexing. As companies such as *Amazon*, the British *Lastminute.com* and Paternot's *theGlobe.com* were showing, the dotcom industry appeared to be based on logic that differed from that of traditional businesses. Paternot describes the rationale behind the enthusiasm for the dotcoms as follows:

> The reigning headline of the era was "Company with Massive Losses Is Worth $300 Million," and the reigning formula for determining the value of a company was multiple to its losses. The more you lose, the bigger you are. (Paternot 2001: 160)

Paternot's suggestion that the dotcom markets were approached as something magical rings true. It remained unclear how such great financial losses as described by him could increase the value of firms; the Internet industry appeared to have its own, inexplicable workings. Above all, it was the novelty and the special status of the Internet, rather than tangible gain that vouched for the value of the dotcoms.

The extremely optimistic evaluations of these firms were rooted in the belief that the Internet was somehow not of the world as we know it and that it had extraordinary powers. For instance, highflying statements about the Internet's capacity to rejuvenate the economy – to bring new inspiration, and introduce wholly new ways of making money and doing business – fuelled the enthusiasm about the Internet industry. The following exclamation from *Forbes* magazine is a fine example:

> The Internet inspires young talent, cracks open ideas, speeds up the velocity of capital, attacks cost, lowers prices, suppresses inflation and makes markets smarter – yes, the stock market, too! (Karlgaard 1999)

Here, the Internet is conceived of as an independent agent that gives birth to new ideas and can exercise its powers so as to make things cheaper and hold back price rises. What is more, hopeful statements like the one just quoted often suggested that the Internet represented something unique in history: a force that can go against inflation and recessions. As was said in the previous chapter, according to several pundits the Internet was changing the laws of economy and giving birth to an economic miracle which would lead to a

long period of prosperity. As the *The Economist* points out, one of the reigning myths of the dotcom era was the belief that the ICT sector was "recession-proof", not susceptible to the usual deflation of market bubbles (*The Economist* 2001). It followed that, regardless of the historical precedents on the stock market, the dotcom boom would be different. This time the world was experiencing an unstoppable boom that was not subject to recessions (*Ec The Economist* 2001).

In addition to the notion that the Internet had exceptional capacities, a central theme associated with the dotcom economy was its inevitability (Frank 2000: 345). In his *One Market Under God* the journalist Thomas Frank points at the formulation of new 'laws' that were to explain the New Economy and present certain developments as a natural given, much like the laws of gravity. Frank refers to "Metcalfe's Law", according to which networks exponentially multiply themselves, Moore's Law, which established that the capacity electronic silicon chips used computers would double in every two years, and George Gilder's "Law of the Microcosm" and "Law of the Telecosm" (Frank 2000: 346). All of these made the growth of the Internet and related technologies seem an unshakeable fact that simply grew out of a set of principles. According to Frank, such certain tales of the inevitability of progress and promises of plenitude assured stock market investors that their purchases were justified and reasonable. Those hesitant were encouraged by reputable authorities and with confident statements about ICT, such as "The physics of the Information Age is a sure bet" (Frank 2000). Frank summarises the reasoning behind the dotcom enthusiasm: "That was no bubble on Wall Street: it was the future itself, generously whispering its secrets into the ears of the faithful and making us all wealthy beyond our wildest dreams" (Frank 2000: 354).

According to the kind of reasoning that typified the dotcom craze, the new technology would inescapably transform the world and – as several enthusiasts foresaw – it would take humanity to a better and richer level of existence. A super-human object was being created: the trust in the Internet and the supposed inevitability of a new type of economy both reveal an understanding of this technology as an independent and omnipotent force. Possessing its own laws and will, the Internet seemed beyond human control; to the contrary, it seemed to have control over man's existence.

7.6 CRASH, DISILLUSION AND BLIND FAITH

From March 2000 onwards the exhilaration with Internet firms gradually fizzled out. Many companies that had caused furore in the latter part of the 1990s became either extinct or were struggling to survive. Celebrated dotcom firms were suffering losses as spectacular as their earlier triumphs. For

instance, after a number of setbacks, both founders of *theGlobe.com* resigned from their posts in 2000. Although the company continues to operate, the business was declared one of the many 'dotbombs', or dotcom failures, that followed the deflation of the investment bubble. By March 2001 such major players of the boom as *Yahoo!*, *Cisco Systems* and *eBay* had respectively lost 88%, 66% and 61% of their market value in comparison to just one year earlier (Konrad & Kawamoto 2001).

The report *Risky Business: Americans see greed, cluelessness behind dot-coms' comeuppance* (2001) by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, reflects the sense of disillusionment with the Internet which followed the deflation of the dotcom bubble. The Pew report highlights three factors that respondents saw as important reasons for the massive collapse of Internet companies: rash and ill-considered business plans, greed for quick money and lack of management expertise (Horrigan 2001). It concludes that ungrounded exuberance was thought to be the main culprit behind the downfall of the dotcoms and articulates a notion that had become current in the public opinion: the thrill of the Internet had blinded people to reason and caused foolish behaviour. As Tom Britt, the founder of one dotcom failure, the Internet portal and directory *Channelseek* puts it: "There was just a lot of dumb money out there. Investment people got caught up in the glitz of the Web, didn't know what they were doing" (Cavanagh 2001).

In short, matters and attitudes that had been praised only a year earlier were now condemned. While the Pew report is critical of the unconventional strategies, lack of experience and greed of the 'dotcommers', at the height of the dotcom boom Internet firms had been highly esteemed *precisely* for their innovative business methods and youthful, eccentric managers, and the press had marvelled at their ability to make millions so fast. Business gurus had confidently promised a blooming future for this branch of the economy *because* it was so dynamic, and Internet companies had been celebrated as the ultimate realizations of free market dreams. This swift, 180-degree change in values exposes a sudden loss of faith in the Internet. Against rational evidence and historical wisdom, a great deal of trust had been invested in the dotcoms, and now the hopes projected on this new technology were bitterly disappointed.

Certainly, the hyper-inflated prices of Internet companies on the market had been a point of concern at the time of the dotcom hype and the great media interest in all things Internet-related did not go unnoticed. Several journalists recognised the parallels between the dotcoms and earlier crazes and investment bubbles. For instance, *The Spectator* saw similarities to the Dutch tulip craze and the Gold Rush in California in the 19th century (Johnson 1999). The ICT magazine *Red Herring* "smells the tulips" in its

discussion of the extremely successful Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) in the year 1999 (Red Herring 1999). And in the article "To Explain Web Mania, Pundits Tiptoe Through a Hot Metaphor" *The Wall Street Journal* traces the many references to the tulip fever in discussions of the craze at hand (Schurr 1999). Moreover, there had been warnings of head-over-heels practices, most notably by the chairman of the United States Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan. In a much-quoted speech on the assessment of the value of financial assets Greenspan cautioned against what he recognised as "irrational exuberance" (Greenspan 1996).

However, in the late-1990s such voices of prudence as Greenspan's had little effect on tempering the eagerness for the dotcoms. According to the dominant understanding about the powers of the Internet, the exuberance against which Greenspan and others had warned was not irrational at all. To the contrary, it appeared to have reasonable grounds from a number of perspectives. Both the birth of a wholly new socio-economic structure – the New Economy – and the general sense of good times that characterised the second part of the 1990s were seen as legitimate cause for exhilaration. As several commentators saw it, there were enough reasons to claim that the phenomenon at hand was, in fact, a case of "*rational exuberance*" (Allen 1999; Sosnoff 1997).

The explanations put forward to argue for this point of view reveal strong belief in the powers of the Internet. Indeed, even as the dotcom bubble was deflating, several representatives of the industry declared their unrelenting faith in it despite the unfortunate state of affairs on the stock exchange. Thus, Jay Walker of the travel booking website *Priceline* – one of the many failures of the hype – continued to believe in the web and "kept the faith" (Levy 2000a). In the same vein, at the height of the dotcom bust in 2001 *Wired* magazine declared that *Intel*'s Andy Grove *believed* in the Internet more than ever before and that his optimism about the ICT sector had not vanished (Heilemann 2001).

The standard argument that justified the excitement about the dotcoms was rooted in the kinds of highly optimistic theories about a paradigm shift in the underlying principles of the economy of which I spoke in Chapter Five. The image of the Internet as a revolutionary and refreshing new phenomenon, which was often propagated by well-known captains of industry boosted the great interest in Internet firms. For instance, in an interview with *Money* magazine, John Chambers of *Cisco Systems*, (producer of computer networking devices necessary to run the Internet such as switches, routers, and Ethernet hubs) proclaims that the world was experiencing a "second industrial revolution" (Insana 2000). Chambers puts forward the idea that the Internet will make people's lives look as fantastic as

the science fiction series *Star Trek*, predicting: "Reality will probably exceed what our dreams are now" (Insana 2000).

Once again, we encounter the idea that ICT and the Internet are capable of radically transforming the world: as was the case with the industrial revolution in the 19th century, the Internet revolution was expected to fundamentally change the (business)world. Even *The Economist* saw it as a *revolutionary* technology, quoting powerful business executives such as Lou Gerstner of *IBM* and Jack Welch of *General Electric* testifying to the great importance of the Internet as an economic force (*The Economist* 1999). Indeed, as the rise of Internet-based companies such as *Amazon*, *E-Bay*, *theGlobe.com* and *Yahoo!* was proving, this new technology was opening up novel possibilities for trade and marketing, creating products and services that had not existed before and generating exceptional monetary gain. Exuberance about such technology seemed reasonable: its abilities and potential, and the endorsements by renowned businessmen and respectable newspapers and magazines all vouched for its great worth.

In addition to the prognoses about the 'Internet revolution' or 'paradigm shift' to come, the many optimistic reports about the state of the American economy also made the exuberance about the dotcoms seem justified. By the year 2000, America had experienced a long stretch of economic growth. As several publications proclaimed, it was the longest recession free period in American history: 107 months (Alter 2000). The main indicators of a boom – greater wealth, rise in employment rates (20 million new jobs between 1993 and 1999) and increased consumer spending – were a regular feature in popular media outlets. As the *Newsweek* article "Good time politics" (Alter 2000) makes clear, there was much support from American politics for the euphoria and optimism about the new economy. Politicians such as Al Gore were speaking of "virtuous circles" (Gore quoted in Alter 2000) that would dominate the economy in the future due to the rise of ICT. Based on the success of the Internet and other ICT, Gore and many other politicians adhered to the notion that information would replace oil as the key factor in the American economy. The confidence that there were "good times ahead" for the society at large was amplified by journalists and a variety of public figures who foresaw a technology-driven boom for many decades to come.

The trend of growing productivity and decreasing prices, so went the argument, would continue as the dotcoms were coming of age. In June 1999, *Business Week* predicted "huge growth ahead for the Internet" (Smith 1999). Quoting one representative of an investment company, the author makes it clear that, despite warnings of risk, the general prospects for the dotcoms were thought to be very promising: "This is a turbocharged industry, and

what you will see in the next 12 months will dazzle and amaze you" (Alberto Vilar in Smith 1999).

7.7 THE EFFERVESCENT RELIGIOSITY OF THE DOTCOMS

In hindsight, a number of commentators have described the craze for Internet firms as a (near-) religious conviction that had temporarily blinded large numbers of people to rational consideration. For instance, in an analysis of the 'dotcom mania' in his *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition* (2003) the Dutch media theorist Geert Lovink describes the typical attitude that guided the actions of many dotcommers as blind faith:

> They were blinded by financial deals, and their religious optimism forced them to believe that technology and markets did not have to be developed and therefore their companies could become mega-successful instantaneously. (Lovink 2003: 74)

Similarly, in his article 'The Rise of Market Populism: America's New Secular Religion', published in the American weekly *The Nation*, Thomas Frank speaks of a "free market faith" that had conquered the public opinion in the course of the dotcom hype and had become a "secular religion" (Frank 2000). In their commentary, both Lovink and Frank emphasise the irrationality and naiveté of the market craze, and they make use of the terms religion and faith in order to account for the otherwise inexplicable enthusiasm for the Internet. A comparison is made between the dotcom boom and religious zealotry. The references to religion within this context make sense, but not because of the deemed foolishness or lack of rational insight of those involved in the craze. There is another and more important reason for describing such instances of collective excitement as religious.

Let us recall Durkheim's thoughts on collective effervescence that I discussed in Chapter Three. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* he argues that it is at moments of communal expression of emotion that the beliefs and the central values of a society are articulated and (re)affirmed. Referring to his analyses of the Australian aboriginal ceremonial corroborees, Durkheim posits that collective effervescence is the key to the rise of religious feelings (Durkheim 2001: 164). At these occasions sacred objects are created, shared beliefs arise and ties between individuals in a community are forged and strengthened. Towards the end of the book he underlines that even those public events that are not designed to be religious rituals can display religious facets. He summarises his argument as follows:

> Every festival, even one purely secular in origin, has certain features of the religious ceremony, for it always has the effect of bringing individuals together, setting the masses in motion, and so inducing that state of effervescence … that is not unrelated to the religious state. (Durkheim 2001: 285)

The dotcom craze represents such a moment of collective exhilaration where shared beliefs and values were celebrated, and a number of Durkheim's remarks about the aboriginal corroborees are applicable to it.

Firstly, Durkheim points at the temporary suspension of ordinary social rules and customs in times of great collective exhilaration. Feelings can become so heated and overwhelming that the usual patterns of behaviour no longer apply. Intense emotions inspire acts that would under normal circumstances be irrational or even unthinkable. He remarks:

> The passions unleashed are so impetuous they cannot be contained. The ordinary conditions of life are set aside so definitely and so consciously that people feel the need to put themselves above and beyond customary morality. (Durkheim 2001: 163)

The shared enthusiasm that characterised the dotcom boom was marked by precisely such a trend to break rules and go against custom. Caution and rational considerations about the value of newly founded Internet firms, the credibility of the promises of the New Economy, the reliability of those who promoted dotcom businesses and the lessons learnt from previous stock market crazes had all been pushed aside by general effervescence. As was the case with the ecstatic Australian tribesmen described by Durkheim, in the course of the stock market craze for the dotcoms, modes of behaviour were defined through intense collective exhilaration rather than established wisdom.

The trust in the so-called Internet whiz kids like the above-mentioned dotcommers is a telling example of such disregard for convention and prudence. Stephan Paternot describes the excessive confidence in the "Internet kids" as follows: "Bet *everything* in the Net business. And get yourself some net kid to run it. … If you're an Internet kid, you know how things work" (Paternot 2001: 151). These young Internet 'whizzes' represented a fresh start, wholly new certainties and clear directives for achieving a better, more exciting world. Despite their lack of experience in the business world, it was thought that they had an intuitive understanding of commerce and could be successful in any field. Mirroring the effervescence

discussed by Durkheim, collective excitement about the dotcoms gave rise to the acts and beliefs that later seemed so unreasonable and rash.

A second observation by Durkheim about moments of collective effervescence is that they inspire in individuals a sense of shared, simultaneous transformation. He speaks of a feeling that a person "seems to have become a new being" (Durkheim 2001: 163-64). As has been said a few times, the transformation of mankind was one of the important themes of the techno-utopian thinking that lay at the foundations of the craze for the Internet and related businesses. Publications concerned with the New Economy, such as Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy*, Schwartz, Leyden and Hyatt's *The Long Boom: A Vision for the Coming Age of Prosperity* (1999) or *The New New Thing: A Silicon Valley Story* (1999) by the American author Michael Lewis, and newspaper articles on a "new era of bright hopes" (Hof 1999) all expressed the sentiments of the time: with the rise of the Internet, the world was being transformed. As I have shown, these publications declared that all aspects of life were being radically renewed – the economy, work, human relationships and governance – and this idea of revolution and rejuvenation itself inspired ever-greater excitement about the Internet and the dotcoms.

Finally, Durkheim interprets dancing, shouting and the use of boomerangs and other instruments in the course of the corroborees as a way of articulating the effervescence of an event and translating it into specific activities (Durkheim 2001: 163). He adds that the rituals in question also intensify the excitement. In the case of the dotcom hype, this process was quite obvious: the exhilaration about the Internet and the dotcoms was both channelled through and reinforced by the optimistic tales and reports in the press, as well as the many books in which visions of the New Economy were laid out. Narratives about the imminent changes to the business world and the successes and excessive wealth of the dotcoms formed vessels of communal exhilaration but they also greatly contributed to it. These stories gave body to an image of the Internet and other ICT as superhuman objects that were capable of transforming the world and granting people access to a horn of plenty that could not be exhausted. They thus created an object of reverence on which a bubbling craze could focus.

In short, the religious dimension of the dotcom craze can be found in the public exhilaration and giddy anticipation of affluence that the Internet firms inspired. The high-spirited mood that marked the interest in the dotcoms formed a fertile ground for articulating and celebrating some of the central values of modern western society which I spoke about in Chapter Two: technophilia, consumerism and the ideal of progress. It allowed for the

portrayal of the Internet as an extraordinary, powerful object to which these values could be anchored.

7.8 CONCLUSION

The expectations regarding the dotcoms of which I have spoken in this chapter can best be described as examples of efforts to provide points of reference for giving meaning to existence and articulating what is important to society. The following ideals that are central to contemporary Western culture were highlighted: the free market, individual success embodied by the self-made man, belief in progress and the omnipotence of technology. Furthermore the dotcom hype represents attempts to construct coherent visions of the world, to create objects that can define our lives and to overcome the fears and uncertainties of human existence. If one agrees with the definitions of religion as put forward by Durkheim and Geertz, then these are the key features that define religion. According to their functional definitions, religion is primarily concerned with creating meaning and establishing anchors to which values and ideas about the purpose of existence can be attached.

I have claimed that the dotcom hype was an example of implicit religiosity within a secular context: on the stock exchange, in the business world and popular culture at large. It was a striking case of shared devotion to ideas about the direction in which the world was heading and it was marked by strong faith in a transcendent, superhuman force: technology. The Internet and the dotcom firms inspired exhilaration about economic growth and radically new ways of creating great wealth, and they were ultimately seen as agents that could help humanity overcome its fragility and reach a better future.

The turn of 20th century was marked by a series of crazes, hypes and fads. As I have shown, information and communications technology sparked off particularly intense collective excitement throughout the 1990s. The Internet and other ICT gave rise to emotional discourses in which the technologies in question carried hopes of affluence, freedom and the betterment of the human condition in general. The dotcom hype was a particularly effervescent expression of the kind of optimism and exhilaration that was associated with information technology at the time. But not all hypes of the period were equally technophiliac or optimistic. A key example of a hype in the second half of the 1990s that was both critical of new technology and concerned with pessimistic visions of the future was the so-called 'millennium bug' scare. The following chapter will offer an account of this phenomenon and show that, like the Internet hype, it too can be seen as a manifestation of implicit religiosity.

CHAPTER 8

EPILOGUE: THE Y2K HYPE

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the run-up to the year 2000 (simultaneous with the dotcom boom) fearful visions of a "digital apocalypse",[13] or the meltdown of society brought about by an all-out failure of computer systems, circulated the pages of magazines, newspapers, websites and chat rooms. At the time, the millennial computer problem, known as the 'millennium' or 'Y2K bug' (the acronym was composed of: Year, 2, and Kilo, thousand in ancient Greek) enjoyed much publicity and it was considered a top priority by governments and the corporate world alike. Several experts anticipated that because of an oversight in computer programming, once the date changed from 1999 to 2000, computers would not be able to process this change in digits and the date would revert to 1900, thus possibly causing failures in computer systems and microchips embedded in appliances.

As forecasts of a digital meltdown reached the press, there appeared to be reason to reconsider the optimism of the sort of techno-utopia that had found its best expression in the Internet hype. The promises of wealth and comfort that had been associated with the Internet were replaced by omens of destruction. If the dotcom and Internet hypes had been based on a notion that information technology is a benign force that can grant us favours, then the millennial computer problem inspired visions of technology as a capricious, malign power beyond human control. If the Internet hype was the peak of excitement about information technology, then the Y2K hype represents the nadir: disappointment with technology and fear of its powers. In other words, this hype can be described as the diametrical opposite of the optimism and exhilaration that the Internet and the dotcoms inspired.

However, there are several parallels between the two hypes and an analysis of the hype that the Y2K bug inspired does offer telling insights into how such instances of shared preoccupation can function as sources of meaning. Like the Internet hype, it was a reaction to troubled and unpredictable times and it too can reveal much about how modern, technological societies channel their anxieties and uncertainties. Despite its pessimistic nature it too, much like the Internet hype, relied on images of technology as an all-powerful, somehow super-human force, and in the

---

13 For examples of the use of the term 'digital apocalypse', see Kirn 1999 or Spector 1999.

narratives about both the Internet and the Y2K bug the possibility of far-reaching social change was coupled to this powerful force.

Furthermore, the Y2K hype was also an outburst of collective fascination that displayed a number of implicitly religious facets. This type of religiosity manifested itself among other things in feelings of awe and fascination towards the bug, in the strong belief in its power to radically change the world, and in the sense of purpose and certainty that the idea of digital apocalypse brought with it. The collective preoccupation with the Y2K bug also provided a sense of social coherence and it produced its own leaders and teachers.

8.2 Y2K – THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

In January 1999, when many media outlets were still publishing exuberant stories about the dotcoms, Time magazine ran a special feature on the 'end of world', paying special attention to the possible effects of the millennial computer problem.

As the magazine suggests, it was deemed probable that computer systems malfunctions would seriously impact life on earth, endangering not just our technologies, but also our very existence.

On the cover of this edition of Time, we see a barefoot, Jesus-like figure amongst urban mayhem, carrying a cross and a sandwich board which reads: "Y2K insanity! Apocalypse Now! Will computers melt down? Will society?" (Time 18.01.1999). From this admittedly tongue-in-

Figure 3: Front cover image *Time*. Vol. 152(2). 18.01.1999

cheek cover and the articles devoted to the subject in the magazine, it still becomes clear that the malfunctions caused by the bug were expected to have serious consequences for all aspects of life, which could even result in the meltdown of society.
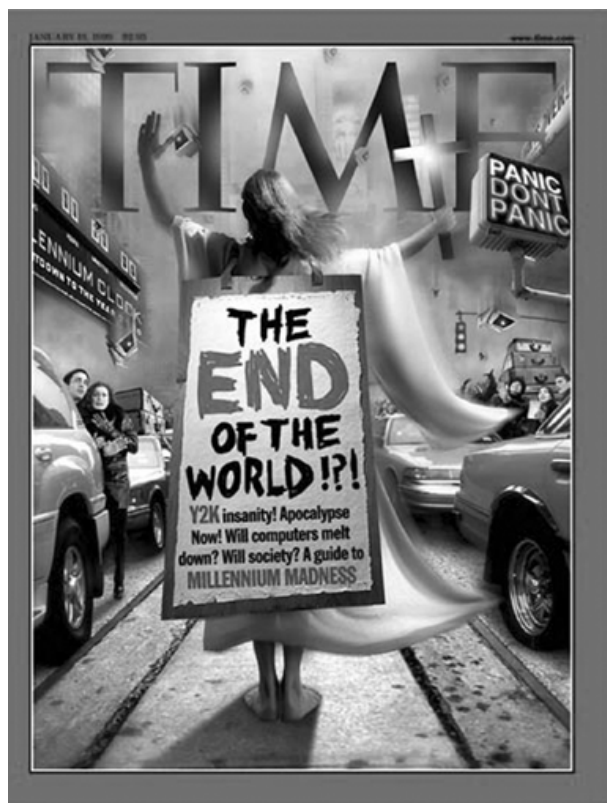
In marking a fault in computers as the agent of a possible apocalypse, Time voiced a feeling that had been hovering in the popular consciousness throughout the last years of the twentieth century: some form of TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It)[14] appeared as a logical and meaningful answer to the uncertain times at hand. The notion of a digital apocalypse provided suitable content for contemporary eschatological fears. It translated unspecified expectations of some form of millennial unrest into a crisis scenario caused by a problem in computer programming. During the aftermath of the Cold War and on the threshold of a new millennium, ICT had become a major vessel of social anomie. Uncertainties about the new world order and a general fin-de-siècle uneasiness were channelled into moral issues, such as apprehension about the spread of pornography on the Internet and e-mailstalking, fear of the negative influences of the Internet and computer games on children, or the continuous threat of computer viruses. The millennium bug was another such vehicle for the insecurities of the time, giving them a particularly pessimistic form.

The year 2000 loomed as a critical deadline and the notion that something momentous was about to happen became a shared preoccupation. The *Time* special on 'the end of the world' was but a small contribution to the avalanche of publications that reviewed the possible consequences of Y2K complications. Apart from articles in the press and discussions on the Internet, a great number of guidebooks and video instructions for Y2K preparations and survival were published. A search on *Amazon.com* produces dozens of 'action guides' to the millennial problem for personal, family and business purposes. In addition, the bug attracted the attention of popular culture at large: it became the subject of science fiction novels, films and television series; it was spoofed in Y2K-themed pop songs[15] and various comedy series, and a whole range of topical merchandising was born (Y2K stationery, crockery, clocks, toys and t-shirts).[16]

Y2K complications were interpreted in various degrees of seriousness but to most commentators there was little certainty as to the *exact* outcome of the problem. Even if it was not certain what the bug would do, many thought that there was reason to be worried and that it was best to be prepared for the

14 The term (pronounced as "tee-oh-tawa-kee" according to *Wired Magazine*, Poulsen 1998) was popular on websites devoted to the millennial problem and taken over by journalists writing on the topic. See, for example Lacayo 1999.

15 Such as 'Y2K-Hooray' by the band Jim's Big Ego. Mp3 download from: http://www.garageband.com/artist/jims_big_ego

16 See Kushner, D. (1999, 30.10.). Y2schlocK. *Village Voice* [Electronic Version]. Online available: http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-11-30/news/y2schlock/

bug to strike. In an article on the possible effects of the bug on a Boston bank *The Economist* concludes: "Even if Bank Boston does its best to be ready, no one can be sure what will happen when the clock strikes twelve" (*The Economist* 1997). The possible consequences of the bug could range from minor to extreme, in which case version it was to have far-reaching ripple effects and eventually cause society itself to collapse. It was suggested that in the bigger picture of the network society, in which different aspects of society are linked across the world, Y2K would leave nothing untouched. The possible failure of the electricity supply would not just cause a complete blackout but have the domino effect of cutting off all other supplies and severing communications and transport networks (Poulsen 1998). Y2K 'guru' Gary North, the post-millennium bug future would culminate in the collapse of the whole of civilisation into chaos and disintegration: "a stock market collapse; the breakdown of most postal services, banks and credit card companies; and a mass exodus of programmers leaving no one to fix things" (Penenberg & Gordon 1999: 52).

In essence, the scenarios about the bug – like the one put forward by Gary North – tapped into the basic questions of man's vulnerability and purpose in the world. They reveal a sense of urgency and a fear of loss of control over the state of affairs in the world. Y2K was a revelatory eye-opener about the fragility of the digital economy and the world in general. It was the definite negation of the promises of ICT and a reminder that technology could break loose and turn on its creators, and thus possibly have unforeseen negative consequences for society.

Warnings about the serious dangers of the 'digitalisation' of the economy and society at large were mostly common among the more extreme millennium bug pundits but even the sober voices of such magazines as *The Economist* pointed out the vulnerability of an economy whose products have "no tangible existence" (*The Economist* 1997). In the article just mentioned, where the *The Economist* presented the scenario of a possible 'attack' of the millennium bug on a Boston bank, readers were reminded of the eventuality that the bug might wipe out records of their accounts and transactions. It transpired that the infrastructure of financial institutions was in fact vulnerable and that trust in computers may be bitterly betrayed.

The measures taken to prevent or cope with the problems that the bug might cause indicate how seriously the millennial computer was taken. In the years preceding the year 2000 most Western governments set up task forces devoted to the bug. For example, in the United States the Federal Aviation Administration, the Pentagon, the tax office and the social security network all had some form of Y2K contingency plan (O'Malley 1998). A telling sign of the commitment to Y2K on an official level were the many billions

invested in fixing the problem. There are no exact data on how much was money was involved but several news media reported that an estimated $500 billion was spent worldwide by governments and the business world (*BBC News* 2000; Levy 2000b). In addition to the Y2K-readiness plans by governments and firms, another indicator of the fact that the millennial problem was seen by some as a considerable threat was the rise of millennium bug-related survivalist movements in the United States and to a lesser degree, in Europe.

8.3 Y2K SURVIVALISM

In general, survivalism can be described as an attitude that assumes the necessity of preparing for a future where the infrastructures, provisions and social order that are commonly taken for granted can no longer be relied on due to disaster, war or some other serious disruption. Y2K survivalism in specific responded to worst-case apocalyptic scenarios that were inspired by the millennial computer problem. Typically, the strategy was to prepare for the post-millennial world as if a war-like emergency was imminent and to find resourceful means of outliving the anticipated chaos and destruction. Y2K survivalists imagined full self-sufficiency and they hoped to regain control over the destiny of humanity that some feared to have been seized by computers. To many survivalists, a Y2K-related disaster was a way out of "a civilization of intimidating global corporations, boundless personal gratification and unnerving manipulations of nature" (Lacayo 1999). Y2K survivalism meant a return to a life in which mankind could no longer rely on computers and technology in general.

Survivalist preparations for the date change tended to be extreme, forming an exceptional reaction to the millennial problem. Nonetheless, Y2K survivalism is indicative of both the fears and hopes that the millennial bug scare gave rise to. It can be described as the most intense and concentrated form of the Y2K hype and it provides us with a magnified image of the ways of thinking that lay at the root of the more mainstream understanding of the millennial problem. Survivalism presented a common cause with a clear vision of the future, notions of 'right' and 'wrong', a definite 'enemy' and practical instructions for managing life. The movement articulated the general social unease of the time in clear terms and was a potent antidote for the existential questions of pre-millennial anomie.

In the article "Take the World…Please" (1999) *Time* magazine offers a typical survivalist take on the millennial problem. It reveals that the bug was seen as a purifying agent: the chaos that would ensue was expected to act as a form of penance for the decadence and the quick money associated with ICT-related businesses. A Y2K disaster would bring an end to man's reliance

153

on computers, reinstate basic manual skills and be "a long-awaited revenge against the nerds" (Kirn 1999) who had come to power with the rise of personal computers in the late 1980s. The magazine foresees the downfall of the digital elite and articulates feelings of revenge as follows: "While formerly high-paid website designers are frantically distilling potable water from the radiators of their Lexuses, [manual workers] will be relaxing" (Kirn 1999). In this version of the future, a feeling of the 'rise of the righteous' comes to the fore. It reveals the belief that the millennium bug would teach a lesson to those who had shunned the so-called tangible economy and hailed in the information age. A dream of salvation and deliverance from dependence on machines and specialists emerges. Since Y2K would establish a new and somehow more unaffected set of truths and values, a return to a simpler and more authentic way of life would follow.

These images of the millennium bug as a powerful force that simultaneously gives rise to fear and fascination formed the core of a basically religious worldview. It is true that several prominent Christian activists integrated the bug into their view of the world. For instance, in their books, sermons and videos the American television ministers Jerry Falwell and Jack Van Impe associated the Y2K problem with Biblical prophecies, interpreting it as a sign of nearing Armageddon.[17] However, the sort of religiosity that typified most Y2K survivalist thinking was not consciously articulated in terms of Christian beliefs. The discourse involved mostly remained on the level of implicit manifestations of religion: dreams of transcendence, allusions to a super-human force, a sense of belonging to a special group and shared excitement about a common cause.

8.3.1 Collective Belief

The survivalist vision of the world was characterised by three sentiments: a belief that with the impending Y2K disaster the *real* truth about the order of the world was being uncovered, a very strong conviction in the validity of the worldview that followed from this realisation and a sense of urgency in taking serious protective steps against the (perceived) threats that one's environment posed. According to the survivalists, the millennial problem revealed that man's security in the world was but an illusion. In an article about the Oklahoma Y2K survivalist Scott Olmsted, *Wired* magazine expounds on the notion that the Y2K scare forced individuals to face up to a world that offers no securities:

---

17 For example Van Impe's video '2000 Time Bomb' (1999) or Falwell's 'A Christian's Guide to the Millennium Bug' (1998).

154

Scott has turned his back on denial – the blind faith that allows people to live normal lives in the face of staggering complexity, risk, and uncertainty. Instead, he's chosen to acknowledge his own vulnerability. ... He, too, has been driven to act by the clarity and intensity of his vision. (Poulsen 1998)

There are unmistakeable religious undertones to this account: it tells of someone who has become privy to important insights about the world and grown into a believer who embraces a new worldview with rigour. The story of Olmsted shows how individuals question the ontological security of the world and how they look for points of focus that can give meaning to their existence. The world as a dangerous and chaotic place is acknowledged as the norm, with its own logic and rules, and a framework emerges wherein it is perfectly possible to make sense of life. The reaction to the disquieting discovery that one's sense of security has been false is to cling on to a new vision – that of a digital apocalypse – and to act upon it. As Olmsted saw it, "taking action – doing something – really gets you out of that [sense of disorientation]" (Poulsen 1998).

Practical preparations for the expected disaster were central to the survivalist attempts to cope with insecurity and formed the key point of focus in this new worldview. The international media paid much attention to survivalist measures such as the relocation of families to the desert and the equipping of homes with electric generators, sun panels, tanks of propane and weapons (Lacayo 1999; O'Malley 1998; Poulsen 1998; O'Reiley 1999). For the masses that were expected to stream out of the cities there were plans for specially designed housing compounds, such as the "Heritage Farms 2000" project in rural Arizona (Lacayo 1999). The British daily *The Guardian* reports on one family who, in anticipation of the worst case scenario, had moved to a remote countryside house with no facilities, and prepared for the year 2000 by stockpiling food, medicine and water purification tablets. According to the article, "they feared Y2K would bring food shortages, the accidental discharge of nuclear weapons, the breakdown of global capitalism and rioting on the streets" (Seenan 2000).

If the immediate concern of survivalism was coping with mayhem and destruction, then the notion that the world would soon undergo great changes also held a promise of salvation and spiritual revival. Despite the fears, to many survivalists a bug-related disaster was a blessing. *Time* quotes a member of the New Age group Church Universal and Triumphant: "Civilizations rise to the level of their incompetence... but personally, I really believe there will be a new Golden Age afterward" (Kirn 1999). The return to a pre-computer era was an appealing outlook for those who found the root

of contemporary malaise in digital technology: the millennial problem gave hope of regaining power over the destiny of humanity that some feared to have been seized by computers. It was a way out of "a civilization of intimidating global corporations, boundless personal gratification and unnerving manipulations of nature" (Lacayo 1999).

In short, the underlying theme of Y2K survivalism was the quest for a promised land and the survivalists' visions of "a Golden Age" to come represented the sort of hope for radical changes that we can associate with religious thinking. According to the Y2K survivalists, the bug would facilitate the rise of those who had accepted the scenario of the digital apocalypse to a new kind of existence. After the initial ordeals, transcendence beyond the restrictive, bureaucratic world of computers and commercial institutions would be possible. "A Golden Age" would follow.

8.3.2. Y2K: A Charismatic, Super-Human Force

The Y2K survivalist movement held the millennium bug to be the truth that guided its actions. Its destructive force stood as the guarantee of the validity of the survivalist worldview. Yet from the many articles on survivalism it transpires that the object to which the Y2K survivalist referred as his true north cannot be fully known. After all, there is no definite proof that the millennium bug will have any disastrous effects, let alone bring about TEOTWAWKI. As the above-mentioned *Wired* article on the Oklahoma survivalist Olmsted shows, this survivalist's belief in the importance of his activities is blind and his main engine is an *intuition* that something overwhelming is about to happen, that "this thing is big enough to do something about" (Poulsen 1998). 'This thing' that he refers to – the millennium bug and its effects – had become powerful enough to warrant his faith. Such strong faith was characteristic of Y2K survivalism, as well as of the more mainstream Y2K scare. As the myth of the bug's capacity to destroy spread, the reasoning behind the problem remained obscure to most, and the Y2K bug acquired a significance that went beyond the logic of computer programming. It seemed to belong to a different order of things that could not and needed not be fully explained.

Although much attention was paid to the subject, it was difficult to comprehend what the millennium bug was. It had no material form and seemed to be nowhere and everywhere at once. It could result in great problems, yet, unlike computer viruses, no one had designed the millennium bug. The enigmatic Y2K bug was more like an independent force than a man-made artefact. *Newsweek* described the problem as "the biggest time bomb in history" (Levy 1996) and it was apparently within no one's power to dismantle this bomb. The bug appeared to be beyond the reach of human

control and understanding, and ultimately it seemed to have control over the destiny of mankind.

As one article in Utne's *Citizen's Action Guide* suggests, it was too late to stop its course; the Y2K bug would now dictate a particular kind of life and mentality.

> One … thing is true about Y2K: It is no longer merely a technical problem. Whether it was ever capable of being solved technically, we have run out of time and resources. It has transformed itself into a social and political issue. … And we do need to learn how to deal with Y2K, because it represents a new type of issue: the failure of complex systems. In the 21st century we can expect to be confronted with more and more of these increasingly complex problems. (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers 1998)

In short, the bug hovered above the world as a very powerful, enigmatic and absolute entity, as something that would determine the course of events in our society but could itself not be influenced or qualified by anything. It had achieved a transcendent, superhuman status.

This elevated significance contributed to the special, charismatic allure that the bug had for the Y2K survivalists. Typically, much unsupported trust was invested in its power to alter the state of the world. The bug was deemed capable of bringing an end to life as we know it, undoing the laws and institutions of society and bringing about the collapse of the foundations of civilisation. Quaint details, such the *Time's* story on a family who had stockpiled toilet paper as a potential bartering item for a time when money was no longer useful,[18] give an indication of the extent of the social changes expected.

To the survivalists, the bug had the potential to bring about the collapse of such foundations of civilisation as the currency systems. Such a force was a source of great fascination to the survivalists, because it implied the reversal of ruling social arrangements and the dawning an exciting new era. The prospect of the victory of the underdog gave hope and as was said before, this meant that the bug was a blessing rather than a misfortune. Consequently, the millennial problem had a strong grasp on the emotions of the survivalist: it both thrilled and frightened, for the bug appeared to have the power to bring chaos into the world and to install a new set of values and guidelines for existence.

---

18 Interview with Arkansas survivalists Jerry and Carolyn Head in Lacayo, 1999.

8.3.3 Common Cause

In a time when unease about the end of the millennium and the post-Cold War period preoccupied the public, the bug threat fulfilled an essentially religious function: it provided the survivalists with familiar themes and strategies for coping with anxieties. As *Forbes* magazine puts it, "This [Y2K preparation] is the most fun they've [the survivalists] had since the Cuban missile crisis" (Owen 1999). The comparison rings true. If in the 1960s the threat of a nuclear attack had kept people busy with preparations for surviving an assault, then there was a similar aspect to the activities of Y2K survivalism. However doom-ridden the context, working towards a goal offered fulfilment and a point on which to project insecurities, and it was a source of collective excitement.

The impending doom held a promise of a more intense sense of belonging to a community. As the example of the Oklahoma survivalist Olmsted reveals, the typical conviction was that the millennial computer problem had opened the door to the truth about the state of the world to a select group of like-minded visionaries. Although the survivalists' passionate interest for Y2K and their sometimes excessive preparations were ridiculed by commentators (Owen 1999; Saffo 1999; Kushner 1999), the movement cherished pretences of having access to special knowledge. True to the image of misunderstood prophets, the realisation that their efforts were not taken seriously was no obstacle for the survivalists. Rather, it was a sign that others had not yet opened their eyes to the threat of the millennium bug.

The notion of themselves as a group of informed and prepared individuals versus the unprepared masses was typical of survivalist thought. That some felt worried about those oblivious to the threats of the bug gives an indication of the special status that was attributed to their own group. "I know I don't have to fear the future... I only worry about people who aren't prepared",[19] says one Ohio woman whose family had embraced the survivalist mindset and taken extensive millennium-proofing measures. This 'us against the rest' attitude was particularly evident in the protective measures that the survivalists took against possible looters. There were plans for defensive compound forming: families and small communities were to literally close themselves off from the rest of the world. For instance, in 1998 the online magazine *Salon* featured a list of existing plans to protect communities from "violent city refugees who may be hunting for food in the early months of 2000" (Brown 1998). These included especially designed,

---

19 Ohio survivalist Diane Eckhart quoted in Lacayo 1999.

isolated 'Survival Domes', purchasing property in remote, rural areas and setting up "covenant communities" of likeminded survivalists (Brown 1998). In anticipation of post-Y2K aggression many acquired guns – another Oklahoma survivalist is reported to have bought four firearms, including an M-16 infantry rifle (Poulsen 1998).

In fairness, the threat of Y2K did not always provoke such measures but it typically did inspire strong group consciousness. Eric Utne, the editor of the *Y2K Citizen's Action Guide* (1998) rejoiced in the sense of community that was reawakened by the preparations for a digital apocalypse: "As we prepare for Y2K something surprising and quite wonderful is going to happen. We're going to get to know our neighbors." (Utne 1998: introduction to the book's online version). His enthusiasm reveals a sense of 'togetherness' and belief in deliverance through shared purpose. To Utne, Y2K was a welcome means of instilling "a family feeling throughout the community", which would mean making contacts with people of different backgrounds, supporting others and taking shared responsibility for the community's children, elderly, disabled and criminals (Utne 1998: introduction to the book's online version). Utne and other activists expressed their feeling that the bug threat revived confidence in others and helped to rediscover intimacy and communal spirit. *Time* quotes the mother of one family: "this [planning for the millennium] has brought us closer together, we have a common goal" (Lacayo 1999).

The sense of belonging to a special group and sharing a goal are important facets of religious experience. Meanings and values are collectively confirmed and the group can offer its members the comfort and security of its confines. If we follow Durkheim's understanding of communal activity, then it is in the context of the close-knit group that the instruments for giving meaning to the world can be formed and legitimised: a shared worldview is created, and special, sacred objects are defined (Durkheim 2001: 160-62). In the case of millennial survivalism one can observe this function in the formation of defensive 'in' and 'out' groups, in the sense of the newly-found togetherness and in the prescriptions for how an informed and responsible member of the group is to act, such as those found in Utne's *Y2K Citizen's Action Guide*.

8.4 MILLENNIAL GURUS

To a great extent the excitement about the millennium bug both among the survivalists and in the mainstream press fed on the prognoses made by different specialists and 'gurus'. Some, such as Gary North or Edward Yourdon, the author of several guidebooks on the millennium bug, can be described as the 'pioneers' of Y2K survivalism. On his website North

predicted "worldwide disaster" and among other things advised the public to "stock up on gold and grain, and move to a remote location".20 Yourdon, whose relocation from New York to a self-reliant home in rural New Mexico was the subject of several articles in the press (Lacayo 1999; Penenberg & Gordon 1999; Zuidema 1999), envisioned a worst-case post-millennial scenario for the economy and society at large. In two books – *Time Bomb 2000* (1997) and *The Complete Y2K Home Preparation Guide* (1999)21 – he expounds on the possible effects of the bug and gives advice for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. While the Y2K preparations suggested by North and Yourdon could be dismissed as extreme survivalism, the possibility of a digital apocalypse was also taken seriously by the authorities.

A number of the prominent Y2K activists were highly placed members of the government and the business community. For example, John Koskinen of the official United States Year 2000 Awareness Group, Charles Lickel of *IBM* and Edward Yardeni of *Deutsche Bank* were esteemed authorities. The "leading Y2K bear" Yardeni (Sandberg & Kaplan 2000) was perhaps the most fierce and enthusiastic of the three. *Money* magazine calls him a "true believer" (Washington 1999) and the image that comes to the fore in several articles is indeed that of a passionate evangelist.

Yardeni's pronouncements were provocatively negative and his language excessively ominous. For example, in an interview to *Fortune* magazine he speaks of a war-like scenario: "We should prepare as though a war is coming. … There could be some very nasty disruptions to our lives" (Kirkpatrick 1998: 173). Judging by such rhetoric, the bug threat was an emotional matter to Yardeni and many of his statements were charged with a sense of personal mission. In one article he explains his motives behind participating in "the [Y2K] hype game" by saying: "it's [the Y2K issue] important to me morally" (Washington 1999: 45). But, befittingly for an evangelist, Yardeni frequently emphasised the value of his predictions as objective knowledge. Thus, when asked why he was certain of the disaster, he says: "that was always my gut feeling" but adds that his suspicions have been supported by solid research (Kirkpatrick 1998). That his vision of the future lacked support from the business world did not make his statements any less self-assured.

It was mentioned before that Y2K survivalists distinguished themselves as a group of visionaries by accepting that their views were misunderstood by others. In the same vein, Yardeni the believer comes across as an insightful teacher in the midst of unaware non-believers. He laments his peers' lack of

---

20 http://web.archive.org/web/20001019080422/www.garynorth.com/y2k/

21 Yourdon's book was just one of the many on the subject. A search on *Amazon.com* produces five other publications with the phrase 'The Millennial Time Bomb' in the title.

trust in his judgment and admits being considered "way out on a limb" by Wall Street. But he ascribes the apprehension from others to *their* ignorance and sees it as his task to awaken the naive to reality. With statements such as "CEOs don't understand technology. They just don't get it" or "we are being awfully naïve if we think we will be ready in time" (both quotes Kirkpatrick 1998), Yardeni profiles himself as a shrewd and daring seer. His warnings speak of a sense of panic and suggest that there is a 'right way' to understand the events of the future. Such teachings appealed to the Y2K survivalist and we see that many of Yardeni's thoughts were mirrored in the fear-struck measures taken by the survivalists.

Yardeni and others, who had no explicit ideological or religious agenda and were known as reputable specialists, functioned as reliable authorities for both survivalists and the Y2K hype at large. With their specialist knowledge they mediated between a higher entity – the technology and the bug – and the public to whom they revealed the truth. Yardeni answers to a number of characteristics that Weber attributes to the priest (Weber 1978: 439-442). He is a professional functionary who claims to have knowledge of a transcendent entity (the bug) and to be able to influence it. There was a clear moral to his teachings, and, as is the case with a guru or priest, around Yardeni and others there emerged a specific collective that was drawn together by a shared belief. This group manifested itself in different degrees of intensity. Some, such as the Y2K survivalists, were an extremely close-knit group that followed the teachings of their 'priests' to the word. Others in the mainstream may have approached the 'gurus' with scepticism. However, as the great media interest and attention from popular culture may reveal, on the whole the imagination of the general public was certainly captured by what they announced. As one journalist writes, at the end of the century "just about every outlet covered Y2K wall-to-wall" (Kestenbaum 2000).

8.5 Y2K AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNITY

Soon after the arrival of the year 2000, when it transpired that prophecies of a digital apocalypse had failed and it turned out that the date change had had few serious repercussions, it was the trend in the press to ridicule Y2K-worries, but in truth, TEOTWAWKI had been considered a reasonable prospect by media, scientists, government officials and business leaders. As was said, in the years leading up to 2000, both official organisations as well as the more extreme survivalist groups prepared for some kind of a post-millennial scenario. In media reports on the subject, it was suggested that, unlike many other doom-scenarios, the millennium bug was no imaginary threat. As the actor Leonard Nimoy of the science fiction series Star Trek puts it on the cover of *Y2K Family Survival Guide: A Complete Action*

Manual for Your Y2K Lifeboat (1999): "The year 2000 is no longer science fiction. The new millennium could bring a legion of potential problems that might cause a short inconvenience or a major disaster" (Rogers & Nimoy 1999: cover). Nimoy and his co-author Rogers go on to quote the Utah Senator and Chairman of the Year 2000 Committee, Robert Bennett, whose outlook on the future was pessimistic:

> Based on the results of the survey [by a number of energy companies] I cannot be optimistic, and I'm genuinely concerned about the prospect of power shortages as a consequence of [Y2K] I expect we will have burnouts and regional blackouts, and in some areas of the country there will be power failures. (Rogers & Nimoy, 1999: front matter)

On *this* occasion, the anxieties seemed to have real grounds – they were directly related to the Western world's growing dependence on technology. As *Wired* magazine put it, "The Y2K bug is not simply a matter of myth … it is a tangible problem hardwired into the fabric of our industrial society" (Poulsen 1998). This and similar statements suggested that the bug was a logical consequence of modernity and a serious antagonist to be reckoned with. Technology, on which modern societies so greatly depend, was now threatening to destroy itself and thus endanger whole societies.

The Y2K bug made the basically religious problem of human fallibility palpable. The scenarios of disruptions and even of a possible apocalypse that were discussed in this chapter indicated that the generally taken-for-granted social structures that form one's environment are fragile. Consequently they underscored the fact that worldviews are vulnerable and subject to changes. Y2K survivalism in particular was rooted in the assumption that once the problems caused by the bug took effect and the subsequent societal disruptions started, social norms and accepted forms of behaviour would change and a new way of life would present itself. In general, whether in survivalist views or mainstream warnings of Y2K related problems, the post-millennial world was associated with chaos and social anomie.

The prospect of imminent disorder and social insecurity captivated the popular media, and for the period of a few years the Y2K bug and millennial preparations were subject to collective excitement and hype. While it is impossible to draw any solid causal links, one possible explanation for the intensity and relatively long duration of the hype was that it provided a means of clearly articulating the general sense of unease and uncertainty that such authors as Giddens and Berger associate with modernity. Insecurity

162

about the future and loss of steady, reliable points of reference that are needed for orientating in the world were the central motifs of the Y2K hype.

The notion that digital technology could be the cause of an all-out collapse of civilisation rhymed well with the *zeitgeist* of an era that had so rapidly and overwhelmingly come under the spell of new technologies. Furthermore, criticism of modern, industrialised societies and the notion that because of their excessive dependence on technology, the members of such societies run the risk of losing control over their own lives, were at the heart of this hype. These were important themes on survivalist agendas but one can also see critical evaluations of the dangers of a highly technological society in the calls by experts to pre-empt and prepare for the millennial problem and the consequent failure of computer systems. The Y2K bug served as a point on which apprehension about modernity could focus and it provided an explanation as to the sources of modern anomie. It was technology – "a tangible problem hardwired into the fabric of our industrial society" (Poulsen 1998), to use *Wired* magazine's formulation – that was at the root of the worries at hand.

8.6 CONCLUSION

Regardless of the images of disturbance and destruction that the millennial computer problem inspired, the Y2K hype should be seen as a collective attempt to re-establish ontological security in an anomic situation. This hype seems to have been a symptom of a society attempting to cope with a changing world, and it was marked by efforts to find order and guidelines. If social anomie, as Durkheim describes it, is characterised by feelings of uncertainty and loss of direction within a group, then the millennium bug scare provided a well-defined vision of the state of affairs in the world. The discourse about the bug consisted of clear narratives concerning the significance of the millennial problem and the direction of where the world was heading. According to the worst-case scenarios, the bug was to be understood as the bringer of a digital apocalypse, and according to the less extreme predictions it represented possible disruptions in the infrastructure and facilities on which societies rely. The three key beliefs that defined both survivalist thinking as well as the mainstream attitudes towards the millennium bug were that the Y2K bug represented a considerable problem, that it was imperative to take measures so as to be ready if or when it struck and that pre-empting problems related to the Y2K bug was an important common cause for everyone.

But, as was argued in this chapter, the millennial problem was more than a mere technical inconvenience. In reports about it, the bug came to the fore as an unpredictable and perplexing force that had the power to inspire both

fear and wonderment. It represented a powerful entity that was potentially beyond human control and thus became the centre of an excited discourse about the possibility of some momentous change in society. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim recognises an essentially religious function in such moments where a group shares excitement and has the sense that it is part of some significant experience or event. As he argues, it is in such settings that groups articulate and renew their common beliefs, and ties between individuals in a community are forged or strengthened. Frameworks for meaning-making are thus created. For both the survivalists and the general public the millennium bug did indeed serve as a point of reference for making sense of the world. While it did underscore the importance of technology to modern Western societies, the visions of the future that were linked to the bug implied that human history was heading in a specific direction. The bug, then, pointed at the necessity of actively re-affirming one's world-view.

The Y2K hype and the kind of survivalism that the millennial problem triggered can be described as implicitly religious phenomena. In this chapter a number of facets came to light that marked them as such. Firstly, collective adherence to the belief that the millennium bug had the power to transform (and eventually improve) the human condition reveals a basically religious aspiration to rise above the status quo to new ways of life. This was similar to the hope that the Internet had inspired: that technology could somehow facilitate transcendence to hitherto unknown planes of existence. Secondly, as was the case with the Internet hype, a telling facet of the implicit religiosity of the Y2K hype was the fact that the millennium bug was attributed charismatic qualities and approached as a super-human object of awe and admiration. Thirdly, the strong sense of common cause that comes to the fore from media reports on Y2K preparations can be seen as a sign of the sort of collective effervescence that Durkheim regards as the source of religious sentiments. Furhtermore, the hype confirmed the validity of convictions about the power of technology and, in the same fashion as the Internet, the Y2K bug formed the focus of shared fears and hopes. Finally, much like the Internet 'evangelists', various gurus and specialists were instrumental in giving form to implicitly religious beliefs, and spreading them by 'evangelising' about the millennial problem and offering instructions for managing life in the post-millennial world.

CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSIONS

9.1 THE ENCHANTING INTERNET

In August 2004 the online edition of *Wired Magazine – Wired News* – announced that from then on it would no longer spell the word 'Internet' with a capital 'I'.[22] As the title of the news item says, "It's Just the 'internet' Now" (Long 2004). In the light of the many enthusiastic and often religiously charged articles about the Internet for which *Wired* became known in the course of the 1990s this was sobering news. The Internet appeared to have lost its spell; it was no longer enchanting enough to deserve a capital letter. As *Wired News* put it:

> True believers are fond of capitalizing words, whether they be marketers or political junkies or, in this case, techies. If It's Capitalized, It Must Be Important. … But a change in our house style was necessary to put into perspective what the internet is: another medium for delivering and receiving information. That it transformed human communication is beyond dispute. But no more so than moveable type did in its day. Or the radio. Or television. … But now, by lowercasing internet, web and net, Wired News is simply giving the medium its proper due. (Long 2004)

By 2004 the Internet had traversed a trajectory that has been crossed by other technological innovations and novel applications in the past. Like electricity, the telegraph, radio and television before, it had followed a path from a promising and fascinating object of worship to an everyday tool. The Internet had become just another medium of communication and it appears that the enthusiasm of which I have been writing in this dissertation was but a passing fancy.

Historically, crazes and media hypes triggered by new technologies have come and gone, replacing one another in what looks like a continuous stream of fleeting infatuations. Furthermore, as the example of the Y2K bug scare showed, hypes that carry opposing sentiments – both great hope and dire fear – can take place simultaneously and on the same public platforms. Both the

---

22 The *Oxford English Dictionary*, as well as the majority of both scholarly works and other publications consulted still spell the word 'Internet' with a capital letter.

Y2K and Internet hype arose in the second half of the 1990s and both were fuelled by the same newspapers and magazines. But in fact, there is continuity in many such spells of enthusiasm: they are rooted in the same kinds of dreams and beliefs, and they can release intense public emotions.

The exhilarated discourse about the Internet throughout the 1990s in the international press and various other publications was a case in point. Typically, it carried visions of a better, wealthier and more enlightened future and expressed hope of an easier, freer and more egalitarian way of life. In these optimistic visions of the future, the Internet was granted a special, elevated status: it was often spoken of as a very powerful agent that had a defining role in our culture and appeared to be steering society in a particular direction. According to various commentators and visionaries from Al Gore and the authors of the manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream', to the cyber gurus Kevin Kelly, George Gilder and John Perry Barlow and MIT professors Negroponte and Mitchell, the Internet had the capacity to change society radically and transform human experiences. What was sometimes referred to as 'the Internet Age' would bring with it a new sort of economy, new ways of making money, new social structures, new communities and even new notions of matter, space and distance.

The prospect of such far-reaching changes to norms, behaviour and ways of thinking (or such a paradigm shift, to use an expression that was popular among Internet visionaries) was exhilarating and it gave rise to sometimes very emotional manifestos, essays and articles in the popular press. Such publications as 'Cyberspace and the American Dream' and various pieces in *Wired*, *Time* and *Newsweek* that were quoted in the chapters of this study attested to a strong belief in the powers of the Internet and other ICT. They delighted in the promises of new technology and its capacities made them confident of the imminent renaissance of various aspects of society. As had been the case with older technologies, the hopes and excitement that were expressed in different publications culminated in a speculative investment boom on the international financial markets. What became known as the dotcom hype was an instance of collective effervescence that translated the public fascination with the Internet into a rush to buy shares in newly founded Internet firms and related companies, often without much caution or awareness of the nature of these. It mobilised both the business world and individual investors and was fuelled by the thrilling sentiment that the Internet represented a completely unique type of industry, where customary laws and regulations no longer applied. Amplified by intense media coverage, the interest in the Internet on the markets grew into an emotional affair that celebrated this technology as the bringer of exceptional success, monetary

gain, an unstoppable economic boom and even the complete transformation of life as we know it.

9.2 NEW TECHNOLOGY HYPES AND RELIGION

Such moments of fascination with technology as the Internet hype of the mid-nineties are more than trivial fads. They can tell us about the sorts of values and aspirations that characterise our culture and they convey what I described in Chapter Two as ultimate meaning. That is, they can articulate those ideals, truths and principles that are of the greatest importance to societies and explicitly formulate ideas about where humanity is headed and what the 'point' of our existence is.

The Internet hype embodied three themes that can be described as central sources of meaning in contemporary Western culture: deep love of technology, or technophilia, belief in progress and consumerism.

First of all, this hype attested to faith in information technology as a powerful guiding force that somehow transcends the human. In popular discourse, the Internet was venerated as a higher power not unlike a divinity: not only was it fathomed as a benign entity but it also represented an inexorable force with a will of its own.

Secondly – related to the idea of technology as an unstoppable agent of change – was the notion that the implementation of the Internet and other networked ICT would inevitably contribute to the progress of humanity. Central to the visions of the future that I discussed in this thesis was the premise that our society follows a linear course towards ever-greater welfare and enlightenment, and that new ICT was a sure means to this end.

Thirdly, the Internet hype was rooted in a notion that typifies consumer culture: goods (including technology and media of communication and entertainment) carry the promise of fulfilling certain hopes and desires. In the stories about the Internet in the press and elsewhere, it was presented as what the sociologist Campbell describes as "dream material". The Internet was regarded as an instrument for realising dreams of wealth, comfort, freedom and so on, and often the emphasis was on its capacity to grant people access to new worlds and novel pleasures.

But the Internet represented more than the sort of dream material that Campbell associates with the consumer world. To a great extent, the enthusiasm concerning the Internet was a matter of strong belief: belief in the force of technology, in the inevitable improvement of society, in the promises of consumer products, and in the imminent dawn of a new way of life where dreams would come true. As has been the case with other hypes and crazes concerned with new technology, this was largely blind faith kindled by excitement about a novelty whose real abilities were yet to be discovered. The Internet hype showed that even such bastions of modern,

167

rational thought as the world of information technology are not as disenchanted as some authors have feared. It revealed that magical thinking, the attribution of superhuman and charismatic qualities to objects, and the hope of rising to new planes of experience continue to play a role in modern technological society. Furthermore, this hype showed that collective belief in some common idea, such as dreams of release from the limitations of human existence, still persists.

The fascination with the Internet was imbued with religious ways of thinking. On the one hand, such notions as transcendence, salvation and omnipotent guiding forces as well as adherence to charismatic geniuses and visionaries had much influence on the discourse about this technology. On the other, the many optimistic visions about the Internet and other ICT fulfilled what one can refer to as religious functions: they were concerned with the meaning and purpose of life, they gave hope of a radically new and better world, and some visions, such as those put forward by the post-humanist thinkers Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, even held the promise of overcoming human fragility and mortality.

What I have described as the Internet hype — the exhilarating stories about the Internet and related technologies in the popular media during the dotcom boom — is an example of the diffusion of religion in contemporary Western society to domains outside the boundaries of traditional religious institutions. While this phenomenon had no explicit links with the Christian Church or any other established religious teaching or community, it entailed a number of characteristics that comply with the definition of religion formulated in Chapter One. To summarise: 1) the techno-futurist discourse about the Internet in the press and in different manifestos represented a body of shared beliefs about the far-reaching significance of this technology and it formed a point of focus for collective emotions; 2) it outlined ideas about the underlying meaning and purpose of society and human existence in general; 3) it classified the Internet and other ICT as forces of extraordinary capacity that transcend us humans; and 4) it referred to this technology as an agent that guides our lives and defines which matters should be of the greatest importance to our society.

9.3 IMPLICIT RELIGION

In this study, I employed the term implicit religion to describe the kind of religiosity that is tacitly present in secular phenomena, such as the Internet hype. Religiosity was implied in this hype's function as a source of purpose, meaning and certainty, in language and imagery that have roots in religious traditions, in the stories of a better future in a new world and in the veneration of the Internet itself. How does such religiosity compare to the

traditional, explicit religions, such as Christianity or Buddhism? What is its status: is it a fake and might one somehow be making a mockery of 'real' religions when classifying phenomena of popular culture as religious?

Let us recall Durkheim's thesis that religion is likely to transform parallel to changes in societies (Durkheim 2001: 326). In different passages of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* he argues that religion responds to the specific social, intellectual and material conditions of a community and he makes the point that therefore no manifestation of religion should be seen as fake or false (Durkheim 2001: 4). If we follow this line of reasoning, then we can assume that our society would also produce its own forms of religion. Matters that are important in contemporary Western culture and phenomena that mark our society – faith in science, technology and progress, individualism and the elevated status of personal freedom and choices, as well the consumer world, popular events and celebrity culture – can all give form to religiosity that is specific to our times. Thus it is not surprising that in a highly technological society such discourses about technology as those concerning the Internet should have religious meaning. They reflect a society's fears, uncertainties, beliefs, hopes, values and ideals, and so they are no less real or valuable than the teachings and customs of official religions.

Implicit religiosity is not necessarily a replacement of any institutional religious tradition or what might fit the label New Age. In contemporary highly pluralist societies of the West it exists simultaneously with other "modalities of religion" (Ter Borg 2004a: 112), be they official religious organisations or the so-called alternative spiritualities that may be influenced by ideas from Western psychology and esoteric traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on. For instance, in addition to the implicit religiosity that has been the subject of this dissertation, the Internet and cyberspace also inspired groups of so-called 'cyber-wiccans' and 'cyber-pagans', whose activities took place almost exclusively via the Internet and in whose teachings ideas about witchcraft and magic were amalgamated with the veneration of technology (Cowan 2004; Davis 1995; Lövheim 2004; O'Leary 2004). Moreover, traditional religious organisations have made use of the Internet has a means of spreading 'the word', and the Internet has also facilitated the rise of e-churches and online faith communities (Brasher 2004; Campbell 2004; Young 2004).

9.4 TRIVIAL RELIGION OF THE EVERYDAY

The basic premise in studying the implicitly religious dimensions of phenomena that we encounter in the everyday context of our culture is that religion is not necessarily limited to certain kinds of organisations, ideas or locations. It can be found in events and beliefs that some may consider

trivial, too commercial or too common. Moreover, this approach presumes a broad definition of religion. It implies that anything in our society that somehow instils ultimate meaning could be religious, as long as it displays the criteria that were mentioned earlier: strong beliefs and references to objects or ideas that are placed above ordinary human experience. Such an understanding of religion as a diffuse, everyday phenomenon that can manifest itself anywhere in the lay world opens up new ways of exploring modern cultures and can offer us interesting insights into how these cultures create meaning.

What does it mean to analyse the Internet hype from the perspective of religion? The objective of this study is not to show that if we look hard enough we shall discover that God is not dead after all, to use Nietzsche's clichéd exclamation. Nor is its purpose to somehow rescue from the forces of secularisation the myths, dogmas and ways of thinking that form the core of religious traditions. Rather, in studying the Internet hype, I used the concept of implicit religion as an analytical tool to help me understand this phenomenon's collective effervescence, dreams of paradise and ideas about omnipotent forces whose logic and powers are beyond us humans. To speak of implicit religiosity in the stories and the excitement about the Internet is to explore how modern societies deal with questions relating to human existence – its significance, purpose and future. It is to trace how we approach the inexplicable and unfathomable, how we cope with overwhelming emotions, what we do with our fears and uncertainties and how we channel our ultimate hopes.

The Internet became popular at a time when there was much talk in the popular press and other publications about the end of an era. The political changes following the end of the Cold War, combined with the nearing new millennium gave rise to stories about a new world order which were largely apprehensive and filled with a serious sense of unease about what the future was to bring. The optimistic discourse about the Internet counterbalanced these sentiments by offering a strong vision of the new era as a time of hope and progress. It thus fulfilled one of the key functions of religion and provided what I described in Chapter Three as ontological security: certainty about how the world 'works', where it is headed and what its norms and aspirations are. If we agree with Durkheim's line of reasoning in his writings on social unease, or anomie, then such a sense of clarity and certainty about the meaning of the world around us is vital to both societies and its individual members (Durkheim 1952: 249-251; 1964: 5). It is the need to create this sense of security that can account for the continued presence of religious language and ways of thinking in secular culture.

When it comes to attempts to create meaning and to make sense of existence, religious repertoire provides us with useful, powerful tools: it draws on familiar traditions and thus appeals to notions and sentiments that have defined our culture for centuries and still continue to have some influence. Moreover, it articulates fears, fascinations and aspirations with suitable emotion and devotion, and it offers us storylines, symbols and imagery that can reflect the true significance of the things we deem important.

It is not unlikely that in the future other technological innovations and scientific applications will inspire hopes and emotions of the same calibre as the Internet did. Newspapers will celebrate the arrival of the greatest innovation in history sure to transform the world, make us money and grant us longevity. There may be visionaries with stories about the fate of humanity, and star-scientists and engineers will take centre stage.

Would it be wiser to be blasé about technology? To use it and live with it in a way that reflects the closing sentence of the Dutch author A. den Doolaard's science fiction novel *De Goden Gaan Naar Huis* [The gods go home]: "We lived among wonders but we did not understand it" [trans. K.P.] (Den Doolaard 1966: 439)? That is, would it be better to not waste our attention and efforts on something as irrational as celebrating technology?

Let us hope that this will never be the case and that people will continue to publicly declare their exhilaration about wonders like the Internet, because the effervescence and the stories that typify such phenomena as the Internet hype are important to meaning-making in contemporary, secular culture. They fulfil functions that belonged to the domain of religious institutions in earlier times, providing us with beliefs and offering us solace and security. While they may have no connection with what is often understood as religion in daily parlance – official dogmas and organisations that are defined by their adherence to a deity – these kinds of phenomena are potent expressions of religiosity in Western cultures today. Manifestations of implicit religiosity, such as the Internet hype, offer meaningful answers to essential existential questions, they tell us that there is a purpose to our lives and they provide ways of communing with others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbate, J. (1999). *Inventing the Internet*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Abels, R. (1997, 10.05). Michiel Frackers likes to move fast. *Trouw*, 1.

Adams, K. (1995). Nowhere to go but down? *Time*, 146(10), 17.

Alexander, G. (1995, 13.08). New Cyberkid on the Block - Marc Andreessen. *The Sunday Times*. [no pg. nr]

Alexander, H. (2007, 06.04). Shop till you drop . . . or are trampled on Hilary Alexander reports on the Primark opening frenzy. *Daily Telegraph*, 9.

Alexander, J. (1990). Between progress and apocalypse: social theory and the dream of reason in the twentieth century. In J. Alexander & P. Sztompka (Eds.), *Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces, and Ideas at the End of the 20th Century* (pp. 15-38). Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Alexander, J. (2003). *The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology*. Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Alexander, J. C., & Seidman, S. (Eds.). (1990). *Culture and Society. Contemporary Debates*. New York, tec.: Cambridge University Press.

Algemeen Dagblad (2006, 02.09). Minister Donner laat Madonna met rust in de Arena. *Algemeen Dagblad*, 20.

Allen, J. T. (1999). Rational exuberance. *U.S. News & World Report*, 127(18), 71.

Almond, G. A., Chodorow, M., & Pearce, R. H. (1982). *Progress and Its Discontents*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alter, J. (2000). Good Time Politics. *Newsweek*, 135(6), 20.

Anderson, L. (1999, 05.07). The Selling of Theglobe.com. *The Standard*. Retrieved 01.09.2007, from: http://www.thestandard.com/article/0,1902,5293,00.html

Andrews, P. (1999). *How the Web Was Won. How Bill Gates and his internet idealists transformed the Microsoft Empire*. New York: Broadway Books.

Authers, J. (1998, 24.06). From DIY to branded broking on the net. *Financial Times*, 28.

Aupers, S. (2002). The Revenge of the Machines: On Modernity, Digital Technology and Animism. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 30(2), 199 - 220.

Aupers, S. (2004). *In de ban van moderniteit: de sacralisering van het zelf en computertechnologie*. Amsterdam: Aksant.

Aupers, S. (2008). Betovering Inc: De spirituele dimensie van online

computergames. In M. Van Well (Ed.). *Deus et Machine: De verwevenheid van technologie en religie* (pp.138-143). The Hague: Stichting Toekomstbeeld der Techniek.

Bailey, E. (1997). *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Kampen: Kok Pharos.

Bailey, E. (2002). Introduction. The Notion of Implicit Religion: What it Means, and Does Not Mean. In E. Bailey (Ed.), *The Secular Quest for Meaning in Life. Denton Papers in Implicit Religions* (pp. 1-11). Lewiston, etc.: Edwin Mellen Press.

Bailey, L. W. (2005). *The Enchantments of Technology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Bar-Haim, G. (1997). The Dispersed Sacred: Anomie and the Crisis of Ritual. In S. M. Hoover & K. Lundby (Eds.), *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (pp. 133-145). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Barlow, J. P. (1993). *Leaving the Physical World*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/HTML/leaving_the_hysical_world.html

Barlow, J. P. (1995, 24.07). Howdy, Neighbours. *The Guardian*, 11.

Barlow, J. P. (1996). *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/barlow_0296.declaration.txt

Barlow, J. P. (1997). Living the Cyberlife Surfing the Fence Line. *Forbes*, 160, 45.

Baudrillard, J. (1997). *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures* (C. Turner, Trans.). London, etc.: Sage.

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bayers, C. (1999). The Inner Bezos. *Wired*, 7(03) [Electronic version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.03/bezos.html

BBC News (2000a, 01.01). Business as usual in Y2K. Retrieved 01.09.2007, from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/586860.stm

BBC News (2000b, 23.04). Bishop condemns dot.com values. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/723394.stm

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity* (M. Ritter, Trans.). London, etc.: Sage.

Becker, J., & de Hart, J. (2000). *Secularisatie in de jaren negentig. Kerklidmaatschap, veranderingen in opvattingen en een prognose*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

174

Becker, J., & de Hart, J. (2006). *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Bell, D. (2001). *An Introduction to Cybercultures*. London, etc.: Routledge.

Bellah, R. N. (1970). *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. New York, etc.: Harper & Row.

Berger, B. (2000). The Wunderkind. *NetGuide*, 3(3), 152-153.

Berger, P. L., Berger, B., & Kellner, H. (1973). *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Random House.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday.

Besecke, K. (2005). Seeing Invisible Religion: Religion as a societal conversation about transcendent meaning. *Sociological Theory*, 23(2), 179-196.

Bolter, J. D. (1991). *Writing Space. The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bottoms, D. (1995). Cyber-Cowboy…or Prophet. *Industry Week*. (December), 48-53.

Bowe, M. (2000). Virtually Rich. *Harper's Bazaar* (1 April), 162.

Brasher, B. E. (2001). *Give Me That Online Religion*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Braudy, L. (1986). *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & its History*. New York, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Bronson, P. (1996). George Gilder. *Wired*, 4(03) [Electronic version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.03/gilder.html

Brown, J. (1998, 11.06). Millennium bugging out. *Salon.com* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1998/06/cov_11feature.html

Brown, S. (2001). Out of site. *Vogue*, 191(12), 238-240.

Bruce, S. (2002). *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bryant, A. (1999). They're rich (and you're not). *Newsweek*, 134(1), 36-44.

Buechner, M., Deleon, A., et al. (1998). Inside The Top Fifty. *Time*, 3(5), 29.

Bullen, E., Fahey, J., & Kenway, J. (2006). The Knowledge Economy and Innovation: Certain uncertainty and the risk economy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 27(1), 53-68.

Burman, E. (2003). *Shift!: The Unfolding Internet - Hype, Hope and History*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Burnett, R., & Marshall, D. (2003). *Web Theory. An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Bush, V. (1996[1945]). As We May Think. *Interactions*, 3(2), 35-46.

Burkeman, O. (2000, 05.12). Waiting for the Revolution. *The Guardian* [Electronic version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2000/dec/05/internetnews.g2

Business Week (1999). Cover Image 'The internet era'. *Business Week* (3649).

Cairncross, F. (1997). *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Is Changing our Lives.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Campbell, C. (1989). *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Campbell, C. (2004). I Shop therefore I Know that I Am: The Metaphysical Basis of Modern Consumerism. In K. M. Ekström & H. Brembeck (Eds.), *Elusive Consumption* (pp. 27-44). Oxford: Berg.

Campbell, H. (2005). *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network.* New York, etc.: Peter Lang.

Casanova, J. (1999). The Sacralization of the Humanum: a Theology for a Global Age. *International Journal for Politics, Culture, and Society*, 13(1), 21-40.

Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society.* Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Cavanagh, L. (2001). From dot coms to dot bombs: have we learned anything? *Seybold Report: Analyzing Publishing Technologies*, 1(5), 28-30.

Chidester, D. (2005). *Authentic Fakes. Religion and Popular Culture.* Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press.

Cobb, N. (1998, 03.06). Cowboy of the Cyber-Frontier. *The Boston Globe*, F1.

Collins, J. & Hequet, M. (1996). High Stakes Winners. *Time*, 147(8), 42-47.

Conlon, G. (1996). Mark Andreessen. *Sales & Marketing Management*, 148(7), 53.

Cooper, J. (1999). The Fast-Moving Internet Economy Has a Jungle; of Competitors … and Here's the King. *Time*, 154(26), 50-53.

Corcoran, E. (1996, 02.06). Inside Netscape: The Software Start-Up Is Growing So Fast It May One Day Pose a Threat to Microsoft. *The Washington Post*, p. H01.

Corn, J. J. (Ed.). (1986). *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, and the American Future.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Corrigan, T. (1999, 07.12). Survey - World's Most Respected Companies - The quintessential figure of electronic commerce. *Financial Times*, 8.

Cortese, A., & Verity, J. (1995). The Software Revolution. *Business Week* (3453), 78-90.

Cottle, S. (2006). Mediatized rituals: beyond manufacturing consent. *Media, Culture & Society,* 28(3), 411-432.

Cowan, D. E. (2004). *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on The Internet.* London: Routledge.

Daly, J. (1996). Tim Berners-Lee. Forbes, 157(7), 64-65.

Davie, G., Woodhead, L., & Heelas, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular, and Alternative Futures.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Davis, E. (1995). Technopagans. May the astral plane be reborn in cyberspace. *Wired,* 3(07) [Electronic version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/3.07/technopagans.html

Davis, E. (2004). *TechGnosis. Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information.* London: Serpents Tail.

Dawson, L. L., & Cowan, D. E. (Eds.). (2004). *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet.* New York, London: Routledge.

De Hart, J. (2005). *Voorbeelden & nabeelden. Historische vergelijkingen naar aanleiding van de dood van Fortuyn en Hazes.* The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Den Doolaard, A. (1966). *De goden gaan naar huis.* Amsterdam: EM. Querido Uitgeverij.

Deudney, D., & Ikenberry, G. J. (1994). After the Long War. *Foreign Policy,* Spring(94), 21-36.

Deutschman, A. (1997). Imposter boy. *GQ: Gentlemen's Quarterly,* 67(1), 120.

Dillon, M., & Wink, P. (2003). Religiousness and Spirituality. Trajectories and Vital Involvement in Late Adulthood. In M. Dillon (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (pp. 179-189). Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press.

Dizard, W. P. (1997). *Meganet: how the global communications network will connect everyone on earth.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Dougherty, S. (1995). John Perry Barlow: a Wyoming rancher turned digital visionary fights to keep fences off the electronic frontier. *People Weekly* 44(23), 77.

DuBois, L. (1999). Extreme Wall Street. *Playboy,* 46(7), 68.

Durkheim, E. (1952 [1897*]). Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Durkheim, E. (1964 [1893]). *The Division of Labor in Society* (G. Simpson, Trans.). New York: The Free Press.

Durkheim, E. (2001 [1912]). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (C. Cosman, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dyson, E., Gilder, G., Keyworth, G., & Toffler, A. (1994). *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age.* Washington, DC: Progress and Freedom Foundation. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/futureinsights/fi1.2magnacarta.html

The Economist (1995a). A new electronic Messiah. *The Economist*, 336(7926), 62.

The Economist (1995b). Paradise by the modem lights. *The Economist*, 336(7921), 14-15.

The Economist (1997). Beware the millennium. *The Economist*, 342(8007), 86-89.

The Economist (1999). Cisco's reluctant evangelist. *The Economist*, 351(8118), 65.

The Economist (2000a). The accidental messiah. *The Economist*, 354(8163), 73.

The Economist (2000b). Praise the baud. *The Economist*, 356(8187)), 103-104.

The Economist (2000c). Something about Martha. *The Economist*, 354(8186), 62.

The Economist (2001). What's left? Economist, 359(8221), 79-81.

The Economist (2002). The poster-child who grew up. *The Economist*, 362(8263), 66.

Edwards, O. (2000). The Wonder Women of Silicon Valley. *Town & Country,* 154(5241), 192.

Ehrenhaft, D. (2001). *Marc Andreessen: Web Warrior*. Brookfield: 21st Century.

Eliade, M. (1958). *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (R. Sheed, Trans.). London, New York: Sheed and Ward.

Eliade, M. (1969). *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago, etc.: The University of Chicago Press.

Eliade, M. (1987). *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). San Diego, etc.: Harcourt.

Ellul, J. (1964). *The Technological Society* (J. Wilkinson, Trans.). New York: Knopf.

Ellul, J. (1990). *The Technological Bluff* (G. W. Bromiley, Trans.). Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

The Financial Times (1995, 01.03.). The Internet Phenomenon. *The Financial Times*, 18.

Flanagan, K., & Jupp, P. (Eds.). (2007). *A Sociology of Spirituality.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Flichy, P. (2007). *The Internet Imaginaire.* (L. Carey-Libbrecht, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Forbes (1995). George Gilder and His Critics. *Forbes*, 156(8), 165-181.

Forbes (1997). Technology's very richest. *Forbes*, 160(7), 57-76.

Frank, T. (2000). *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy*. New York: Doubleday.

Fukuyama, F. (1989). The End of History? *National Interest* (Spring), 3-18.

Fuller, R. (2001). *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding unchurched America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gaddis, J. L. (1989). *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War.* Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Gaddis, J. L. (1991). Toward the Post-Cold War World. *Foreign Affairs* (70), 102-123.

Gates, B. (1995). *The Road Ahead.* London: Viking Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). Religion as a Cultural System. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *Interpretation of Cultures.* (pp. 87-125). New York: Basic Books.

Gerstner, J. (1995). Cyber cowboy: an interview with John Perry Barlow. Communication World, 12(10), 18.

Gibson, W. (2000 [1984]). *Neuromancer.* London: Harper Collins.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gilder, G. (1993). George Gilder's Telecosm: The New Rule of Wireless? *Forbes*, 151(7), Supplement p. 96-110.

Gilder, G. (1995a). The coming software shift. *Forbes*, 156(5), 146-162.

Gilder, G. (1995b). Telecosm: angst and awe on the Internet. *Forbes*, 156(13), 156.

Gilder, G. (1996a). Telecosm: feasting on the giant peach. *Forbes*, 158(5), 84.

Gilder, G. (1996b). The Gilder Paradigm [Electronic Version]. *Wired*, 4(12) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://wired-vig.wired.com/wired/archive/4.12/gilder.html

Gilder, G. (1998a). Paradigm Party. *Forbes*, 162(4), 94-100.

Gilder, G. (1998b). The Soul of Silicon. *Forbes*, 161(11), 110-128.

Gilder, G. (2000). *Telecosm: How Infinite Bandwidth Will Revolutionize Our World*. New York: Free Press.

Gillies, J., & Cailleau, R. (2000). *How the Web Was Born. The Story of the World Wide Web*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Giulianotti, R., & Armstrong, G. (1997). Introduction: Reclaiming the Game - An Introduction to the Anthropology of Football. In R. Giulianotti & G. Armstrong (Eds.), *Entering the Field. New Perspectives on World Football* (pp. 1-30). Oxford: Berg.

Gledhill, D. (2000, 09.01). Cyber blitz on the air waves. *Independent on Sunday*, 6.

Gollnick, J. (2003). Is Implicit Religion Spirituality in Disguise? *Implicit Religion*, 6(2&3), 146-160.

Gollnick, J. (2004). Religion, Spirituality and Implicit Religion in Psychotherapy. *Implicit Religion*, 7(2), 120-141.

Goode, J. (1997, 01.05). After the Gold Rush. *Rolling Stone*, 42-47.

Gore, A. (1997). Remarks by Vice President Al Gore at the Internet/Online Summit. Renaissance Hotel, Washington DC. Tuesday, December 2, 1997. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/cybercrime/gore-sp.htm

Gore, A. (1998). Remarks prepared for Vice President Al Gore at the 15th International ITU Conference, Monday, October 12, 1998. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/OVP/speeches/itu.html

Grainger, R. (2002). *Healthcare and Implicit Religion*. London: Middlesex University Press.

Greeley, A. M. (2003). *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium: A Sociological Profile*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Greenspan, A. (1996). The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society Francis Boyer Lecture AEI Annual Dinner, Washington D.C., 05.12. 1996. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.federalreserve.gov/BoardDocs/speeches/1996/19961205.htm

Grow, B. (2001, 18.07). A Net Apostle Keeps the Faith. *Business Week Online*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/jul2001/tc20010718_010.htm

The Guardian (2000, 05.12). Waiting for the revolution. *The Guardian*, 2.

Hafner, K. (1996). *Where Wizard Stay Up Late. The Origins of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Hafner, K. & Dyson, E. (1997). The accidental 'techie' (excerpt from the book Release 2.0). *Newsweek*, 130(15), 79.

Halman, L., & Draulans, V. (2004). Religious Beliefs and Practices in Contemporary Europe. In W. Arts & L. Halman (Eds.), *European Values at the Turn of the Millennium* (pp. 283-316). Leiden, etc.: Brill.

Halman, L., Luijkx, R., & Zundert van, M. (Eds.). (2005). A*tlas of European Values*. Leiden: Brill.

Hamilton, J. (2000). The Valley of the Dollars. *Town & Country*, 154(5241), 184.

Hand, M., & Sandywell, B. (2002). E-topia as Cosmopolis or Citadel. On the Democratizing and De-democratizing Logics of the Internet, or, Toward a Critique of the New Technological Fetishism Theory, *Culture & Society,* 19(1-2), 197-225.

Hanegraaff, W. J. (1999). New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian's Perspective. *Social Compass*, 46(2), 145-160.

Harris, C. (1999). Secular Religion and the Public Response to Diana's Death. In T. Walter (Ed.), *The Mourning for Diana* (pp. 97-107). Oxford: Berg.

Heelas, P., Woodhead, L., Seel, B., Szerszynski, B., & Tusting, K. (2005). *Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Heilemann, J. (2001). Andy Grove's Rational Exuberance. *Wired*, 9(06) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/9.06/intel.html

Helmore, E. (1999, 10.01). Internet on line for new revolution. *The Observer,* 8.

Hervieu-Léger, D. (2000). Religion as a Chain of Memory (S. Lee, Trans.). New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Hill, P. C., Pargament, K.I., et al. (2000). Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure. Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 30(1), 51-77.

Hinnells, J. R. (1995). The Penguin Dictionary of Religions. London, etc.: Penguin.

Hjelm, T. (2008). To Study or Not to Study Religion and Society: The Institutionalization, Fragmentation and Marginalization of Sociology of Religion in Finland. Acta Sociologica, 51(2), 91-102.

Hof, R. D. (1999). Empire Builders: Jeffrey P. Bezos. Business Week (3648), EB24.

Höijer, B., Lidskog, R., & Uggla, Y. (2006). Facing dilemmas: Sense-making and decision-making in late modernity. Futures, 38(3), 350-366.

Holmes, P. R. (2007). Spirituality: Some Disciplinary Perspectives. In K. Flanagan & P. Jupp (Eds.), A Sociology of Spirituality (pp. 23-41). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Horrigan, J. (2001). Risky Business: Americans see greed, cluelessness behind dot-coms' comeuppence. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Houtman, D., & Aupers, S. (2007). The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46(3), 305-320.

Houtman, D., & Mascini, P. (2002). Why Do Churches Become Empty, While New Age Grows? Secularization and Religious Change in the Netherlands. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 1(3), 455-473.

Houtman, D., Steijn, B., & De Witte, M. (1994). Inleiding: De vanzelfsprekendheid van vooruitgang. In D. Houtman, B. Steijn & M. De Witte (Eds.), *De vanzelfsprekendheid van vooruitgang. Kritische beschouwingen over technologie en rationaliteit* (pp. 7-15). Amsterdam: Boom.

Hume, L., & McPhillips, K. (Eds.).(2006). *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hunt, K. (2003). Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Do Not Go to Church. In G. Davie, P. Heelas & L. Woodhead (Eds.), *Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (pp. 159-169). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hunt, S. (2002). *Religion in Western Society*. Basingstoke, etc.: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hunt, S. (2005). Religion and Everyday Life. London: Routledge.

Huntington, S. (1989). No Exit – The Errors of Endism. The National Interest, 17(Fall), 3-11.

Huntington, S. (1993). The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22-50.

Huysmans, F., Haan, J. d., & Broek, A. v. d. (2004). *Achter de schermen. Een kwart eeuw lezen, luisteren, kijken en internetten.* The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Hyman, T. (2000). Now That's Hail Mary Play. *Business Week* (3666), 100-102.

Ikenberry, G. J. (1996). The myth of post-cold war chaos. *Foreign Affairs* (75), 79-92.

The Independent (1995, 10.07). Anthills of the interface *The Independent*, 14.

The Independent on Sunday (1996, 22.12). Prophets of the 21st century. *Independent on Sunday*, 5.

Insana, R. (2000). King of the Net. *Money*, 29(11), 43-47.

Johnson, F. (1999). Tulip Mania, the Web and how the bourgeoisie never understands the latest thing. *Spectator*, 283(8931), 34.

Jole van, F. (2001). *Valse horizon. Over internet en maatschappij.* Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.

Jones, D. (2006). *iPod, Therefore I Am. A Personal Journey Through Music.* London: Phoenix.

Kadlec, D. (1999). Internet Mania. *Time*, 153(2), 91.

Kaplan, D. A. (1995). Nothing but net. *Newsweek*, 126/127(26/1), 32.

Kaplan, D. A. (1999). Silicon Heaven. *Newsweek*, 133(24), 48-52.

Kapor, M. (1993). Where Is the Digital Highway Really Heading? The Case for a Jeffersonian Information Policy, *Wired*, 1(03) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.03/kapor.on.nii.html

Karaflogka, A. (2003). Religion in - Religion on Cyberspace. In G. Davie, P. Heelas & L. Woodhead (Eds.), *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (pp. 191-202). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Karlgaard, R. (1999). Woody and the Dow. *Forbes*, 164(8), 45.

Karlgaard, R. (2000). Hedging Rocketman. *Forbes*, 165(8), 51.

Katz, J. (1997). Birth of a Digital Nation. *Wired*, 5(04). [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.04/netizen.html

Kehoe, L., & Jones, S. (1995). A David and Goliath Fight. *Financial Times*, 20.

Kelly, K. (1998). *New Rules for the New Economy: 10 Radical Strategies for a Connected World*. New York, etc.: Viking.

Kelly, K. (1999). Nerd theology. *Technology in Society*, 21, 387-392.

Kelly, K. (1999). The Roaring Zeros. *Wired*, 7(09). [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.09/zeros_pr.html

Keohane, N. O. (1982). The enlightenment idea of progress revisited. In G. Almond, M. Chodorow & R. Pearce (Eds.), *Progress and its Discontents* (pp. 21-40). Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press.

Kepel, G. (1994). *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World* (A. Braley, Trans.). University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Kerry, J. (2000, 16.06). Senator Kerry Speaks to the Senate on Bridging the Digital Divide, 16.06.2000. Retrieved 01.06, 2009, from:
ttp://kerry.senate.gov/low/record.cfm?id=181964

Kestenbaum, D. (2000). System Failure. *The New Republic*, 222(3), 12.

Kirkpatrick, D. (1998). Could Y2K Cause a Global Recession? *Fortune*, 138(7), 172-173.

Kirn, W. (1999). Take the World … Please. *Time*, 153(2), 74.

Knoblauch, H. (2008). Spirituality and Popular Religion in Europe. *Social Compass*, 55(2), 140-153.

Konrad, R., & Kawamoto, D. (2001, 08.03). A year after the Net bubble burst, blame game begins. *CNET News*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://news.com.com/2009-1017-253125.html

Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kumar, K. (1978). *Prophecy and Progress: The Sociology of Industrial and Post-industrial Society*. London: Allen Lane.

Kuo, D. (2001). *Dot.bomb: My Days and Nights at an Internet Goliath*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Kurzweil, R. (1999). *The Age of Spiritual Machines: when computers exceed human intelligence*. New York: Viking.

Kushner, D. (1999). Y2schlocK. Retailers Hit Hard by Millennium Bug. *Village Voice*, 44(48), 41.

Lacayo, R. (1999). The End of the World as We Know It? *Time*, 153(2), 60-68.

Laeyendecker, L. (1986). *Brengt de vooruitgang ons verder? Kanttekeningen bij een wijd verbreid geloof*. Baarn: Ten Have.

Leibovich, M. (2000, 03.09). Child Prodigy, Online Pioneer. Amazon.com Founder Bezos Hires Great Minds. But Will It Matter? *Washington Post*, A01.

Levy, S. (1995a). This Changes...Everything. *Newsweek*, 126/127(26/1), 22-30.

Levy, S. (1995b). Technomania. *Newsweek*, 125(9), 24-30.

Levy, S. (1996). The 1,000 Year Glitch. Newsweek, 127(26), 92.

Levy, S. (2000a). The Bug That Didn't Bite. Newsweek, 135(2), 41.

Levy, S. (2000b). Where did my billions go? Newsweek, 136(18), 78.

Levy, S. (1998). Surfers, step right up! *Newsweek*, 131(21), 74-83.

Levy, S. (1999). Wired for the Bottom Line. *Newsweek*, 134(12), 42-49.

Lewis, M. (1999). *The New New Thing: A Silicon Valley Story*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Lewis, P. H. (1996, 03.04.). Yet Again, Wall Street Is Charmed by the Internet. *The New York Times*, 1.

Long, T. (2004, 16.08). It's Just the 'internet' Now. *Wired News*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from:
http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2004/08/64596

Lövheim, M. (2004). Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.), *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet* (pp. 59-73). London: Routledge.

Lovink, G. (2003). *My First Recession: Critical Internet Culture in Transition*. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers.

Lovink, G., & Delhaas, R. (Eds.). (1991). *Wetware*. Amsterdam: De Balie.

Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: Macmillan.

Luckmann, T. (1990). Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion? *Sociological Analysis*, 50(2), 127-138.

Lynch, G. (2007). *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century*. London, etc.: IB Tauris.

Lynn, M. (1998, 28.06). Internet Navigator who lost his way - Profile - Interview - Marc Andreessen. *The Sunday Times*. [No pg. nr].

Mack, T. (1999). Paul Allen Bandwidth Believer. *Forbes*, 164(12), 186-192.

Malinowski, B. (1955). *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Malone, M. S. (2000). The Gildered Age. *Forbes*, 165(4), 124-130.

Maney, K. (1999, 20.10). Inventor of Web weaves tale of its past, present, future. *USA Today*, 03B.

Marx, K. (1972 [1843]). Introduction to Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (T. B. Bottomore, Trans.). In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (pp. 11-23). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Marx, L. (1996). The Domination of Nature and the Redefinition of Progress. In Marx, L., & Mazlish, B. (Eds.). *Progress. Fact or Illusion*. (pp. 201-218). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Marx, L. (2008). The idea of nature in America. *Dædalus*, Spring, 8-21.

McClellan, J. (1998, 10.12). Log on, all ye faithful. *The Guardian*, 2.

McClellan, J. (2003, 06.11). I link, therefore I am. *The Guardian*, 21.

McCoy, C. (1994, 14.11). Visionary or Cyberspace Cadet: John Perry Barlow, the high priest of high tech, has some harsh words for network-hungry corporations. *The Wall Street Journal*, R20.

McCracken, D. G. (1990). *Culture and Consumption*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

McGregor, L. (2000, 16.03). Sitting pretty. *The Guardian*, 7.

Menard, G. (2004). The Moods of Marianne: Of Hijabs, Nikes, Implicit Religion and Post-Modernity. *Implicit Religion*. 7(3). 246-255.

Miles, S. (1998). *Consumerism: As a Way of Life*. London, etc.: Sage

Miller, L. (1997, 30.09). Can the Internet save souls? *USA Today*, 14D.

Miller, S. (1996). Picks & Pans: Net Worth. *People Magazine*, 45(14), 39.

The Mirror (2000, 11.04). The Mirror's Pride of Britain - Working for others. *The Mirror*, 26.

Mitchell, W. J. (1995). *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Monden, M. (1997, 07.07). Pssst, grapje. *Het Parool*, 44.

Moravec, H. (1999). *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mosco, V. (2004). *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Moss, B. (2005). Thinking Outside the Box: Religion and Spirituality in Social Work Education and Practice. *Implicit Religion*. 8(1). 40-52.

Murdoch, G. (1997). The Re-Enchantment of the World. Religion and the Transformations of Modernity. In S. M. Hoover & K. Lundby (Eds.), *Rethinking, Media, Religion, and Culture*. (pp. 85-101). London: Sage.

Murphy, P. (2000, 15.03). Lastminute paper fortune. *The Guardian*, 2.

Naughton, J. (2000). The greatest invention since the printed word. *The Observer*, 11.

Negroponte, N. (1995). *Being Digital*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Nesti, A. (1990) Implicit religion: The issues and dynamics of a phenomenon. *Social Compass*, 37(4). 423-438.

Nisbet, R. (1970). History of the Idea of Progress. New York: Basic Books.

Noble, D. (1999). *The Religion of Technology. The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*. London, etc.: Penguin.

Nocera, J. (1999). Do you believe? How Yahoo! became a blue chip. *Fortune*, 139(11), 76-92.

NRC Handelsblad. (2006, 02.09). Jongeren SGP gaan Madonna aanklagen. *NRC Handelsblad*, 7.

NRC Handelsblad. (2007, 30.01). OM: geen vervolging Madonna aan kruis. *NRC Handelsblad*, 9.

Nye, D. E. (1994). *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

O'Leary, S. (2004). Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.), *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet* (pp. 37-58). London: Routledge.

O'Malley, C. (1998). Why the Government's Machines Won't Make It. *Time*, 151(23), 62-66.

O'Riley, P. (1999). Individual Preparation for Y2K. *Utne Reader*. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from:
http://www.utne.com/web_special/web_specials_archives/articles/135-1.html

Owen, E. (1999). Why Oh Y2K? *Forbes*, 163(11), 28.

Park, R. E. (1972). *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pärna, K. (2004). Why Study Implicit Religion? *Implicit Religion*, 7(2), 101-107. 198

Pärna, K. (2005). Religie en spektakel in het digitale tijdperk. *In de Marge*, 14(4), 41- 48.

Pärna, K. (2007). Believe in the Net: the Construction of the Sacred in Utopian Tales of the Internet. *Implicit Religion*, 9(2), 180-204.

Pärna, K. (2009). Technophilia: Internet as a Vessel of Contemporary Religiosity. In W. B. Drees (Ed.), *Technology, Trust, and Religion* (pp. 55-73). Leiden: Leiden University Press.

Parrott, W. G., & Harré, R. (2001). Princess Diana and the Emotionology of Contemporary Britain. *International Journal of Group Tensions*, 30(1), 29-38.

Partridge, C. (2005). *The Re-enchantment of the West* (Vol. 1. Understanding Popular Occulture). London: Continuum.

Paternot, S. (2001). *A Very Public Offering. A Rebel's Story Business Excess, Success, and Reckoning.* New York, etc.: John Wiley & Sons.

Pearl, D. (1995, 07.09). Futurist Schlock: Today's Cyberhype Has a Familiar Ring. *The Wall Street Journal*, A1.

Pearson, K. (1995, 29.07). Journey to the heart of cyberspace. *Financial Times,* 10.

Penenberg, A. & Gordon, J. (1999). The Glitch Watch. *Forbes*, 163(1), 52-53.

Pennar, K. (1997). Info-age evangelist. Esther Dyson. *Business Week* (3549), 92.

People (1995). Spinning a golden web: Marc Andreessen's Internet software earned him $50 million in one day. *People*, 44(11), 74.

People (1999). The 25 Most Intriguing People Of '99: Bill Gates Under attack for raking it in, he excels at giving it away. People, 52(25), 75.

Peretz, E. (2000). The enfantrepreneurs. *Vanity Fair* (1 September), 248-262.

Playboy (2000). Playboy Interview: Jeff Bezos. *Playboy*, 47(2), 59.

Pope, K. (1999, 08.02). TV Networks Are Showing Avid Interest In Firms With Names Ending in Dotcom. *The Wall Street Journal*, A3.

Postman, N. (1993). *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology.* New York: Vintage.

Poulsen, K. (1998). The Y2K Solution: Run For Your Life, *Wired*, 6(08). [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.08/y2k.html

Quittner, J. (1999a). Tim Berners-Lee. *Time*, 153(12), 192.

Quittner, J. (1999b). An Eye on the Future. *Time*, 154(26), 56-66.

Quittner, J., & Mondi, L. (1995). Browser madness. *Time*, 146(8), 56.

Rainie, D. & Packel, L. (2001). More Online, Doing Moore. *Pew Internet and American Life Project.* Retrieved on 01.06.2009, from: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2001/More-Online-Doing-More.aspx

Ramdharie, S. (1999, 26.05). Niet zeiken, lachen en je best doen. *De Volkskrant*,15.

Red Herring (1999, 12.04.). What a week for IPOs! *Red Herring*. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.redherring.com/Article.aspx?a=4273&hed=What+a+week+for+IPOs!

Reinhardt, A. (1999). Meet MR. INTERNET. *Business Week* (3646), 128-140.

Reiss, S., & Levine, J. (1999). St. Tim of the Web. *Forbes*, 164(2), 314-317.

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier. Reading*, MA, etc.: Addison Wesley Publishing Company.

Richards, J., Wilson, S., & Woodhead, L. (Eds.). (1999). *Diana, the Making of a Media Saint.* London: Tauris.

Rief, S. (2008). Outlines of a Critical Sociology of Consumption: Beyond Moralism and Celebration. *Social Compass*, 2(2), 560-576.

Ritzer, G. (1999). *Enchanting a Disenchanted World. Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*. Thousand Oaks, etc.: Pine Forge Press.

Rogers, A. M., & Nimoy, L. (1999). *Y2K Family Survival Guide: A Complete Action Manual for Your Y2K Lifeboat*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press.

Roof, W. C. (1999). *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.

Rosenberg, E. (2000, 03.06). Luxeleed; Jonge miljonairs zuchten onder sudden wealth syndroom. *NRC Handelsblad*, 33.

Rothstein, E. (2000, 23.09). The New Prophet of a Techno Faith Rich in Profits. *The New York Times*, 9.

Sadowski, Y. (1998). *The Myth of Global Chaos*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Saffo, P. (1999, 18.05). The Real Y2K Bug. *Salon.com*. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from; http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/1999/05/18/real_y2k/index.html

Sales, N. J. (2000). Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire? *Harper's Bazaar* (1 April), 210.

Sandberg, J. (1995, 11.08). Netscape Has Technical Whiz In Andreessen *The Wall Street Journal*, B1.

Sandberg, J., & Kaplan, D. A. (2000). Why Y2K Won't Die. *Newsweek*, 135(2), 38.

Schenker, J. L. (2000). Plans To Dotcom The World. *Time*, 155(6), 33.

Schrifrin, M. (2000). Move over Mary Meeker, Henry Blodget. *Forbes*, 165(5), 18-21.

Schurr, S. (1999). To Explain Web Mania, Pundits Tiptoe Through a Hot Metaphor. *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition*, 233(96), B1.

Schwartz, P., Leyden, P., & Hyatt, J. (1999). *The Long Boom. A vision of the coming age of prosperity.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Seenan, G. (2000, 05.01). Family maintains millennium doomwatch. *The Guardian*, 5.

Segaller, S. (1998). *Nerds 2.0.1. A Brief History of the Internet.* New York: TV Books.

Seidman, S. (1990). Substantive debates: Moral order and social crisis - perspectives on modern culture. In J. C. Alexander & S. Seidman (Eds.), *Culture and society. Contemporary debates* (pp. 217-235). New York, etc.: Cambridge University Press.

Serwer, A. (1995). Internet-worth: why the frenzy won't stop soon. *Fortune*, 132(12), 26.

Serwer, A., & Curry, S. (1996). Netscape Creates the First Cyber-Billionaire. *Fortune*, 133(1), 84.

Shapiro, A. L. (2000). *Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know (2nd ed.).* New York: Public Affairs.

Shrimsley, E. (2000, 16.08). Day the wwworld changed for ever. *The Sun*, 8.

Sklar, L. (1970). *The Sociology of Progress.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Smelser, N. J. (1962). *Theory of Collective Behavior.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Smith, A. (2001, 11.02). Life - Brought to book - Jeff Bezos is the king of the New Economy. *The Observer*, 8.

Smith, G. (1999). A coming of age for the dot.coms. *Business Week* (3661), 94-95.

Sosnoff, M. (2000). Rational Exuberance. *Forbes*, 166(11), 238.

Spector, L. (1999). 2000: The Year of Living Dangerously. *PC World*, 17(1), 90-100.

Stahl, W. A. (1995). Venerating the black box: Magic in media discourse on technology. *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 20(2), 234.

Stahl, W. (1999). *God and the Chip: Religion and the Culture of Technology.* Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Stahl, W., Campbell, R., Petry, Y., & Diver, G. (2002). *Webs of Reality. Social Perspectives on Science and Religion.* New Brunswick, etc.: Rutgers University Press.

Standage, T. (2000). *The Victorian Internet. The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's online pioneers.* London: Phoenix.

Stefik, M. (1996). *Internet Dreams. Archetypes, Myths, and Metaphors.* Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.

Stewart, M. (2001). *Tim Berners-Lee: Inventor of the World Wide Web.* New York: Facts on File Inc.

Swiss, T., & Herman, A. (2000). The World Wide Web as Magic, Metaphor, and Power. In T. Swiss & A. Herman (Eds.), *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory* (pp. 1-4). London: Routledge.

Szerszynski, B. (2005). *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Takaki, M. (2000). Super Bowl XXXIV shaping up as dot-com scrimmage. *SHOOT*, 40(39), 1-2.

Tapscott, D. (1995). *The Digital Economy. Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Tapscott, D., & Caston, A. (1992). *Paradigm Shift. The New Promise of Information Technology*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Tarde, G. (1969 [1894]). *The Public and the Crowd* (N. C. Ellis, Trans.). In T. N. Clarck (Ed.), On Communication and Social Influence (pp. 277-294). Chicago, etc.: The University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, J., & Wacker, W. (1997). Speak the Future. *Wired*, 5(06) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/5.06/es_wacker.html

Taylor, R. (1999, 16.12). Back to a more prosperous future. *Financial Times*, 16.

Ter Borg, M. B. (1991). *Een uitgewaaierde eeuwigheid: het menselijk tekort in de moderne cultuur*. Baarn: Ten Have.

Ter Borg, M. B. (1996). *Het geloof der goddelozen*. Baarn: Ten Have.

Ter Borg, M. B. (1999). What is Religion? In J. G. Platvoet & A. L. Molendijk (Eds.), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion. Contexts, Concepts and Contests* (pp. 397-408). Leiden, etc.: Brill.

Ter Borg, M. B. (2004a). Some Ideas on Wild Religion. *Implicit Religion*, 7(2), 108-119.

Ter Borg, M. B. (2004b). *Zineconomie: de samenleving van de overtreffende trap*. Schiedam: Scriptum.

Tetzeli, R., & Shaifali, P. (1996). What it's really like to be Marc Andreessen. *Fortune*, 134(1), 136-156.

Thomas, J. (2002). *Diana's Mourning. A People's History*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Tillich, P. (1964). *Theology of Culture*. New York, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Time (1996). Cover image 'The Golden Geeks'. *Time*, 147(8).

Time (1999). Cover image 'The End of the World!?!'. *Time*, 152(2).

Toffler, A. (1980). *The Third Wave*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Toffler, A. (1990). *Powershift*. New York, etc.: Bantam.

Tough, P. (1995). What are we doing on-line? *Harper's Magazine*,

291(1743), 35.

Town & Country (2000). Five to Watch. *Town & Country*, 154(5241), 197.

Trouw (2006, 02.09). Aanklacht om act Madonna SGP-jongeren. *Trouw*, 1.

Utne, E. (1998). *Y2K Citizen's Action Guide: preparing yourself, your family, and your neighborhood for the year 2000 computer problem and beyond*. Minneapolis: Utne Reader Books. [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 01.06.2009, from: http://www.utne.com/web_special/web_specials_archives/articles/404-1.html

V2 Organization. (1991). Missionary in the Artificial Paradise (L. Martz, Trans.). In G. Lovink & R. Delhaas (Eds.), *Wetware* (pp. 17-18). Amsterdam: De Balie.

Van de Ven, P. (2004, 29.09). Een ware heiligverklaring. Andre Hazes - het ritueel. *Trouw*, 11.

Van Ginneken, J. (2003). *Collective Behavior and Public Opinion. Rapid Shifts in Opinion and Communication*. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Van Marin, S., & Boven, R. (1998). The Buzz Machine. *Newsweek*, 132(4), 22.

Van Meter, J. (2000). The new dot.com society. *Vogue*, 190(4), 378-385.

Vasterman, P. (2004). *Mediahype*. Amsterdam: Aksant.

Vasterman, P. (2005). Media-Hype: Self-Reinforcing News Waves, Journalistic Standards and the Construction of Social Problems. *European Journal of Communication*, 20(4), 508-530.

Wall Street & Technology (2000). Online Ad Blitz on Super Bowl Sunday. *Wall Street & Technology*, 18(1), 8.

Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Montfort, N. (Eds.). (2003). *The New Media Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Warner, E. (2000, 04.03). Triumph of the young pretenders. *The Guardian*, p. 28.

Warner, M. (1999a). The Beauty of Hype: A Cautionary Tale of Silicon Valley. *Fortune*, 139(4), 140

Warner, M. (1999b). The Young and The Loaded: Our new ranking names the 40 richest Americans under age 40. *Fortune*, 140(6), 78.

Washington, L. (1999). True Believer. *Money*, 29(3), 44-45.

Watson, T. (2006, 03.03). IBM Global CEO Study 2006: Innovate + Collaborate + Orchestrate = Prosper. Retrieved on 01.06.2009, from: http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/page/Turbo?entry=ibm_global_ceo_study_2006

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society. An outline of interpretive sociology* (E. Fischoff, Trans. Vol. 1 and 2). Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press.

Weber, M. (1989 [1918]). Science as a Vocation (M. John, Trans.). In P. Lassman & I. Velody (Eds.), *Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'* (pp. 1-31). London: Unwin Hyman.

Weber, M. (2001 [1905]). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (T. Parsons, Trans.). London: Routledge.

Webster, F. (2002). Theories of the Information Society (2nd edition). London, etc.: Routledge.

Weeks, L. (1999, 24.06). THE NAVIGATOR; Signing Off. *The Washington Post,* C04.

Wertheim, M. (2000). *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace.* London: Virago.

Whetley, M & Kellner-Rogers, M. (1998). Turning to One Another. The Possibilities of Y2K. *Utne Reader* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from:
http://www.utne.com/archives/TurningtoOneAnother.aspx

White, T. (2000). Brains In A Box: Sci-Fi & Social Justice. *Billboard* 112(41), 3.

Wilde de, R. (2000). *De voorspellers: een kritiek op de toekomstindustrie.* Amsterdam: De Balie.

Wilde de, R. (2001). *De kenniscultus. Over nieuwe vormen van vooruitgangsgeloof.* [Oratie Universiteit Maastricht. 22.01.2001]. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from:
ww.pers.unimaas.nl/arch.oraties/2001/oratie_dewilde_volledig.doc

Wilson, J. (2000, 18.03). How lastminute.com clicks with users. *The Guardian*, 12.

Wilson, B. (1975). *The Noble Savages. The Primitive Origins of Charisma and Its Contemporary Survival.* Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press.

Wilson, B. (1982). *Religion in Sociological Perspective.* Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Winston, B. (1998). *Media, Technology and Society: a history from the telegraph to the Internet.* London: Routledge.

Wired. (1993). Tired-Wired. *Wired*, 1(06) [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from:
ttp://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.06/tiredwired.html

Woolley, S. (1999). Internet Insanity. *Money*, 28(1), 94.

Wright, R. (1993). The New Democrat from Cyberspace. *New Republic*, 208(21), 18-27.

Wright, R. (1997). The Man Who Invented the Web. *Time*, 149(20), 64-68.

Wuthnow, R. (1998). *After Heaven: spirituality in America since the 1950s.* Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press.

Young, G. (2004). Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.), *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet* (pp. 93-105). London: Routledge.

Yourdon, E. & Yourdon, J. (1998). *Time Bomb 2000. What the Year 2000 Computer Crisis Means to You!* London: Prentice Hall.

Yourdon, E. & Roskind, R. (1999). *The Complete Y2K Preparation Guide.* London: Prentice Hall.

Zuidema, T. (1999, 15.10). Edward Yourdon: softwaregoeroe en onheilsprofeet. *Computable* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 06.01.2009, from:
http://www.computable.nl/artikel/ict_topics/maatschappij/1310996/242
9449/offline-edward-yourdon-softwaregoeroe-en-onheilsprofeet.html

WEBSITES AND AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIAL

The Electronic Frontier Foundation http://www.eff.org/
Garageband http://www.garageband.com/artist/jims_big_ego
Gary North's Y2K Links and Forums
http://web.archive.org/web/20001019080422/www.garynorth.com/y2k/
Gildertech: Telecosm Forum http://www.gildertech.com/
Lawrence Hagerty's The Spirit of the Internet
http://www.matrixmasters.com/spirit/spirit.html
The Internet Society (ISOC) http://www.isoc.org/
John Perry Barlow http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/
The Progress and Freedom Foundation http://www.pff.org/
The Utne Reader http://www.utne.com/
Salon.com http://www.salon.com/
Stefan Paternot http://www.paternot.com/
Superbowl commercials http://www.superbowl-ads.com
Tim Berners-Lee http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/
The Well http://www.well.com/
Wired Online http://www.wired.com/

Falwell, J. (1998) 'A Christian's Guide to the Millennium Bug', VHS
Paternot, S., & Palm-Star Entertainment (?) 'Public', Retrieved 01.04.2009,
from: http://www.paternot.com/video.htm
Van Impe, J. (1999) '2000 Time Bomb', VHS

SAMENVATTING

INLEIDING

Als je de minder genuanceerde versies van de secularisatiethese moet geloven, dan is religie hard op weg om steeds irrelevanter te worden in moderne Westerse samenlevingen. De verwachting is dat het verschijnsel religie op een gegeven moment als een kaars zal uitdoven en verdwijnen. Inderdaad lijkt de verminderde aantrekkingskracht van de traditionele religieuze instituten in het Westen, en het uitsluiten van religieuze invloed op specifieke domeinen (vooral de staat en het juridische systeem) in de maatschappij, erop te wijzen dat religie steeds minder belangrijk wordt in onze samenleving. Opinieonderzoeken tonen ook aan dat godsdienstonderwijs en religieuze ethiek steeds minder invloed hebben op individuele levens.

Met Max Weber's onttoveringsthese is er een sociologische traditie ontstaan die deze wending in de geschiedenis betreurt. Sociologen variërend van Weber tot Anthony Giddens stellen dat de demystificatie van ons wereldbeeld en de steeds losser wordende grip van (religieuze) tradities op ons leven hebben geleid tot een serieus te nemen betekenis- of zingevingscrisis. De moderne 'condition humaine' wordt geregeld als problematisch beschouwd wanneer het gaat om het duiden van de wereld, het betekenis geven aan individuele levens en het vinden van antwoorden op basale existentiële vragen.

ONDERZOEKSVRAGEN EN STELLINGEN

In tegenstelling tot de Weberiaanse onttoveringsthese stel ik in dit onderzoek dat moderne Westerse samenlevingen juist vol met betekenis- of zingeving zitten: ideologieën, lifestyle choices, wetenschap en technologie, de kunsten, onze relaties met anderen en onze alledaagse activiteiten maken ons leven betoverend en betekenisvol. Sterker nog: religie is niet verdwenen. Naast de observatie dat religieuze tradities nog steeds een rol spelen in het leven van veel mensen, is het ook overduidelijk dat de basale sentimenten en manieren van denken die samenhangen met het duiden van de wereld niet zo drastisch veranderd zijn als sommige denkers beweren. Onze samenleving blijft religieus, ondanks de ontkerkelijking en de demystificering van traditionele religieuze wereldbeelden. Mijn stelling is dat betekenisgevende processen tegenwoordig nog altijd beïnvloed worden door mythes en magisch denken. Ik beargumenteer dat religieuze vocabulaires en noties van verlossing en transcendentie nog steeds een rol spelen in hoe we ons leven begrijpen en in hoe we praten over de toekomst. Zelfs domeinen die buiten het bereik van

traditionele religieuze lessen lijken te liggen, kunnen religieuze aspecten hebben en een functie bekleden die traditioneel geassocieerd wordt met religie.

De focus van dit onderzoek ligt op uitingsvormen van religie die zich overal in onze cultuur kunnen hebben genesteld. Ik analyseer hun functies en bekijk in hoeverre zij dienst doen als bronnen van betekenisgeving. Deze stille, niet-institutionele vormen van religiositeit vat ik onder de term 'impliciete religie'. Ik laat zien dat religie in zijn impliciete vorm een grotere rol speelt in onze samenleving dan we wellicht denken. De centrale vragen in deze dissertatie zijn: Wat zijn de kenmerken van 'impliciete religie'? In welke fenomenen huist deze vorm van religie? En wat is een mogelijke verklaring voor de voortdurende aanwezigheid van religieuze taal en sentimenten in een seculiere cultuur?

Ik test mijn stelling dat religie nog steeds aanwezig is in hedendaagse Westerse samenlevingen aan de hand van een casus: het publiek enthousiasme voor Internet in de jaren negentig van de vorige eeuw. Ik stel dat de publieke hype die volgde op de introductie van Internet in feite religieus van aard was. Daarmee bedoel ik dat, hoewel het hoopvolle discours over Internet dat deze hype typeerde niet voortkwam uit een verbondenheid met specifieke religieuze instituten, het toch sterk leunde op religieuze ideeën en vocabulaires en functioneerde als een bron van krachtig geloof. In dit boek onderzoek ik de aantrekkingskracht van Internet als een 'object of faith' en bekijk ik hoe Internet dienst zou kunnen doen als een bron van betekenisgeving.

SAMENVATTING HOOFDSTUKKEN

De eerste drie hoofdstukken vormen het theoretische kader van dit proefschrift. Hoofdstuk één geeft een definitie van religie, legt het begrip 'impliciete religie' uit en plaatst deze in de context van andere, vergelijkbare begrippen die in de sociologie en religiestudies gangbaar zijn. Ik hanteer de volgende definitie van religie: religie is een systeem van gedeelde waarden en geloofsovertuigingen, dat een zingevende functie heeft en verankerd is in een kracht, voorwerp of idee dat het menselijke overstijgt. We kunnen spreken van 'impliciete religie' als deze bron van zingeving zich buiten de grenzen van traditionele religieuze instellingen bevindt. 'Impliciete religie' hoort thuis in een familie van begrippen, zoals 'onzichtbare religie' (Luckmann), 'civiele religie' (Bellah) en 'seculiere religie' (Hanegraaff), evenals (zelf)spiritualiteit, magie, hertovering/ betovering, en sacralisering. Net zoals 'impliciete religie', zijn ook deze begrippen geworteld in de aanname dat religie zich niet beperkt tot bepaalde instellingen of tradities. De term 'impliciete religie' heeft echter een aantal voordelen. Ten eerste beperkt dit begrip zich niet tot bepaalde

facetten van de samenleving (zoals het geval is bij Bellah's civiele religie, dat zich toespitst op zaken die met de staat en haar burgers te maken hebben). Ook is de aanname bij 'impliciete religie' niet dat niet-geïnstitutionaliseerde religie per se verborgen moet zijn (zoals Luckmann dat doet met zijn 'onzichtbare religie'). Ten tweede focust dit begrip niet op specifieke elementen, zoals het magische, sacrale of spirituele, maar biedt het analytisch gereedschap om te bestuderen hoe verschillende facetten van religie samen werken: hoe ze voor sociale cohesie zorgen, hoe ze de gevoelens van groepen kanaliseren en hoe ze erin slagen om zin te geven aan het bestaan van mensen.

In hoofdstuk twee wordt het begrip 'ultieme betekenis' besproken (zoals dat geformuleerd wordt in Luckmann's The Invisible Religion (1967)). Dit hoofdstuk spitst zich toe op drie thema's die karakteriserend zijn voor zingeving in hedendaagse Westerse samenlevingen: consumentisme, technofilie (de liefde voor technologie) en het vooruitgangsideaal. Ik stel dat als de moderniteit al een zingevingscrisis met zich meebrengt (vlg. Weber, Berger, Giddens), ze dan tegelijkertijd toch ook een bron van troost biedt. Consumentisme, een belangrijk aspect van moderniteit, heeft grip op mensen vanwege de beloftes van rijkdom, comfort en genegenheid die goederen ons kunnen voorhouden. Maar ook omdat ze voor idealen kunnen staan die belangrijk zijn voor de samenleving: groei van welvaart, vrijheid, individualiteit, flexibiliteit en verandering. Op een vergelijkbare manier fascineert technologie ons omdat het gezien wordt als een almachtige kracht die onze levens kan verbeteren en geloofwaardige antwoorden kan geven op vragen die een diepe emotionele betekenis kunnen hebben: Wat stuurt ons bestaan? Hoe kunnen we ons wapenen tegen de onzekerheid en gevaren van de wereld om ons heen? Het vooruitgangsgeloof heeft dezelfde functie: het biedt een hoopvolle visie op de toekomst, zekerheid en het gevoel dat het bestaan zin heeft. Het belangrijkste aan deze thema's is echter dat we er een gevoel aan kunnen ontlenen dat alles is zoals het hoort en dat de wereld op een manier functioneert die we kunnen begrijpen. Kortom, de consumptie- en toekomstgerichte technocultuur die zo eigen is aan moderne Westerse samenlevingen biedt veel troost, comfort en zekerheid. Of, zoals Giddens het formuleert, 'ontologische zekerheid'.

In hoofdstuk drie definieer ik 'ontologische zekerheid' als het vertrouwen dat ons wereldbeeld logisch en betrouwbaar is. Ik stel dat momenten van collectieve 'effervescence', of opwinding (vlg. Durkheim) manieren kunnen zijn om dat soort vertrouwen te handhaven. Massabijeenkomsten, rages en verschijnselen zoals de internethype zijn voorbeelden van dergelijke 'coping mechanisms' om met culturele onbehaaglijkheid om te gaan. Ze geven het gevoel dat men ervaringen en overtuigingen deelt en ze (her)articuleren de

overtuigingen en aspiraties die bepalend zijn voor een samenleving. Zoals bij de internethype duidelijk werd, zijn vooral technologiehypes gepassioneerde bevestigingen van belangrijke sociale waarden als vrijheid, innovatie, verandering, vooruitgang en de verbetering van de condition humaine in het algemeen.

De vier volgende hoofdstukken gaan over het publiek enthousiasme voor het Internet zoals zich dat in de media en andere publicaties ontwikkelde gedurende de tweede helft van de jaren negentig. De nadruk ligt op deze hype als een manifestatie van 'impliciete religie'. De centrale vraag van de discussie is hoe dit seculiere verschijnsel antwoorden heeft kunnen geven op vragen over de zin en ultieme betekenis van het bestaan die traditioneel met religie worden geassocieerd.

In hoofdstuk vier schets ik de opkomst van het Internet en kijk ik naar de achtergronden van het techno-utopische discours die de hype rondom het Internet typeerde. Tevens bespreek ik de historische context van deze hype, en laat ik zien dat deze een reactie was op een aantal collectieve onzekerheden die na het einde van de Koude Oorlog opspeelden. Ik stel dat de Internethype het belang benadrukte van de drie zingevende thema's die in hoofdstuk twee worden besproken: consumentisme, 'technofilie' en het vooruitgangsideaal. Ten eerste werd de opwinding over het Internet gevoed door gevoelens die de consumptiecultuur kenmerken: liefde voor noviteiten en een geloof in de mogelijkheden die gebruiksvoorwerpen bieden om dromen te verwezenlijken. Ten tweede onderstreepte de Internethype de rol van technologie als het antwoord op de problemen van de mensheid en heeft het uitzonderlijk emotionele liefdesbetuigingen voor de technologie voortgebracht. Ten derde betuigt het idee dat het Internet met zich een nieuwe, betere samenleving zou brengen van sterk geloof in de vooruitgang. In de toekomstvisies over deze nieuwe samenleving werd het idee van voortdurende verbetering van de mensheid zelf op een voetstuk geplaatst als één van de belangrijkste waarden van de samenleving. Kortom: het publiek discours over het Internet behelsde de belangrijkste waarden van de samenleving, zaken om in te geloven en vragen over het doel en de zin van het bestaan.

In hoofdstuk vijf beschouw ik de impliciet religieuze dimensies van de Internethype. Centraal in dit hoofdstuk staat het feit dat de verhalen over het Internet een zeer optimistische kijk op de wereld boden. De visies van het 'Internettijdperk' die ik in dit hoofdstuk bespreek, verwezen naar een nabije toekomst waar veel bestaande onzekerheden vervangen zouden worden door rijkdommen en zekerheid. Religiositeit manifesteerde zich in de verhalen over paradigmawisseling, die een transcendentie van de mensheid naar een beter en radicaal nieuwe leven voorspelden. Bovendien waren de verhalen

over het Internet als een kracht die in staat zou zijn om afstanden te verkleinen en controle uit te oefenen over materie, gebaseerd op een impliciet religieus geloof in het bestaan van een bovenmenselijk wezen. Daarnaast werd Internet de rol van brenger van vrijheid en gelijkheid toebedeeld. Een rol die een religieuze betekenis kreeg omdat technologie werd gekoppeld aan hoop en verlossing. Bovendien brachten de techno-utopische dromen die met het Internet geassocieerd werden gedeelde verwondering voort en (her)bevestigden ze de waarden die centraal staan het moderne Westerse wereldbeeld, zoals vrijheid, gelijkheid en vooruitgang.

In het zesde hoofdstuk worden enkele 'helden', 'profeten', 'evangelisten', ondernemers en 'whiz kids' besproken die een belangrijke rol hebben gespeeld in het discours rondom het Internet. Ik bekijk hoe deze bijgedragen hebben aan de publieke fascinatie voor het Internet. Vijf mannen in het bijzonder zijn daarbij interessant: Marc Andreessen van Netscape, Tim Berners-Lee, een van de uitvinders van het World Wide Web, Jeff Bezos van Amazon.com, en 'zieners' George Gilder en John Perry Barlow. Ik laat zien dat ze alle vijf op hun eigen manier charismatische gevoelens hebben voortgebracht en ik bespreek hun rol als wegbereiders van het geloof in het Internet. Terwijl het Internet als een brenger van een nieuwe manier van leven vereerd werd, werden degenen die met deze technologie werkten bewonderd om hun profetische kennis, om hun nauwe contacten met het Internet en hun vermogen om deze 'kracht' te beïnvloeden. Deze helden en zieners hebben veel bijgedragen aan de verheven status van het Internet: ze hebben het geloof in de uitzonderlijke krachten ervan gelegitimiseerd en ze hebben deze technologie met veel overtuiging en verve gepropageerd. Hun charismatische status en ogenschijnlijke betrouwbaarheid gaf aanleiding tot de hoogste verwachtingen met betrekking tot de waarde van het Internet en het potentieel ervan om grote welvaart te genereren.

Dat er inderdaad sprake was van hoge verwachtingen, werd vooral duidelijk tijdens de zogeheten dotcomhype, een investeringsboom in Internetzaken en gerelateerde technologieën op de financiële beurzen. Deze boom is het onderwerp van hoofdstuk zeven. De dotcomboom en de intense media-aandacht daaromheen zijn interessante voorbeelden van vormen van irrationeel gedrag, grote emotionaliteit en zelfs magisch denken in een tijd die herhaaldelijk rationeel en onttoverd werd verklaard. Deze hype was geworteld in een sterk geloof in het buitengewone vermogen van het Internet. Typerend voor impliciet religieuze verschijnselen was dat de verhalen die deze hype 'maakten' het Internet aan bepaalde doelen en betekenissen verbonden. De volgende idealen die de hedendaagse Westerse wereld kenmerken werden daarbij benadrukt: de vrije markt, individuele succes belichaamd door de 'selfmade man', vooruitgangsgeloof en de almacht

van technologie. Kortom, de dotcomhype vertegenwoordigde pogingen om een coherent wereldbeeld te construeren, om dingen te creëren die onze levens kunnen vormen en bepalen, en om de angsten en onzekerheden van het bestaan te overkomen.

Interessant genoeg viel deze boom samen met een andere mediahype die ook met informatietechnologie te maken had, namelijk het millenniumprobleem. Dit computerprobleem is het onderwerp van hoofdstuk acht, waar ik het als een dystopisch tegenpool van de opwinding rondom het Internet en de dotcombedrijven beschouw. Ik laat zien dat ondanks de pessimistische voorspellingen die de 'millennium-' of 'Y2Kbug' heeft voortgebracht, ook dit verschijnsel een uiting van impliciete religiositeit was, en dat men ook hier toewijding aan een gedeeld geloof kon vinden. Ten eerste verwijst het gezamenlijke geloof in het idee dat de millenniumbug het menselijke bestaan kon transformeren (en eventueel verbeteren) naar een religieus verlangen om de status quo te overstijgen en een radicaal nieuw en beter leven te bereiken. Ten tweede, zoals het ook bij de Internethype het geval was, was het feit dat de millenniumbug als een bovenmenselijk verschijnsel werd gezien dat zowel gevreesd als vereerd werd, een illustratieve uiting van impliciete religiositeit. Ten derde kan het sterke gevoel van een gezamenlijk doel dat naar voren komt in mediaverslagen van de voorbereidingen op de eventuele consequenties van de millenniumbug geduid worden als een teken van het soort collectieve 'effervescence', dat Durkheim als de bron van religiositeit beschouwt. Ten slotte bestonden er, net zoals er 'Internetevangelisten' zijn, verschillende 'millenniumguru's' en andere specialisten die duidelijk het geloof en de 'waarheden' over de millenniumbug verwoorden. Zij zorgden voor de vorming en verspreiding van impliciet religieuze ideeën: door te evangeliseren' over het millenniumprobleem en door richtlijnen te geven over hoe men het in een postmilleniale wereld moest redden.

Het concluderende hoofdstuk brengt de theoretische inzichten van de eerste drie hoofdstukken samen met de analyses van de casus. Met de Internethype als voorbeeld, beschouw ik nogmaals het bewijs voor mijn centrale stelling dat zelfs in seculiere contexten (zoals de domeinen van technologie en de zakenwereld) religie in haar impliciete en niet-geïnstitutionaliseerde gedaante een belangrijke factor blijft in moderne zingevingsprocessen.

'IMPLICIETE RELIGIE' – ALLEDAAGSE RELIGIOSITEIT

De basale vooronderstelling in het bestuderen van de impliciete religieuze dimensies van alledaagse fenomenen in onze cultuur, is dat religie zich niet beperkt tot bepaalde organisaties, ideeën of locaties. Je kunt religie vinden in

gelegenheden en gedachten die sommigen misschien als te triviaal, te commercieel of te gewoontjes beschouwen. De benadering die ik in dit boek aanhang is dat alles in onze samenleving wat op de een of andere manier doordesemt is van ultieme betekenisgeving als religieus beschouwd zou kunnen worden. Tenminste, zolang het maar blijk geeft van een sterk geloof en refereert aan objecten of ideeën die buiten de normale menselijke ervaring liggen. Zo'n begrip van religie als een diffuus, alledaags fenomeen opent nieuwe deuren, manieren om moderne culturen te onderzoeken. Het kan ons interessante inzichten bieden in hoe culturen betekenisgeving creëren.

Het doel van deze studie was niet om de mythes, verhalen en denkwijzen die de kern vormen van religieuze tradities te redden uit de handen van secularisatie. Het doel was om door het bestuderen van de internethype en het gebruik maken van de term 'impliciete religie' als denkgereedschap dit fenomeen te begrijpen: het collectieve gevoel van 'effervescence' , de dromen van het paradijs, en de ideeën over een almacht wiens logica en krachten die van ons gewone stervelingen te boven gaan. Spreken over impliciete religiositeit in de verhalen en de opwinding over het Internet betekent onderzoeken hoe moderne samenlevingen omgaan met vragen over het menselijk bestaan: de waarde van het leven, het doel en de toekomst ervan. Het betekent nagaan hoe we datgene wat onuitlegbaar en ondoorgrondelijk is benaderen, hoe we omgaan met overweldigende emoties en wat we doen met onze angsten en onzekerheden.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Karen Pärna was born in Tallinn, Estonia in January 1977. She attended the Gustav Adolf Gümnaasium in Tallinn and completed the International Baccalaureat programme at the Jeanne d'Arc College in Maastricht in 1995. In 2001 she obtained an MA degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Maastricht and in 2002 an MA in Literary Theory from the University of Oxford. Between 2004 and 2008 she was a PhD candidate and teaching assistant at the Faculty of Religious Studies of Leiden University. As of 2008 she is junior lecturer at the University College of Maastricht University, where she teaches BA courses in sociology and sociology of religion.