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A Twenty-First Century Bible

**Spiritual self-help book The Secret as a modern
form of religion**

Abstract

The Secret is amongst the most popular self-help books of the past decade. It provides its reader with tools to control the Law of Attraction. Thereby, the reader should be able to receive whatever he or she wants. In this thesis, the form, content and impact of *The Secret* are compared to a twenty-first century form of religion. This form is being explained by combining research on postmodern religion and spirituality with that on therapeutic culture. *The Secret* is being analyzed on its message, narrative of revelation, forms of authority, institutionalization and vision on humans.

This thesis will show that *The Secret* is inherently a product of its time, as it could not have been successful, or even have existed, without the changing perception of religiosity and personhood, that together formed a new form of religion. Characteristics of this new form are a focus on individuality and expressivism, a mixture of spiritual influences without them being affiliated to institution or dogma, and the idea that humans are deemed to experience trauma and need tools to overcome this.

In the end, the thesis shows how objects and practices that are not obviously religious can still fulfill a religious function for individuals. Thereby it is part of an academic trend that tries to research the growing amount of options that modern Westerners have to find purpose in their lives.

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“The Secret can give you whatever you want”¹

In March of 2006 the Australian television producer Rhonda Byrne, together with a small team of filmmakers, published the ninety-minute documentary *The Secret*. A few months later, in November, the documentary was followed by the book with the same title. *The Secret* is a self-help book, which appeals to people’s wishes to have more (material) success. Its claim is that by positive thinking one can gain health, wealth and power. Although the film was not very popular at first, the book was an immediate and worldwide success. It was translated into forty-six languages and held a top position on the New York Times bestseller list for over two years.² In total more than nineteen million copies of the book were sold worldwide. Talk show legend Oprah Winfrey dedicated not one, but two complete episodes of her show to *The Secret* in 2007, which boosted sales figures even higher. In November 2016, exactly ten years after the publication of the first book, Byrne published the sequel *How the Secret changed my life*. This is a collection of success stories from people who have changed their lives by using *The Secret*. Apparently, even after ten years, *The Secret* is still relevant to many people.

The Secret revolves around the Law of Attraction. This law is not an invention of Byrne, nor is she the first to write about it. Instead, the concept of the Law of Attraction is over a hundred years old. Its mental legacy can be traced back to the New Thought movement, an American movement which combined Christianity with the then newly invented neurosciences of neurology, mesmerism and phrenology. Some of these sciences are now referred to as pseudosciences. Despite that, the Law of Attraction has remained a popular concept. Among the people who wrote about the Law of Attraction before Byrne were alternative medicine advocate Deepak Chopra, nineteenth-century self-help author Napoleon Hill and New Thought writer Wallace D. Wattles, to whose book *The Science of Getting Rich* Byrne credits her inspiration for writing *The Secret*.³ Together, these men already sold millions of books in which

¹ Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006), xi.

² On *The Secret*’s official website, the book can be purchased in Afrikaans, Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Kannada, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Marathi, Mongolian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Turkish and Vietnamese. <http://www.theseecret.tv/world-languages/>.

³ Byrne, *The Secret*, ix.

the Law of Attraction was promoted. To quote historian of religion John Stackhouse Jr., *The Secret* was really “nothing new”.⁴

However, despite this apparent lack of originality, *The Secret* was a major hit. Why is that? What are the reasons for its success? What led to this melting pot of ideas, from New Thought, mysticism, Western Esotericism, self-help and spirituality? Why did it make such an impact in our twenty-first century Western society? What does it say about our society, our worldviews, and our sense of religiosity and spirituality?

This thesis will be a first step in answering questions like these. On the basis of the main question ‘How do the form, content and impact of *The Secret* relate to and represent a twenty-first century, Western form and function of religion?’ This form of religion will be explained by the study of postmodern religion and spirituality and the transformation of personhood in the course of the last sixty years. These transformations combined will show a new form and function that religion can have in the West, which in this thesis refers to Europe and the United States. An analysis of *The Secret* will then be made against the background of these described transformations.

There is a common discussion amongst religion scholars whether topics like these should have a place within religious studies. Since *The Secret* does not affiliate itself with a certain religious or spiritual tradition, it could even be considered a form of secular self-help. On the other hand the book does contain, as stated above, a mixture of spiritual and religious influences, though these are not unambiguous. Why then, is this book such an interesting topic for religion scholars?

It is my opinion that these unambiguous religious practices and materials are exactly the kind of topics that modern day religion scholars should study. Throughout Europe and the United States there is a decline in the amount of people who call themselves religious. On the other hand, there is an incline in people who refer to themselves as spiritual. Houtman and Aupers, respectively sociologist of religion and professor of media culture at Leuven University, even use the term ‘spiritual turn’ in their work on modern religiosity.⁵ As a result of these numbers the study of spirituality is becoming more and more relevant. There are researchers, such as Paul

⁴ John Stackhouse Jr., “Oprah’s Secret: New? Old? Good? Bad?,” *johnstackhouse.com*, 21 February 2007, <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/2007/02/21/oprahs-secret-new-old-good-bad/>.

⁵ Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, “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* 48(1) (2007).

Heelas, who call for the emancipation of spirituality as an independent academic field.⁶ Heelas even suggests renaming religious studies into the study of religion and spirituality. Others, for example Heinz Streib and Ralph Hood, do not support the idea of spirituality as an independent field of study. In their opinion, spirituality is in itself a new, modern form of religion, which they refer to as “privatized and experience-oriented religion”.⁷

In this debate I stand alongside Streib and Hood. I believe that the attempts to separate religion and spirituality and the attempts to create a form of hierarchy between the two directs attention away from the fact that both concepts are in fact very much entwined. If we as religious scholars want to keep attempting to understand the religiosity in the world around us, we should not be too concerned with trying to create boundaries between religion and spirituality. Rather, we should open our eyes to the way in which traditional forms and understandings of religion are being transformed into the more privatized and experience-oriented worldviews as described by Streib and Hood.

This point of view is tangible in the definition of religion that underlies this thesis. This definition is of course stipulative, being especially chosen for this type of research. However, as this is an academic thesis, I cannot withdraw myself from the obligation to define my constitutive term. I choose to wield an empirical definition of religion, formulated by Thomas Tweed in his book *Crossing and Dwelling*. This definition reads: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”⁸

Tweed’s definition has not been accepted without critique. The American Academy of Religion even dedicated a review symposium to *Crossing and Dwelling* and its theory of religion. In this review, Aaron Hughes challenges the way in which Tweed used ethnographic research material to create an encyclopedic theory of religion. This overlap of models has resulted in a lack of nuance when it comes to different religious movements, according to Hughes.⁹ Finbarr Curtis has argued that Tweed, being very cautious about his own subjectiveness and power, has been

⁶ Paul Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 758.

⁷ Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood, ““Spirituality” as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives,” *Implicit Religion* 14(4) (2011), 451.

⁸ Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

⁹ Aaron Hughes, “Crossing, Dwelling, and A Wandering Jew,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77(2) (2009): 407.

very concerned about creating a definition that would not exclude any forms of religion. However, this makes the definition rather broad, as it does not contain any harsh boundaries for the concept of religion. Curtis places Tweed amongst the positivists, because he aims to create a universal and inclusive definition for all religions.¹⁰

Yet, the choice for this interpretation of religion has been made because of several reasons: it implies plurality in the religious field, focuses on the importance of cultural change, combines human forces with suprahuman forces and places the importance of religion in this life, instead of the next. Another important argument is Tweed's vision on the function of religion. This function is two-sided, as religion should confront suffering as well as intensify joy. The latter is a rather unique feature of a definition of religion. As self-help is all about changing people's lives for the better, it is important that the definition yielded in this thesis does not only focus on suffering, but also on joy and pleasure.

Curtis argued that Tweed's aim to create a universal and inclusive definition of religion was somewhat questionable. This is a statement that I must agree with. Having read critiques on Tweed's work, it has become noticeable that his definition does not work for all religious studies. Therefore, I would not wish to suggest that Tweed theory poses some universal truth. However, in this particular case study, the definition offers a perfect frame to study religion in a modern, ever changing world.

Contents

This thesis consists of two main parts. In the first part, I will offer a theoretical for my later analysis of *The Secret*, which will follow in the second part. The chapters of the first part are "Theoretical Frame", which gives a general overview of the different academic debates that were relevant for this thesis, "Spirituality in a Postmodern World", which describes the transformation of religion in the Western world during the last sixty years and "Therapeutic Culture", which discusses the dominant discourse of therapy in the West, which is amongst others responsible for the success of self-help.

¹⁰ Finbarr Curtis, "No Universalizing Deductive-Nomological Explanations Please; We're Irish: A Response to Thomas A. Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77(2) (2009): 425.

The second part thus offers an analysis of *The Secret* itself. The first chapter of this analysis is “The Message”, in which I address the contents of *The Secret* and what it invites its readers to do. The next chapter, “Revelation”, revolves around the way in which *The Secret* was presented and how the public reacted to this. The chapter “Institutionalization” gives an overview of the ways in which Byrne and her team have tried to build a community and worldview around *The Secret*, that exceeds the book itself. In “Authority”, I discuss the different forms of power and authority in *The Secret*. The last chapter of the analysis focuses on what it means to be human, according to *The Secret*.

Methodology and sources

Despite the fact that *The Secret* originated in the form of a movie, this thesis is based upon the book. The reason for this choice lies with the academic strengths of the author of this thesis. Being educated as an historian, I have been especially trained in the skill of textual analysis. This strength is thus employed in this research.

The main method used in this research is that of discourse analysis. *The Secret* both employs and is part of a certain discourse, which strongly influences Western perception on religion and personhood. The goal therefore was not just to analyze what was being said by, about and revolving *The Secret*, but mainly why these things are being said.

Which influences have resulted in this type of discourse and what does it say about our culture and our vision on religion? Discourse analysis is the most appropriate method for these types of questions, because it concentrates on how knowledge, identities and beliefs are structured in language.¹¹ By using discourse analysis the different linguistic, religious and cultural influences on *The Secret* have been made visible.

Besides the method of discourse analysis, two other methods have been used that are worth mentioning in this introduction. Firstly, document analysis has been used. Document analysis concentrates on the function, use and content of a document and places this information in a larger context. When being used on personal documents, it is an acknowledged method to

¹¹ Titus Hjelm, “Discourse Analysis,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg et.al. (London: Routledge, 2011), 134.

grasp a vision of a group's social values.¹² Secondly, history plays an important role in the research. The study of history and historiography is essential in this thesis, because it explains the existence of certain social and religious trends.

The Secret was the main source for this thesis. To this central subject several other sources were added. Firstly, the other books from "The Secret-family": the four sequels *The Power*, *The Magic*, *The Hero* and *How The Secret Changed My Life*. Secondly, ego-documents were vital to this research. Ideally, these ego-documents should be reflections of people's initial thought about *The Secret*, as well as representing the transformation of these thoughts over time. The most ideal form of ego-document for this quest was that of the blog.

Blogs are online personal journals, which can be studied as ego-documents. Ego-documents are personal documents from an individual, which give an insight in his or her thought process. Often ego-documents are used in research where those involved have passed away. However, in this case it is an ideal source because it is the closest we can come to tracing people's initial reaction. After all, these blogs were written and placed online, being easily accessible and often never to be looked at again by the author.

As the internet is an inexhaustible source of information, the list of used blog entries has been narrowed down to ten. These ten blogs were selected because they all wrote more than one blog entry about *The Secret* and/or the Law of Attraction, and because they were not altered after their initial date of publication. All of the blogs are written in Dutch. For the purpose of this thesis, I have translated all quotations made from this material. The original quotations can be found in the footnotes. It is interesting to note that the bloggers that have written about *The Secret* and the Law of Attraction could all be categorized within a similar genre. Their blogs already revolve around self-development and the pursuit of happiness. This was not an intentional selection, but a mere coincidence. Apparently, *The Secret* appeals to a specific public. It is important to keep this fact in mind, because it emphasizes that this thesis can merely claim to study a twenty-first century view on religion, not *the* twenty-first century view.

¹² Grace Davie and David Wyatt, "Document Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg et.al. (London: Routledge, 2011), 151.

1. Theoretical Frame

The study of *The Secret* in relation to a modern day world view on religion does not neatly fit into one delimited academic debate. Rather, several questions are relevant, which in their turn are closely connected. These questions explain and justify this research within the field of religious studies. They also show the importance and relevance of this thesis with regards to the current academic field of religious studies.

In this chapter, I will first discuss three important academic questions that together mark the boundaries of the debate in which this thesis should be placed. These three questions are: (I) What is the relation between religion and secularity? Where does one place the boundaries that separate the concepts? (II) What is the relation between religion and spirituality? How are they perceived by different audiences? What consequences do these perceptions have for the debate? (III) What is the role of therapy and self-help within religious studies? What are the different opinions on this role? After that, I will cover some supporting themes regarding this topic. These themes will be elaborately dealt with in further chapters of this thesis.

Religion vs. secularity

Religion and secularity are complex terms. Usually, secularity is used as a term to label a lack of, or declining, religiosity within a certain society or social group. For instance, states that have a separation between church and state are labeled as secular, because religion does not play an official role within such a state. However, there are many other interpretations for the term secular. Charles Taylor has stated that secularity is not the decline of religion, but the pluralisation of religion.¹³ The choice whether and how a person wants to be religious is what defines secularity in the eyes of Taylor. Graeme Smith poses the interesting claim that secularity is an inherently Christian concept: the privatized position that religion has within Western, secular states is something that can only be accomplished with Christianity, because it is already a rather privatized tradition.¹⁴ Islamic societies, for example, could according to this theory not be secular, because the separation of religion and state is not applicable to Islamic

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁴ Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2008), 3.

tradition. A final interpretation of secularity is the so-called “subtraction-theory which interprets the secular as the absence of religion.”¹⁵

This last interpretation is much criticized in the academic debate on secularity, because it implies that religion is something that can be universally defined. However, the subtraction-theory is interesting in this particular context because it translates to objects, events and people. Whereas the other interpretations often focus on secularity as a societal label, the subtraction-theory does not necessarily imply this. However, it poses a related problem. It implies that in order to determine what is secular, one must first determine what is religious.

As previously mentioned, I have chosen to use Thomas Tweed’s definition of religion, which reads: “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries”.¹⁶ Although this definition is a brave attempt to define religion, and one which is very suitable for this thesis, it has not been without critique. Just like any definition of religion, Tweed’s has its flaws. One of the major critiques on Tweed’s definition, which I have not yet elaborated on, is that it implies that mobility is a key characteristic of religions. Manuel Vásquez makes the legitimate point that for many religious communities in diaspora, or who are minorities, mobility is not an option. There are groups, in Vásquez research illegal Latino Migrants, who are subordinate to many constraints when it comes to mobility. They have to keep a low profile, for instance, or are bound to restraints when it comes to travelling. However, these groups have vivid religious communities as well. Vásquez thus states that religions should not only be researched in terms of mobility, but sometimes also in their lack of mobility.¹⁷

However, this particular critique can be put aside in this particular thesis. Mobility should not always be understood in spatial terms. Tweed himself discerns three types: terrestrial, related to land, corporeal, related to the body, and cosmic, related to the extraterrestrial, the universe, the metaphysical.¹⁸ Mobility is not only about physical movement, but also about a mobility in ideas, practices and traditions and the negotiations surrounding these themes. This could perhaps be best understood as a form of cosmic mobility, as these negotiations challenge beliefs, practices

¹⁵ Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁶ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54.

¹⁷ Manuel A. Vásquez, “The Limits of the Hydrodynamics of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77(2) (2009): 436.

¹⁸ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 75.

and traditions. ¹⁹In this thesis, mobility should be understood in the latter way. Spiritual and new religious movements are the product of religious mobility and are abundantly developing. ²⁰ Therefore, it is justified to imply mobility in this case, in the sense of crossing traditional religious boundaries. This type of mobility is indeed possible for religious movements in the West.

Another, and in this particular case more valid critique, is that Tweed's definition is too broad and does not leave enough room for nuance. ²¹ This is a critique that is commonly voiced against definitions of religion that are not essentialist in their nature. Essentialist definitions of religion focus on content: this means that these definitions set some demands for the content of a 'true religion', and if something does not match these demands, it is not a religion. ²² An example of an influential essentialist definition is: "Someone is religious if in his universe there is something to which (in principle) all other things are subordinated."²³

The problem with essentialist definitions is that people are often inclined to define the essence of religion in terms of what they are used to. This means that definitions of religion created by Westerners often implied monotheism, the presence of and subordination to a God and the importance of belief. ²⁴ These characteristics are a result of the influence of Protestant Christianity on our Western society, which has radically altered our understanding of religion since its emergence in the sixteenth century. ²⁵ Thus, the problem with essentialist definitions is that they are at risk to exclude many religious beliefs and practices, simply because they are not common or known to the defining party.

On the other side of the spectrum one finds the functionalist definitions. As the term already suggests, this type of definitions focuses on the role that religion plays. Religion is not about what it contains, it is about what it does. One of the classic functionalist definitions is the one by Emile Durkheim, written down in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. According to Durkheim, religion is: "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is

¹⁹ Ibid., 74.

²⁰ Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, *Handbook of New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3.

²¹ Hughes, "Crossing, Dwelling, and A Wandering Jew" and Curtis, "No Universalizing Deductive-Nomological Explanations Please; We're Irish: A Response to Thomas A. Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling*".

²² Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 57.

²³ William A. Christian quoted in Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281.

²⁴ Ibid., 276.

²⁵ Ibid., 271.

to say, things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them".²⁶

However, most definitions nowadays are a combination of functionalist and essentialist forms of definition. A very influential one is the definition of religion by Ninian Smart. According to this theory, religion functions in seven dimensions: ritual, narrative, emotional, institutional, ethical, doctrinal and material.²⁷ Smart has employed a phenomenological method, concentrating on different visible characteristics of religion.²⁸ These characteristics are both functional as essential. The main critique voiced against Smart concerns the way in which he includes secular worldviews, such as communism and nationalism, in his theory.²⁹ By doing so, he wished to challenge the common perception of religion. However, at the same time this challenges the very purpose of the concept of religion itself.³⁰

Tweed's definition employed in this thesis is also an example of a definition which combines functional and essential elements. It contains both an idea of what the content of religion should entail, i.e. "human and suprahuman forces", as what its function should be, i.e. "to intensify joy and confront suffering". This makes it, indeed, a broad definition. The theory challenges the perception of religion, because there are many things that can intensify joy and confront suffering, which would not be naturally looked upon as being religious. However, Tweed still delimits religion, by adding the presence of suprahuman forces to its definition. This means that, even though his definition is very broad, it still creates boundaries for the concept of religion, unlike the earlier mentioned definition by Smart. Hereby, Tweed's definition is very much useful for this case study. It opens doors for the study of new forms of religion, without diminishing the value of religion in itself.

Religion vs. spirituality

The second major debate that underlies this thesis is the one about the relation between religion and spirituality. I already mentioned this debate briefly in my introduction, stating that I do not

²⁶ Karen E. Fields, trans., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 44.

²⁷ Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11-21.

²⁸ Anna S. King and Paul Hedges, "What is Religion? Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?" in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, ed. Paul Hedges (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

find it constructive to use these two terms as each other's counterparts. In this paragraph, I will discuss the academic debate on the topic further.

The first important question is why Western society has come accustomed to two different terms. What are the differences implied by this apparent separation of religion and spirituality? As explained in the previous paragraph, religion is a concept of which the content can change, depending on who does the conceptualizing. The term is, as historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith calls it, a second order term. It is not native, meaning that it has no meaning of its own: it merely means what society says it means.³¹ For the West, this means that we are often inclined to understand religion according to the characteristics of Christianity, which has long been the dominant religion in the West.

In the course of the last century, and in particular since the 1960's, the West has been confronted with all sorts of new religiosity, which have become characterized as alternative spiritual movements, New Religious Movements, New Social Movements and/or New Age Movements.³² These movements had other characteristics than known, traditional religions, and were therefore labeled differently. Important characteristics of spirituality that are commonly agreed on are, amongst others, the presence of a natural power, or even divinity, within ourselves and a close relation with nature.³³ Most importantly, spirituality is often described as a "Do-It-Yourself" movement.³⁴ This implies that there is no standard pattern for spiritual movements. However, this implication is not correct.

For quite some time, it has been an academic trend to diminish the importance of spirituality. The main argument was that, because of their fragmented and highly individualized nature, spiritual movements could never match the impact and importance of traditional religion. Spirituality was for instance diminished as being a "fuzzy" concept.³⁵ One of the most prominent critics of spirituality is sociologist Steve Bruce. In the field of religious studies, Bruce is most known for his book *God is dead*, in which he presents himself an advocate for the secularization

³¹ Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 269.

³² George D. Chryssidis, "Defining the New Age," in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. Daren Kemp et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 5.

³³ Heelas, "Spiritualities of Life," 759.

³⁴ Houtman and Aupers, "The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: the Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000," 306.

³⁵ Ralph W. Hood and Heinz Streib, "'Fuzziness' or Semantic Diversification? Insights about the Semantics of 'Spirituality' in Cross-Cultural Comparison (conclusion)," in *Semantics and Psychology of Spirituality: a Cross-Cultural Analysis*, ed. Heinz Streib et. al. (Cham: Springer, 2016), 159.

thesis. When it comes to the argument of the growth of spirituality, Bruce states: “I cannot see how a shared faith can be created from a low-salience world of pick-and-mix religion”³⁶ This statement implies two things. Firstly, that spirituality cannot match religion, because it does not meet traditional understandings of what religion should be - cohesive, for example. Secondly, it implies that there is a vertical hierarchy, in which religion stands above spirituality, and spirituality is nothing more than a pale shadow of ‘real religion’.

Statements like these are fiercely contested. As early as 1997, psychologist of religion Brian Zinnbauer stated that religious studies should embrace the study of spirituality, because of the fast growth of the spiritual movements.³⁷ Paul Heelas took this statement one step further, stating that religious studies should be renamed as the study of religion and spirituality. According to Heelas, who studied the participation in spiritual practices in Great-Britain, spirituality is now more popular than religion, which would justify such a rebranding.³⁸

Despite their efforts for the emancipation of spirituality, both Zinnbauer and Heelas still imply that spirituality and religion are two different concepts. This is however not a given fact in the academic field. There are also scholars who try to study spirituality not as a counterpart of religion, but rather as a transformed form of religion. A major influence on this work has been the study on the “spiritual turn” by Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers. In this study, they grant the success of spirituality in the West to the decline of Christianity. However, they emphasize that this decline does not necessarily mean a decline of religion.³⁹ By using a quantitative study with a focus on people’s religious self-designation, they show that many Europeans distance themselves from the tradition, i.e. Christianity, and instead turn to other spiritual alternatives.⁴⁰ According to Houtman and Aupers, it is a misconception that these spiritual alternatives are too fragmented and individualized to study as a cohesive concept. Rather, these alternatives might seem fragmented, but they share essential characteristics.⁴¹ In order to understand these characteristics, to understand spirituality, religion scholars must attempt to break free from the Christian paradigm of religion.

³⁶ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 105.

³⁷ Brian J. Zinnbauer et. al., “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36(4) (1997): 562.

³⁸ Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” 759.

³⁹ Houtman and Aupers, “The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: the Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000,” 305.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 312

Houtman and Aupers are not alone in their conviction that spirituality is a new form of religion. In order to make spirituality a more cohesive topic of research, Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein have used the study on the spiritual turn, combined with other research, in order to offer a theory of spirituality. According to them, this theory - on which I will elaborate in chapter two - shows that spiritualities can, like traditional religions, be understood by their shared characteristics.⁴² With this theory they aim to challenge the traditional perspective of religious studies, opening the field to proper study of new religiosity. Heinz Streib, together with Ralph Hood, made the previously mentioned statement that spirituality is simply a “privatized, experience-oriented religion”, which also suggests that spirituality is indeed a new interpretation of religiosity.⁴³

There are thus many arguments to challenge the idea that religion and spirituality are two different concepts, or counterparts even. However, this conception is rather strong, not only in the academic field but also in society itself. Religion is often perceived as being narrow and traditional, two characteristics that do not appeal. Spirituality, on the other hand, is interpreted as being personal, more free.⁴⁴ Many spiritual movements thus shy from designating themselves as religious, which only strengthens the apparent contradiction. However, I believe it is important for scholars of religion to keep an open mind towards the transformation of religion. Globalization, individualization and the decline of tradition challenge scholars to think outside of the box with regards to religion. It is not realistic to think that, in a society which changes rapidly on many fronts, the conception of religion does not change accordingly.

Self-help, therapy and religious studies

The third debate that should be taken into account is that of the role of therapy, and in particular self-help, in religious studies. The focus lies on self-help, because this is the genre in which *The Secret* is categorized. However, as self-help is a product of the therapeutic market, the general relation between therapy and religion should not be overlooked.

⁴² Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein, “Religion and Spirituality,” in *Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg et.al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 76.

⁴³ Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood, ““Spirituality” as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives,” 451.

⁴⁴ Brian J. Zinnbauer et.al., “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy,” 563.

Therapy and religion are often seen as competing concepts. This is because both offer a sense of support, of purpose. Both within therapy as within religion, one can find the tools to deal with the hardships of life. There are many academics who believe that therapy and religion cannot co-exist. Indeed, some even think that therapy will one day replace religion. Eva Moskowitz is a scholar who finds herself in the this camp. In her book *In Therapy We Trust* she is very critical of what she calls “the worship of the psyche”.⁴⁵ She claims that Americans now “turn to therapy as they once turned to God”⁴⁶, with a devotion that resembles that of cult-members. However, where this devotion was thus previously directed outwards, towards an institutionalized system, it is now directed inwards, thereby being completely turned over to the fusses and fits of the individual. According to Moskowitz, this is an alarming development.

In his review “Religion and Therapeutic Ethos in twentieth-century American History”, Christopher Loss describes the theory of sociologist Philip Rieff, who states that religion and therapy cannot coexist, because there is no room for religion in the therapeutic image of man. Rieff refers to this image as “psychological man”, who has emerged without any attention for religious beliefs.⁴⁷ With this, he means that every necessity that one can have for being religious has been taken care of in an alternative way. A simple example: instead of praying about how to handle a certain situation, people are now implemented with the idea that only they, as individual, know the right answer to a problem.

The competition between therapy and religion is thus a much discussed theme. Another important approach to this relationship is studying how therapy has emerged into religion. Often, this results in a study of religious self-help. This study is more prominent to certain religions than to others. A denomination that is often discussed in the context of religious self-help is Evangelical Christianity. Katja Rakow for example has made extensive study of the ‘pastorpreneur’ Joel Osteen, an Evangelical minister who has adopted a therapeutic discourse and has published several self-help books.⁴⁸ Wendy Kaminer has also made study of Evangelical self-help books. She is much more critical in her research, concluding that religion

⁴⁵ Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Christopher P. Loss, “Religion and the Therapeutic Ethos in Twentieth-Century American History,” *American Studies International* 40(3) (2002): 62.

⁴⁸ Katja Rakow, “Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen’s ‘Message of Hope.’” in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States: New Perspectives and New Findings*, ed. Ph. Goff et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

is somehow corrupted by laziness and pursuit of profit, which she detects in the self-help industry.⁴⁹ Her critique that pursuit of profit, caused by the market of self-help, ruins the essence of religion, is one often found in research regarding this topic.

A topic that has been somewhat neglected in this debate is how self-help can in itself become a religious object. As self-help is most often discussed by religion scholars within a specific religious frame, it's independent role and function can be overlooked. However, it is exactly this topic that is interesting against the background of changing perception of religion and spirituality. An influential attempt to shed a light on this topic has been made by Kathryn Lofton. She noticed how influential the practices and visions propagated by talk show-host Oprah Winfrey were becoming in the United States. She thus decided to study Oprah as a religious object. Her several studies have shown that, despite the fact that the question "can X function as a religion" always remains a matter of definition, there are definitely arguments to be found which justify making Oprah a topic within religious studies, such as the reactions she provokes with her fans and the tropes of conversion that are found in the journals of these fans.⁵⁰

Lofton's research has been a major inspiration for this thesis, both in its strengths as in its flaws. In proving that practices, people and visions that would not necessarily be deemed religious by the public, can indeed be studied as religious objects, she has strengthened the idea that an unaffiliated self-help book such as *The Secret* is a valid research object in the context of religious studies. Despite the fact that there is no outspoken affiliation with any religious or spiritual movement, I will show that there are in fact many such influences underlying *The Secret*. This is, just like the Oprah-study, an attempt to look outside the box and study contemporary and new ways in which people find their purpose and support. However, I also spoke of flaws. In my opinion, Lofton's flaw is that she refrains from defining religion in the beginning of her work, thereby being unable to draw any other conclusion than the fact that religion lies in the eye of the beholder. This is of course not an unjust conclusion, but it is a rather unsatisfying and unsurprising one. In an attempt not to make the same fault, I presume in this thesis that *The Secret* can function as a religious object, by using a definition that justifies this presumption. With this discussion out of the way, I will instead focus on in which ways the book represents a new form of religiosity.

⁴⁹ Wendy Kaminer, "Saving Therapy: Exploring The Religious Self-Help Literature," *Theology Today* 48(3) (1991).

⁵⁰ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

Other relevant topics

The three debates discussed above were the main structural debates that underlie this thesis. However there are other topics relevant for the research presented here. These topics are therapeutic culture, religion in a postmodern society, New Thought and commerce. In this paragraph, I will introduce each of these topics by and large. Because these topics are all extensively discussed in the following chapters, I will not go into much detail, in order to refrain from being repetitive. This paragraph thus merely functions as an introduction to the supporting academic themes.

Therapeutic culture is a term used by sociologists, mainly. It is a concept of grave importance for this thesis, because it helps to clarify and understand the role and impact of self-help. It represents the paradigm of our current western society: a society in which every domain of life has been influenced by therapy and psychology. The effect of this influence has been extensively studied for each of these domains, such as economy, the workplace, literature, pop culture and religion, to which I will return later in this chapter. The work that best describes the historical development of therapeutic culture is *Saving the Modern Soul* by sociologist Eva Illouz.⁵¹ In this book she traces therapeutic culture back to the days of Sigmund Freud and explains how his work has ultimately developed into what she refers to as the “Therapeutic Narrative of Selfhood”.⁵² Summarized, this narrative entails the idea that man continuously suffers, yet has the power to change his life.⁵³ This narrative returns in many other studies on therapeutic culture. Nikolas Rose uses the term “autonomy of the self” to describe this value of suffering and personal responsibility.⁵⁴ Frank Furedi focuses more on the role of trauma in therapeutic culture. He states that trauma is essential for this paradigm, because without trauma there would be no need for therapy. According to Furedi, modern man is almost obligated to experience trauma.⁵⁵ It is what makes us human in the eyes of each other. Therapeutic culture thus provides a certain vision of personhood.

⁵¹ Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵⁴ Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

⁵⁵ Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

Whereas therapeutic culture functions as one leg of this research, the role of religion in a postmodern society functions as the other. Since postmodernism, Western perception of religion has dramatically changed, as have our perceptions of knowledge, truth and personhood. Influential names in this line of research are Charles Taylor, Michael Foucault, Colin Campbell and Michael Stausberg and Mark Gardiner, all of whom will be introduced and discussed in chapter two. For now, it suffices to say that it is a combined worldview of therapeutic culture and postmodern religion against which I will perform my analysis. Because of the importance of these topics, they are both granted a chapter of their own.

The last two themes I wish to touch upon in this chapter are not so much relevant for their debates, as well for their function as background information for this research. The theme of New Thought and Western Esotericism has proven to be essential in comprehending and interpreting the ideology behind *The Secret*. When it comes to western esotericism a lot of inspiration has been drawn from the works of Wouter Hanegraaff, in particular from his contribution to the *Handbook of New Age*.⁵⁶ Hanegraaff is an authority in the area of western esotericism, which makes his contributions very valuable. As already mentioned in the introduction, *The History of New Thought* by John S. Haller has been the foundation of the interpretation of New Thought ideas in this thesis.⁵⁷

As a final theme I would shortly like to point out the importance of commerce in this case study. The worldwide success and million sold copies from *The Secret* had of course also to do with intelligent branding and marketing. Whether commerce decreases the value of religion is a question to which scholars do not agree. However, more and more scholars, such as Paul Heelas and Kathryn Lofton, are coming to terms with the fact that commerce is part of our capitalist society and is therefore naturally connected with contemporary religion. As Lofton states: "reading, like religion, does not need to lose its preciousness the minute it gains profitability".⁵⁸ That is way marketing and commerce strategies are also an important part of the research material for this thesis.

⁵⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, "The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism," in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. Daren Kemp et. al. (Leiden, Brill:2007), 25-50.

⁵⁷ John S. Haller, *The history of New Thought: from mind cure to positive thinking and the prosperity gospel* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation Press, 2012).

⁵⁸ Lofton, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon*, 153.

2. Modern Religiosity and Spirituality in the West

The first step for this thesis is to map the form and impact of religion in the contemporary western world. As this topic could result in a thesis of itself, I choose to refrain myself from mapping the institutionalized religions, such as Christianity and Islam. In this chapter I thus employ a more narrowed scope, focusing on newer forms of religiosity and spirituality. I will describe how religion in the western world changed dramatically over the course of the last fifty years, why this happened and what this transformation has resulted in. I am however aware that with this choice I am leaving certain sides of the religious spectrum out of account. Hopefully this acknowledgement compensates for that flaw.

The form and impact of newer forms of religiosity and spirituality is relevant for this thesis, because it delivers an insights into the transformation of religions and also into our changing perception of religion. As Meredith McGuire explained in her book *Lived Religion*, both content and interpretation of religion transforms over time.⁵⁹ An insight into the nature and results of this transformation is relevant for this thesis, because it functions as a background to interpret how *The Secret* represents and relates to a modern day view on religion.

Living in a postmodern age

Traditionally, the Western world has a long history of a Protestant interpretation of religion. During the Reformation, the new protestant leaders focused on piety, believe and submission to God as being the key elements of Christianity.⁶⁰ Although the West has become used to this interpretation, it is not a self-evident one. Before the Reformation, religion was often interpreted as a set of rituals, of practices. Believe mattered, but it did not truly become religion's most important characteristic until the Reformation.

This year, 2017, marks the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, at least according to common Western tradition, where the spread of Luther's ninety-five theses is commonly used as a marking of the starting point of Protestantism. Whilst this 'birthday' is commemorated throughout Europe, we are also on the verge of yet a new common interpretation of religion.

⁵⁹ Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

⁶⁰ Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 271.

This new interpretation has been in the making since the 1960's and is slowly but steadily becoming more and more self-evident for Westerners.

This new interpretation could not have come into existence without the influence of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a cultural movement that reacted against the then dominant movements of modernism and structuralism.⁶¹ The latter were characterized by their notion of universality, of truth. Modernists believed in the power of the ratio and in the fundament of knowledge.⁶² Structuralists tried to discover universal structures in language and culture.⁶³ Postmodernism on the other hand abolishes all notion of truth. Its point of view is that there is no such thing as one objective and independently existing truth, because everything is created by humans. Therefore, there is nothing external to men that is intrinsically true. Michel Foucault stated that what people experience as true, their knowledge, is created by those with power in their societies.⁶⁴ According to Foucault, it is not knowledge that creates power, but the other way around. Because knowledge is created on a macro level, we are often not aware of its artificiality. We can be nothing but subordinated to the discourse that has been created for us and with us.

One of the core characteristics of postmodernism is its skepticism towards the so-called grand narratives.⁶⁵ A grand narrative, also known as a meta narrative, is a narrative in which all knowledge, history and culture lead towards a preset end goal.⁶⁶ Examples of such narratives are communism, fascism, but also religions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The postmodernists revolted against these great narratives because each of them pretended to hold universal truth. However, why would there be such a thing as universal truth? According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, men have become too familiar with diversity, individuality and pluralism to uphold the idea of a grand narrative.⁶⁷

Such a worldview meant a crisis for the institutionalized religions. For what is a religion without a grand narrative? What holds it together? One could easily imagine religion fading away in a

⁶¹ Colin Campbell, "Modernity and Postmodernity," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert Segal (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 311.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 309.

⁶³ Jeremy Carrette, "Post-structuralism and the study of religion," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John Hinnells (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 274.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin et. al. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

⁶⁵ Campbell, "Modernity and Postmodernity," 316.

⁶⁶ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2013), 30.

⁶⁷ Campbell, "Modernity and Postmodernity," 313.

postmodern society. However, no such thing happened. Instead, both the character of religion as the character of the religious practitioner changed.

The philosopher Charles Taylor states that this change was the beginning of the *Age of Authenticity*.⁶⁸ This change also took place in, or rather since, the 1960's. According to Taylor, the *Age of Authenticity* is characterized by the value of expressive individualism.⁶⁹ This means the ideal of freedom to not only believe and think as an individual, but also to express this towards the rest of the world. It is precisely what Nikolas Rose has named the culture of the regime of the self.⁷⁰ Notice how Taylor's phrasing "expressive individualism" correlates with the way Streib and Hood defined modern spirituality, "a personalized and experience-oriented religion", a definition mentioned in the previous chapters. In both concepts individualism and action are central elements. The presence of individuality is quite literal, in both "personalized" as in "individualism". Action is implied by the use of "expressive", i.e. taking action to show internal feelings externally, and "experience-oriented", which suggests that one has to act in order to practice religion and thus experience its results.

A third element of change that should not be forgotten in this paragraph is the pluralisation of religious options. For a long time, Christianity has been the dominant religion in the West. Over the course of the last century, in particular the last fifty to sixty years, the West has been confronted with many new forms of religion, which sometimes really differ from Christianity. Islam, for example, but also Buddhism and New Age spiritualities. Also, the option not to believe has become more and more valid.⁷¹ This has resulted in movements such as atheism and secularism. Curiously enough, these movements, which profile themselves as being non-religious, sometimes show similarities to traditional religious characteristics. An example of this is the very successful Sunday Assembly. This "Church without God" is an international movement.⁷² Followers of this movement assemble on Sunday mornings, sing songs, read and meditate. Another example is the academic debate on whether a radical form of secularism, such as the French *laïcité*, can be considered a form of religion on its own.⁷³ When studying religiosity in the Netherlands, Gabriël van den Brink employed a definition of 'the higher' as

⁶⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁷⁰ Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, 2.

⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

⁷² Germieke Smits, "Kerk zonder geloof loopt vol," *Trouw*, 29 september 2014, <https://www.trouw.nl/home/kerk-zonder-geloof-loopt-vol~af34135b/>.

⁷³ Taylor, "Western Secularism," 9.

being “the presumption of a whole to which I feel connected and which motivates me to altruistic action.”⁷⁴ This definition, often criticized for being far too extensive, shows that the religious field is very pluralized, and that it no longer only contains traditional interpretations of religion.

The end of the great narratives, the pluralism of religious options and the value of self-expression together gave form to a new understanding of religion. An understanding in which being religious is not a given fact, but an individual choice. This choice is, in theory, completely independent of family, cultural background or political affiliation. According to Taylor, this freedom of choice is the core element of a secular society, rather than the absence of religion.⁷⁵

Power of the believer

Besides religion becoming a personal choice, another change occurred that transpired in both the character of religion as well as in the character of the religious practitioner. There has been a growing belief in the internal powers of the religious practitioner himself in the Western world.⁷⁶ The idea that humans themselves contain some sort of power is not new. Tweeds’ definition, which does not necessarily focus on modern religiosity and spirituality, already hints at this with the phrase “drawing on human and suprahuman forces”. What is new, though, is the growing trust in these human powers, as well as the idea that they are in themselves enough and do not need the support of a form of transcendent power.⁷⁷

The belief in the power of men probably has found its first roots in what Taylor refers to as the “disenchantment of the world”, a theory first drawn up by Max Weber.⁷⁸ Only when external divine and demonic powers were no longer taken for granted would there have been room for the internal powers of man. Besides this so-called disenchantment the rise of psychology and therapy has also been of immense importance for this development. I will elaborate on this topic in the next chapter.

⁷⁴ “Het hogere is de verbeelding van een geheel waarmee ik mij verbonden weet en waardoor ik mij geroepen voel tot onbaatzuchtig handelen.” Gabriël van den Brink, *De Lage Landen en het Hogere: de betekenis van geestelijke beginselen in het moderne bestaan* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 26.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁷⁶ Houtman and Aupers, “The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: the Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000,” 312.

⁷⁷ Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” 759.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

A third and final influence that should be mentioned in this context is the New Age movement. This movement, again originating from the sixties, valued self-spirituality and its expression very highly. New Age is often interpreted as a mixture of European romantic and Eastern spiritual influences, resulting in a new and unprecedented movement of highly individualized, expressive spiritual beliefs and practices.

These two developments, religion becoming a personal choice and the belief in a human's own powers, have been the foundation of many modern spiritual movements. After elaborate study, psychologists of religion Streib and Klein have come to what they refer to as "the ten semantics of 'spirituality'".⁷⁹ Note that the quotation marks around the word spirituality are added by Streib and Klein themselves. This is because they find themselves among the scholars who interpret spirituality as modern religion. They therefore do not wish to suggest that with these semantics they have discovered the differences between religion and spirituality. Rather, these semantics should be regarded as the building blocks for interpreting what modern religion is. Some of them are contradictory, because they practically never occur as a complete set. There are, as said, ten of them:

1. Connectedness and harmony with the universe, nature and the whole
2. Part of religion, of christian beliefs
3. Search for higher self, meaning and enlightenment
4. Ethics, in relation to humanity
5. Belief in higher power(s)
6. Intuition of something unspecified, but higher and beyond oneself
7. Experience of truth and purpose
8. Awareness of a non-material world
9. Opposition to religion and dogma
10. Individual religious praxis, meditation, prayer and worship

It is a strong belief of mine that we should interpret modern day religiosity according to these ten building blocks. These semantics steer us away from traditional Christian inflected interpretations of religion. Also, they suggest that there is never one ideal model to interpret religion: rather, there are many possible models that could be created from these building blocks. This so-called study of spirituality however, is not an easy one. Because of its highly

⁷⁹ Streib and Klein, "Religion and Spirituality," 76.

individualized character and lack of central institution one faces a real challenge when trying to map spirituality. There are many quantitative studies that leave out spirituality all together. An example of this is a recent Dutch study executed by the CBS, the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, which was aimed at mapping religiosity amongst Dutch teens and adolescents. When asked about their personal religious affiliation, the respondents could only choose an institutionalized religion, such as Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism, or nothing. More than 50% identified themselves as being non-religious.⁸⁰

However, if one does include spirituality in a survey, the tide turns. In a research assignment for a religious foundation, I carried out my own survey on religiosity amongst teens and adolescents. Almost a quarter of the respondents opted for the answer “not religious, but spiritual” when asked about their religious affiliation.⁸¹ This image is confirmed by other quantitative studies. A study about the spiritual turn and the decline of religion showed that, in Europe, France, Great-Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden were most prone to the decline of traditional religion and the rise of alternative forms of spirituality.⁸² The Netherlands is, according to this study, the fastest riser. Another study, or more an aggregation of studies, shows that in eleven Northern and Northeastern European countries, the belief in ‘God inside man’ is on average 30%.⁸³

The difficulty with measuring spirituality is that there is no definitive model for spiritual expression, or for religious expression in general. This is in contrast with the academic trend of the past, in which researchers assumed that individuals’ religious affiliations would be connected with the morals and practices as promoted by the religious organisations with which these individuals identified themselves.⁸⁴ More and more however, researchers realize that this is a strongly simplified interpretation of religious identity, which does not do justice to the real situation. Therefore, it is important to combine studies on spiritual practices, such as the one by Paul Heelas, with studies on individual self-designation, for example the research done by Houtman and Aupers.

⁸⁰ Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, “Aandeel godsdienstige jongeren gedaald,” February 22, 2017, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2017/08/aandeel-godsdienstige-jongeren-gedaald>.

⁸¹ Lianne van Valen, “Jongeren Inspireren: Onderzoeksverslag masterstage stichting Geloofinje project,” (May 2017, on demand), 10.

⁸² Houtman and Aupers, “The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: the Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000,” 305.

⁸³ Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” 760.

⁸⁴ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 3.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to sketch an image of the form that so-called new religiosity and spirituality have in the Western world, and how this form has come to pass. I have shown how Western perception of religion has changed since the 1960's as a result of postmodernism, individualization, expressivism and the growth in human force. These developments resulted in a patchwork of highly individualized, expression-oriented religious experiences, which are so different from the traditional understanding of religion that they are categorized as spirituality. Whether one opines that spirituality is something existentially different from religion, or that it is simply religion in a new form, there is an agreement on the growing importance that spirituality has come to play in Western societies.

3. Therapeutic Culture

In chapter one I already shortly mentioned the discourse that has become known as Therapeutic Culture. Since this is such an essential discourse in relation to the success of self-help and *The Secret*, I will elaborate on it further in this chapter. Firstly, I will briefly touch upon the history of psychology and therapy. After that, I will elaborate on the role of therapy in our current society, and the critiques that have been voiced against this role. Thirdly, I will zoom in on the relation between religion and therapy. Finally, the concept of (religious) self-help will be discussed.

The rise of therapy

The origins of therapeutic culture are often traced back to the creation of psychoanalysis in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was Sigmund Freud who first came up with a “scientific theory of the mind”.⁸⁵ He thought of the mind as a legitimate and trustworthy object of research. Freud differentiated three parts of the human mind: the id, which is basically made up out of primal instincts, the superego, which is formed by external influences such as moral value systems, and the ego, which interacts between the two former and is therefore the rationalizing power. The ego makes sure that in acting upon his or her instincts, one does not stray too far from the superego. However, id and ego share the characteristics of avoiding pain and seeking pleasure. This implies that a person in itself is always after his or her own personal benefit, but is somewhat controlled in that quest by the superego. It also implies that when the superego is lacking or disturbed, because of poor upbringing or isolation for example, this can have serious consequences for the behavior of a person.⁸⁶ Freud studied amongst others trauma, sexuality and family relations in order to explain the concept of a disturbed ego. Indeed, one could say that Freud invented the concept of psychological trauma.

⁸⁵ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 22.

⁸⁶ Saul McLeod, “ID, Ego and Superego,” *Simply Psychology*, last modified 2016, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>.

Freud's work was a huge success, in particular in the United States. Students from his first psychoanalytic circles described him as a great teacher, as a prophet almost.⁸⁷ Within a mere forty years after Freud first started these private gatherings, psychology was allowed as a treatment for private individuals. Eva Illouz relates Freud's success in the United States to the popularity of movements who worked with 'healing through the mind', such as the Mind Cure Movement and New Thought.⁸⁸ However, it is to Freud, and not to these previously existing movements, that we owe the first concept of the 'self', as a psychological entity.

In order for the Freudian self to become the self as we now know it, it had to make one essential transformation. According to Freud, the self was a determined concept. One could discover his or her true self, but one could not change it.⁸⁹ Not everyone agreed with this determined vision on life. There were also men, some of them before Freud even, who believed that a person was able to overcome all obstacles and be whoever he wanted, regardless of background or status. This line of thought can be traced back to the Enlightenment period, in which Westerners first started concerning themselves with equality and emancipation. Illouz refers to Samuel Smiles, who wrote a book called *Self-help* as early as 1859. In this book Smiles wrote about men of little fortune, who had risen to great heights.⁹⁰ It illustrated that a man could be anything, as long as he was willing to work hard for it. This line of thought also directly inspired what has become known as "The American Dream", the ideal that anyone can become anything, and is noticeable in movements such as feminism and the abolition movement.

Although these two visions seem to clash, they have melted together in our current therapeutic culture. The positive outlook on self-improvement as proclaimed by Smiles has been combined with the Freudian focus on trauma, self-destructiveness and and conflict. Together, they form the core characteristic of what I will refer to as 'therapeutic person': a person who always has to deal with some sort of trauma, but at the same time possesses the capabilities to overcome that trauma.

⁸⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 24.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

The characteristics of the therapeutic person

Using the concept of ‘therapeutic person’ requires a disclaimer. It must be made clear that this term does not imply that all people are uniform, or that they think and feel in the same way. However, there are certain patterns, especially when it comes to language, that consciously and unconsciously influences every person in the western world. In his *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*, Nikolas Rose explains that there are many ways to shape the autonomous self. All of these forms, however, share similar patterns. They are connected to a system of family resemblances. This means that no autonomous self is identical to another, yet they are very much alike because they share certain characteristics.⁹¹

What then, are the characteristics of personhood that we find in therapeutic culture? The first one has already been mentioned briefly: the experience of trauma. In this day and age, experiencing trauma is self-evident. This trauma can vary in form, from the divorce of one’s parents to being violently assaulted, or witnessing a horrific event. Roughly fifty years ago, however, the concept of trauma did not even exist.⁹² Victims of the second world war did not receive trauma care, nor did soldiers returning from Vietnam. The rapid rise of trauma in our societies has been clearly illustrated by Frank Furedi in “The Silent Ascent of Therapeutic Culture in Britain”. In this article, Furedi compares the responses to two different floods in Britain, one in 1953 and one in 2000. In 1953 164 people lost their lives in a flood. The response to this, as can now be retraced through newspapers, was rather stoic. The response to the flood in 2000 however, was much more emotional. Four people died during the flood: a tragic event, but minor when compared to the incident of 1953. Even so, the newspapers reported massive emotional trauma.⁹³ Furedi concludes that the experiencing of trauma must be a matter of language: it is not the event that creates the trauma, but the memory of it-in particular the way that that memory is phrased. Without the right language, one can simply not experience trauma.⁹⁴

The second important characteristic, strongly related to trauma, is the therapeutic narrative. One could think of the therapeutic narrative as a compilation of all of one’s traumas, both the larger and the smaller ones. It relies heavily on the Freudian influence in therapeutic culture, as it

⁹¹ Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, 3.

⁹² Frank Furedi, “The Silent Ascendency of Therapeutic Culture in Britain,” *Society* 39(3) (2002): 16.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 17.

assumes that trauma shapes an individual's life. However, a therapeutic narrative is two-sided. It is also a narrative of how an individual has overcome that trauma, or how he or she is planning to overcome it.

With the therapeutic narrative as modern form of a life's story, modern life has come to revolve around the experiencing of and dealing with trauma. It is a new form of social status: the more an individual can overcome, the stronger he or she appears to the people around her.

"That that don't kill me, can only make me stronger", sung Kanye West, loosely channeling Friedrich Nietzsche. He is not alone in this. Therapeutic narrative is everywhere; on the work floor, in the educational system, in Western pop culture and literature.⁹⁵ Organizations are filled with counselors and psychologists and the number of burn-outs has never been higher. The experience of trauma is assumed. According to Furedi, Western society even expects people to experience trauma.⁹⁶ It has become the central characteristic of personhood, the thing that makes humans human.

Thus, besides experiencing trauma, people are also able to overcome it, to change their lives for the better. This ability implies certain characteristics of therapeutic personhood. Firstly, it is implied that one's background does not matter. One can cut oneself completely loose from family, birthplace, education, status, race, gender, and etcetera. As has become clear by the earlier example of Samuel Smiles, this idea is not completely new- although one can discuss whether Smiles accounted for women and people of colour in his day and age. Neither is it an idea that is unique for therapeutic culture; one can find similar ideas in for example feminism and anti-racism. This results in a strong entanglement of these movements, as has been illustrated by Illouz.⁹⁷

Being able to clear oneself completely from one's background signals the next characteristic: the existence of a true self. Without a true self, a person would have absolutely nothing to fall back on once he has cut ties with his past. As mentioned before, it was Freud who initiated the concept of the self. This concept however has transformed drastically through the years. According to Rose, the modern concept of the self is build upon the following pillars: autonomy,

⁹⁵ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 217.

⁹⁶ Furedi, "The Silent Ascendancy of Therapeutic Culture in Britain," 17.

⁹⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 121

identity, liberty, choice and fulfillment.⁹⁸ It is on the basis of these concepts that many people in the West shape their lives, judge their actions and chase their goals. How this true self has come to pass can be a thesis-or more- in itself. It is important to note that 'the self' is not something that developed itself merely within the frame of therapy and psychology. Instead, it is a concept that has been under strong external influence. An important influence, especially in the context of a consumer-oriented society, is that of liberalism.⁹⁹ Liberalism, being free and autonomous, has been a major influence on the history of Europe. It has inspired revolutions and (religious) wars and has completely transformed our economy. Apparently, when looking at the characteristics of the self as stated by Rose, it has also radically transformed the Western perception of personhood.

Therapy on the market: self-help

Therapy, like everything in Western society, has become a market, a form of economic capital. This happens in many forms, which cannot all be mentioned in this thesis. Therefore the focus lies instead on the therapeutic market that is most important for this research: the market of self-help.

Self-help is a genre that aims to provide personal and easily accessible therapy and advice for the general public. The 'institutionalized' self-help, meaning those self-help formulas which are clearly outlined and labeled, are mostly sold in the form of a book. Another important source where one can find self-help is on the internet, YouTube in particular. However, this type is very fragmented and often not openly connected to certain books, films, or authors. In this research, I will therefore not concentrate on self-help on YouTube.

When searching for 'self-help' in the digital database of Broese Utrecht, the biggest bookstore in Utrecht, I got 13.702 hits for that category. The titles vary from *how to lose belly fat* to *self-help hypnosis material* and *300 daily affirmations*. Even Smiles' *Self-Help* from 1859 is still for sale. Two other of the largest bookstores in the Netherlands, Scheltema Amsterdam and Donner Rotterdam, came up with 1751 and 550 hits, respectively. Note that in the last two cases, these are only the books that have the words 'self-help' in the title. There might be many more titles available, who are less implicit about being self-help books.

⁹⁸ Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, 1.

⁹⁹ Roger Foster, "Therapeutic culture, authenticity and neo-liberalism," *History of the Human Sciences* 29(1) (2016): 113.

Much has been written about the form and function about self-help and the Mind-Body-Spirit (MBS)- genre, in which self-help is usually categorized. In these writings, authors have tried to establish different models for what the definition of self-help should be. For this thesis, different of such articles were studied. The work of Elizabeth Puttick, who discusses whether MBS literature reflects or creates spiritual trends, and that of Helen Lee, who studied the rhetorics of the MBS genre, were ultimately not specific enough for this analysis.¹⁰⁰ This choice has been made because these works try to establish general conclusions about the whole MBS genre, of which self-help is just a part. Heidi Marie Rimke does focus on the self-help genre in particular. However, her work is mostly about the power implemented on individuals by self-help.¹⁰¹ As it is not the aim of this thesis to establish relations of power that flow through self-help, her work has also been put aside. Remaining was David Gauntlett, who offered a simple, but workable model of the form and function of self-help.

According to David Gauntlett, self-help can have three functions. It can aim to strengthen the 'narrative of the self' (i.e. one's personal identity and biography), to transform the reader, or to learn the reader how to adapt to circumstances.¹⁰² In a time were individuals are focusing more and more on personal freedom, this last category is deteriorating. *The Secret* falls within the second category, as it aims to transform people's lives by proper use of the secret it reveals.

Due to the vast array of titles, categories and functions of self-help, it is somewhat difficult to define what the concept exactly entails and what it does not. Rather, it is like 'the self' a concept that relies on family resemblances. No two self-help books are alike, but they all have overlapping characteristics. Gauntlett studied a wide variation of self-help books and came up with the following characteristics of self-help:

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Puttick, "The Rise of Mind-Body-Spirit Publishing: Reflecting or Creating Spiritual Trends?" *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 1 (2005): 129-149 and Helen Lee, "Truths that Set Us Free?' The Use of Rhetoric in Mind-Body-Spirit Books," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22(1) (2007): 91-104.

¹⁰¹ Heidi Marie Rimke, "Governing Citizens through Self-Help Literature." *Cultural Studies* 14(1) (2000): 61-78.

¹⁰² David Gauntlett, "Self-Help Books and the Pursuit of a Happy Identity," Extended version of material from *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002) posted at <http://www.theoryhead.com/gender>, 2.

***Believe in yourself and you can achieve anything. Social 'barriers' can generally be disregarded** is you have the will to overcome them.

*You can't let the world 'happen' to you. Instead you must **take control** of your life.

*It may not be obvious what would make you **happy** in life and what is available to you. These things have to be worked out; and then you can strive to get them.

*Women and men are **fundamentally similar** on the 'inside', although men may have learned to be overly insular, emotionally withdrawn, and bad at communicating, whilst women may not be confident or recognize the full range of their capabilities. But in any case, women and man can adopt new ways of thinking and behaving so that they can become fully-functioning, balanced, self-assured, emotionally intelligent people.

***Change is always possible.**¹⁰³

In this quotation, some emphasis has been added. By this emphasis, one can clearly see the ways in which self-help is a direct product of therapeutic culture. It addresses the individual and its personal desires and happiness. Also, it disregards social, racial and gender differences completely, suggesting that the barriers that result from these differences only exist in the mind. The self-responsibility of the individual is also emphasized.

Although Gauntlett rather well attempted to capture the essence of self-help, he also seems to overlook an important aspect. His article focuses on the secular self-help, in which there is no reference to a divine or spiritual power, whether internal or external to men. With this focus he overlooks a large portion of the market. Self-help is namely also a popular subject within religious institutions and spiritual communities. Studies by Katja Rakow and Wendy Kaminer show that self-help is particularly popular amongst Evangelical Christians.¹⁰⁴ Kathryn Lofton has confirmed the popularity of self-help with research into journaling, a popular self-help practice. She showed that journals of evangelical christians and journals of Oprah-fans (who often do not fall within this category) contain very similar tropes. This shows that they both use a similar underlying discourse of self-help.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁴ Rakow, "Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's 'Message of Hope.'" and Lee, "Truths that set Us Free? The Use of Rhetoric in Mind-Body-Spirit Books."

¹⁰⁵ Kathryn Lofton, "Practicing Oprah; or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39(4) (2006): 611.

When self-help is employed in a religious or spiritual setting, the presence of some sort of power is essential. Within institutionalized religion this power is represented by God and is therefore external. In religious self-help God is a friend, to whom one can ask advice and who has the best intentions for everybody.¹⁰⁶ This is a dramatically different role than God has in for example Calvinist Christianity, because it means the abolition of predestination and powers beyond mankind. When it comes to spiritual self-help, of which *The Secret* is an example, the form that this power takes is less self-evident. The power within men is essential for spirituality. This however does not mean that an external power cannot exist.

This internal or external power is not something that can be directly traced back to therapeutic culture. However, in the margins of religious history, one can find many movements where therapy and religion have come to merge, such as the New Thought and Mind Cure Movements, who also believed in healing through the mind. Up until this day, there are still scholars who believe that therapy will rise to the level of religion, or even replace it. The simple merging of spirituality and therapy, or religion and therapy, shows that this is not a legitimate prediction.

Conclusion

Currently, western society is characterized by the all-over presence of the discourse of therapeutic culture. Within this discourse there are several characteristics that form our sense of personhood. The four most important of these characteristics are the self-evident experience of trauma, the existence of a 'true self', which is autonomous and free, the notion that one can completely sever oneself from social, racial and gender backgrounds and the ability of every person to change his life.

One of the direct results of therapeutic culture is the existence and success of self-help books. Self-help can have different functions, forms and backgrounds. It is as much used by religious institutions as it is by spiritual or non-religious people. Because of all these different forms, it is difficult to establish a hard definition of what self-help exactly is. Rather, one should categorize self-help with the theory of family resemblances in the back of one's mind. An important facet of self-help that cannot directly be linked to therapeutic culture is the presence of internal (spiritual) or external (religious, sometimes spiritual) power.

¹⁰⁶ Rakow, "Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's 'Message of Hope,'" 223.

4. The Message

The first step of the analysis of *The Secret* is to piece together exactly what message it wishes to convey. As Byrne announces in the introduction to her book, she is about to reveal a great secret. The secret to life. A secret so great even, she chooses to write it with a capital S. What, then, is this big secret? What does it entail? Where can we find its roots? How does it work? What is the function of belief when it comes to this Secret? What is its relation to other religions?

In this chapter, I will first elaborate on the fundament of *The Secret*: the Law of Attraction, and how this functions according to the book. After that, I will discuss which influences can be found back in the secret of *The Secret*. In closing of this chapter I will explain how the message of the book appeals to a modern reader.

The Law of Attraction

The core of *The Secret* is revealed rather quickly in the book. The secret to life is the Law of Attraction, or more specifically the knowledge of the existence and usage of this law.¹⁰⁷

According to Byrne and her team, the Law of Attraction is a law of nature, which, when properly used, can ensure that an individual can have whatever he or she desires.¹⁰⁸ Byrne did not create this Law of Attraction herself, nor does she claim to. It is a tradition that derives from New Thought spirituality, on which I will elaborate later in this chapter. Despite the fact that the Law of Attraction can be considered public knowledge, Byrne presents it with a sense of secrecy.

This secrecy is strongly related to what Wouter Hanegraaff calls the “inner model” of Esotericism. In this model, Esotericism is interpreted as a universally spiritual truth, which has been hidden from the masses behind institutionalized and differentiated systems of belief. Only a small elite would therefore have access to this spiritual truth.¹⁰⁹ While these masses would be kept content with ritual and superstition, this elite would have access to the rational and deep truths of the world. This implied that, beyond the different external shapes that religion could have, there was one universal truth for all or one basis, from which all religions derived.

¹⁰⁷ Byrne, *The Secret*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁰⁹ Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism, A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 10.

The sense of secrecy that surrounds Western Esotericism is also embedded in the book. It is presented with a sense of revelation. There is a secret, known to only a small and elite group, that will now be brought forward into the public eye. For instance, Byrne never refers to her personal inspiration, *The Science of Getting Rich*, by actually using the book's title. She will refer to it as "a book" or "a very special book". This is very interesting, because it conveys a certain feeling to the reader. Despite the large numbers reading this book and the fact that it has been covered on television and the internet, each and every reader feels like he or she has been personally initiated into this elite society that know of *The Secret*. Each and every one of them is given the feeling that they are special, that they are unique.

What then does this secret, this Law of Attraction, contain of? The name in itself implies its function. The Law is all about how to attract the things you want to yourself, and avoid attracting the things you do not want in your life. According to the Law of Attraction, man is like a magnet, and can thus attract different types of frequencies.¹¹⁰

The Law of Attraction is embedded in the Universe. The capital U, which is constantly used in the book, implies that the Universe is an independent entity. This is a common rhetorical method in the Mind-Body-Spirit genre.¹¹¹ In *The Secret* the same tactic is used for the secret itself and also when referring to the reader, which is done with the term You. In this way, the reader feels personally addressed. Also, instead of dealing with abstract concepts, one deals with demarcated, personalized entities.

The Universe is absolute, impersonal and completely rational.¹¹² It does not judge and it does not favour. It merely mirrors the other main actor: You, the individual reading the book, watching the movie, or deploying *The Secret* in daily life. According to *The Secret*, power lies with the individual, or more specifically, with the individual's thoughts. By deploying the proper thought process, one is able to control the rational and absolute Universe and to make it work in favour of oneself.

This proper thought process is called the Creative Process, and subsists out of three simple steps: Ask, Believe and Receive.¹¹³ When Asking, one must have a clear picture of one's goal. Byrne suggests the method of visualization for this part. If however visualization does not

¹¹⁰ Byrne, *The Secret*, 7.

¹¹¹ Lee, "Truths that Set Us Free? The Use of Rhetoric in Mind-Body-Spirit Books," 96.

¹¹² Byrne, *The Secret*, 27.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 47-57.

suffice, one can also create this clear picture by making vision boards, photoshopping, or writing. The second step, Believe, is less hands on. In order for the Law of Attraction to work, one must believe that what is asked is already in his or her possession. For instance, if someone wants to lose weight (an example much used in the book), Believing would include taping one's goal weight on the scale and buying clothes in the size one wishes to have, not the size one currently has. Believing is thus not limited to a mental state of mind, but also has physical aspects. The third and final step is Receive. This step is about making yourself mentally ready to receive what has been asked. You cannot have thoughts that contradict with your wish. In the previous mentioned example of weight loss, this means that one cannot receive the weight loss if one is negative about his or her body. The Universe, being a mirror, will reflect these negative thoughts, resulting in more negative results for the body.

Main influences

The individual is thus the main character in the discourse of *The Secret*. The part played by the individual is strongly related to both therapeutic culture and the theory of disenchantment. The individual can only be the main character in any religious system in the absence of a god, in a disenchanted world. The disenchantment of the world should be traced back to the Late Middle Ages. Before that time, the existence of angels, demons and spirits was self-evident. Without all these external entities, there is only man. Charles Taylor refers to this new position of humans as "the buffered self".¹¹⁴ Instead of being subordinate to external powers, one is only subordinate to oneself. The influence of therapeutic culture is most noticeable in the aspirations of the individual. The message "you can have whatever you want" refers to the chronic sense of unfulfillment and dissatisfaction often expressed by people.¹¹⁵ *The Secret* makes a strong appeal to what Nikolas Rose calls "the regime of the self", the absolute and utter freedom and power to do with one's life as one desires.¹¹⁶ Besides that, the message also appeals to an individual's expressive site, by placing the individual's wishes on a pedestal and urging him to act upon those wishes. *The Secret* requires action and expression in order to work, in the form of proper thinking and feeling.

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

¹¹⁵ Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

¹¹⁶ Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, 1.

The functioning of the Creative Process also makes the relation between *The Secret* and New Thought especially clear. New Thought is a metaphysical movement, of which the origins lie in the nineteenth-century United States. The movement is the result of an attempt to combine the new 'sciences' of neurology, mesmerism (of which the most common practice is hypnotism) and phrenology (skull measurement) with the more liberal forms of Christianity and spirituality.¹¹⁷ It is from the science of mesmerism, in particular, that *The Secret* owes its focus on magnetism. Within this new form of 'rational Christianity' created in New Thought, God has become bound to rational and universal laws of nature, and has lost every sense of arbitrariness or emotion.¹¹⁸ The founding father of New Thought is Phineas Quimby, a philosopher and healer, whose belief it was that physical illness was the result of faulty or erroneous thoughts. Quimby and his followers thought that research into paranormal matter resulted in an extra dimension to the sciences. To them, emotion and intuition stood on equal foot with ratio. They thought that the human mind was able to comprehend all.¹¹⁹

At the heart of *The Secret* lies the belief that mental creates material. Thoughts create reality, and if every person learns to control his or her thought process, we can all have the world we want for ourselves. In *The History of New Thought: from Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel* John S. Haller describes this authority of the mental world as being the core characteristic of the New Thought movement.¹²⁰ He states that according to New Thought the mental world is the only true reality. The material world is merely its creation. Another concurrence is the rationality of the divine.¹²¹ Byrne does not speak of God or Gods in her work, in the sense of authoritative figures. However, one could argue that instead the Universe is the "godlike" of *The Secret*. The Universe is after all a rational and universal authority, on which we all depend. In the chapter *How to Use the Secret* Byrne states: "How it will happen, how the Universe will bring it to you, is not your concern or your job. Allow the Universe to do it for you."¹²² A couple of pages further on in the chapter, she also writes: "Trust the Universe. Trust and believe and have faith."¹²³

¹¹⁷ Haller, *The History of New Thought: from Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel*, 3.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²² Byrne, *The Secret*, 51

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

One might thus be inclined to categorize the discourse behind *The Secret* as a form of dual sourced activity: a belief system in which an external divine or godlike power coexists with an internal power. However, there are also objections towards referring to the Universe as the divine of *The Secret*. The most important one would be that the Universe does not have a theistic character. It is, for instance, not transcendent, because people can grasp and influence it completely with their minds. The discourse of *The Secret* implies a complete control from men over the Universe, thereby eliminating forms of divinity. The Universe does seem to have a binary character. On the one hand, it is an absolute, impersonal and rational entity, a mere mirror of one's thoughts. On the other hand Byrne creates a certain affectionate relationship with this Universe, by emphasizing the belief and faith in the justice of the Universe. This makes the Universe impersonal, yet friendly.

The terms "belief" and "faith" are rather significant in this context. *The Secret* contains fifty-seven references to *believe* and twenty to *faith*, in most of these cases even to *utter faith*. Having faith and believing are central to successfully using *The Secret*. This is quite an interesting fact. Faith and believe have not been essential characteristics for religion until the rise of the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century.¹²⁴ Before that, religion was more defined in terms of ritual and action. The Protestant reformers transformed the Western vision on religion, or more specifically on Christianity, by making believe the core element of religion. Up until this day most western researchers see believe as the most important characteristic of religiosity, which is a major token of our culturally Christian heritage.¹²⁵

The value of belief and faith as implied by Byrne in *The Secret* signals the same cultural heritage. Even though action (thinking) is very important, actions are worthless without belief. However, the text itself tells a different story about the religious background of *The Secret*. Byrne does not shy away from religious references. On the contrary: she makes the claim that *The Secret* is (unconsciously) universally known to all religions, of all times and from all places in the world. In the chapter *The Secret Revealed* she refers to "Religions, such as Hinduism, Hermetic traditions, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and also civilizations, such as the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians" as having had teachers of *The Secret* in their midst.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," 271.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Byrne, *The Secret*, 20

She also quotes Buddha several times and refers to Eastern rituals such as meditation.¹²⁷ The Creative Process, one of the cornerstones of *The Secret*, can according to Byrne be retraced to a very famous source: The New Testament of the Bible. The Creative Process was apparently the method which Christ taught the apostles.¹²⁸ Yet again, this religionism signals the influence of Western Esotericism in Byrnes work.

Targeted personhood

The way the message of *The Secret* is structured implies a certain vision of personhood, which can be connected with the therapeutic form of personhood as described in chapter three. Firstly, the book stimulates the reader to remember an experience of trauma. Byrne opens her foreword with the following anecdote: “A year ago, my life had collapsed around me. I’d worked myself into exhaustion, my father had died suddenly, and my relationships with my colleagues and loved ones were in turmoil. Little did I know at the time, out of my greatest despair was to come my greatest gift.”¹²⁹

The events mentioned in this anecdote are not only experienced as traumatic, but are also quite general. Many people will recognize themselves in this immediately. This recognition makes later appeals on the reader, for example by addressing him personally by using You, even more effective. Secondly, *The Secret* emphasizes that every person has the responsibility and the power to change his life. Individuals have, by the power of their thoughts, absolute control over their lives. The ability to change was also on the list of self-help characteristics by David Gauntlett.¹³⁰ Finally, *The Secret* states that an individual can overcome all social, racial and gender ties. For the Law of Attraction everybody is equal. This means that an individual must merely take control in order to overcome certain social boundaries.

Besides this, *The Secret* also emphasizes the ease with which one can implement this lifestyle. Byrne makes clear that she will provide “easy paths, tips and shortcuts.”¹³¹ With this, she appeals to laziness, which is a characteristic that is often used to describe the generation of

¹²⁷ Ibid., 21, 23, 185, 192.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹²⁹ Ibid., ix.

¹³⁰ Gauntlett, “Self-Help Books and the Pursuit of a Happy Identity,” 2.

¹³¹ Byrne, *The Secret*, xii.

millennials. The easier the message is presented, the more likely it is that the targeted public responds.

Conclusion

The Secret is based upon the Law of Attraction, a popular concept in the New Thought movement. According to this Law, a person is capable to attract whatever he wants to himself by employing a proper thought process. At the same time, this process can help to avoid any negative events from happening to this person. This idea implies that an individual can, with his mind, control both the physical as the non-physical world, and that the Universe is impersonal and rational. The concepts of faith or external divinity are absent.

Byrne places *The Secret* above any known, institutionalized system of culture, religion or spirituality. However, the content of the message makes clear that influences of therapeutic culture, New Thought, Western Esotericism and Protestantism are essential to the creation of this work. Protestantism has shaped the frame of belief and faith that underlies *The Secret*. Therapy and psychology have created a mindset for humanity to which a message like that of *The Secret* appeals. New Thought, which in itself is strongly connected to therapeutic culture, and Esotericism together have shaped the exact form of *The Secret*.

5. Revelation

As mentioned in the chapter “The Message” *The Secret* was presented to the world quite literally as being a secret that had for the first time been brought into the public eye. Both the book as the film ooze a sense of mystery, a sense of secrecy. The revealing of *The Secret* is an interesting topic in itself. How is this revelation presented in the book? How was it marketed? How was it received? What does all of this tell us about *The Secret*? In this chapter I will explore the revelation of *The Secret*.

The revelation of *The Secret*

The title of this chapter, “Revelation”, is not chosen out of a sense of sensation or assumption. Rather, it represents a characteristic that is quite clearly noticeable in the way *The Secret* has been configured. Take the synopsis on the back of the book, the first thing a potential customer will look at. It reads:

It has been passed down through the ages, highly coveted, hidden, lost, stolen, and bought for vast sums of money. This centuries-old Secret has been understood by some of the most prominent people in history: Plato, Galileo, Beethoven, Edison, Carnegie, Einstein, along with other inventors, theologians, scientists and great thinkers. Now The Secret is being revealed to the world.¹³²

Besides the term “revealed” being used, this synopsis justifies the term “revelation” in many other ways. The book clearly is marketed as being the first to unveil something that has been hidden throughout the centuries. It is also suggested that this hiding happened consciously. Note, for example, the use of the terms “highly coveted”, “stolen” and “bought”. In the book itself, the claim that *The Secret* has been consciously kept from the world is expressed by Denis Waitley, a psychologist, mind potential trainer and one of Byrne’s often cited Teachers. In “The Secret Revealed” (again, the word “revealed”!) Waitley is quoted: “The leaders in the past who had The Secret wanted to keep the power and not share the power. They kept people ignorant

¹³² Byrne, *The Secret*, synopsis.

of *The Secret*. People went to work, they did their job, they came home. They were on a treadmill with no power, because *The Secret* was kept in the few”¹³³

This quote is interesting, because it says so much about the underlying influences of *The Secret*. Firstly, it mentions ‘the leaders in the past’, who, according to this description, were rather malicious men. This particular phrase points out two interesting characteristics. Firstly, that the power given by *The Secret* has long been in the hands of a small group. This is, as mentioned in “The Message” a signal of the influence of Esotericism in this work. Secondly it signals a distrust in authorities, in political leaders in particular, and in “the system”. A resentment for tradition and (dogmatic) rules is one of the ten semantics of spirituality and/or modern religion, as covered in chapter two. Wanting to break with known traditions and creating something that feels completely unique and tailored to our personal needs is apparently something that appeals to us. However, one can also think of non-religious influences that feed this distrust in “the system”. In an article from 2006 two researchers from the Public Administration and Organizational Science department of Leiden University came up with ten possible reasons why the faith in political leadership is declining in the Netherlands. Besides the influence of modern media, or the poor performances of previous Dutch governments, they also mentioned the ‘coming of age of millennials’ as a potential reason. They say: “Pleasure, laziness and lack of [social] engagement appear to be characteristics of this generation, and this generation is thought to have averted itself from traditional political institutions(...).”¹³⁴

One can of course discuss (at length) whether these are really the core characteristics of an entire generation, or whether a distrust of “the system” has a religious connection or not, but that is not relevant in this matter. What is relevant is that the characteristics mentioned in the quote- pleasure, laziness and lack of engagement- correlate with what has been described as ‘the therapeutic man’ in chapter three. In that chapter, I refer to the work of Freud, who thought of men as being intrinsically selfish and always seeking pleasure. Self-help is also tailored to these specific needs, as well as being easily accessible and not requiring too much of an effort.

¹³³ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁴ “Genot, gemakzucht en gebrek aan engagement zouden deze generatie typeren en deze generatie zou zich hebben afgekeerd van de traditionele politieke instituties (...). Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille, “Waar bleef het vertrouwen in de overheid?” *Vrij Bestuurskunde* 4 (2006): 60.

So is Byrne the first person ever who attempted to bring *The Secret* to the attention of the larger public? Not really. Because how, then, could she explain knowing this secret herself? In the book it is explained that people have, in fact, tried to pass on the secret previously.

Poets such as William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and William Blake delivered it in their poetry. Musicians such as Ludwig von Beethoven expressed it in their music. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci depicted it in their paintings. Great thinkers including Socrates, Plato, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Pythagoras, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Victor Hugo shared it in their writings and teachings.¹³⁵

Whether these men did or did not know the secret, or how it would take shape in their work, is not an important question here. What matters is their function in this book. In order to justify knowing the secret, without immediately affiliating themselves with 'the great leaders', Byrne and her team need another line of authority. They find it in the men named in the quotation above. Firstly, these men are generally very well known in the Western world. Whether one has a university degree or not, most of these names will at least ring a bell. This makes the line of authority with which Byrne and her team affiliate themselves accessible and recognizable. Secondly, the works of men such as Shakespeare, Newton and Da Vinci have a certain authority. They are remembered as some of the most influential men in European history. Thirdly, they are what could be called a safe choice. No matter one's current political, social or cultural affiliation, there is somewhat of an understatement in the West about the great names of the past. There are very few people who would look at this list and feel like they would not be associated with them.

Despite keeping the sense of mystery and elite intact, *The Secret* thus also represents success and greatness. Shakespeare and Newton are not in this book because they had such happy, fulfilled lives: they are mentioned because of their successes as respectively artist and scientist. This focus on (material) success is a very interesting one, on which I will further elaborate in chapter eight.

¹³⁵ Byrne, *The Secret*, 4.

Why is revelation interesting

The claim of bringing a new revelation is not unique within religious traditions. Every known religious or spiritual tradition is familiar with the concept of revelation, as the moment where the transcendent connects with the human. We see it in the revelation of Muhammad in Islamic tradition, reaching a state of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition and in the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, which is known in both Judaism and Christianity.

In Christianity, the best known religious tradition of the West, “revelation” is one of the most important concepts, mainly of course because of the Book of Revelations. However, revelation is also an important term with regards to the revelation of Christ and the spreading of his message. Luke 2:28-32 reads:

“Simeon took him [ed.: Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all the nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”¹³⁶

Revelation often represents the revelation of the Messiah, and with him of the truth. In the other Abrahamic religions, this Messianic form of revelation is also characteristic, though some, such as Judaism and certain groups of Muslims, believe that this revelation is yet to come. This is not a coincidence, as revelation has a certain function for religious movements. As Craig Martin describes in *Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, religions, like any movement or organization that tries to establish a certain authority, has to deal with the problem of legitimization. By using items from the “cultural toolbox” -such as myths, texts and rituals- movements and organizations can formulate a tradition, which legitimizes their existence and authority.¹³⁷ At the same time, they can create boundaries with this tradition. Who is not a part of the story, is not a part of the movement. Revelation is a particular form of such a tradition, because it is an legitimization that occurs outside of men. This implies an authority that stands above human comprehension. Revelation ultimately results in what Bruce Lincoln refers to as

¹³⁶ Luke 2:28-32, New International Version.

¹³⁷ Craig Martin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100.

“manufacturing consent”.¹³⁸ This means that it is a tool to artificially create a consent of how people should act and live: not because they want to, but because they feel like they should.

Another form of revelation, that does not revolve around personal or Messian revelation, can be found in the Pagan religions. As Paganism is really a superordinate term, I will explain this case by using the example of Wicca. Modern Wicca dates back to the 1940's, when Gerald Gardner first started spreading this new occult movement.¹³⁹ However, according to Wicca-ideology itself, the religion is much older; pre-Christian, even. Wiccans believe that they uphold an ancient religion of nature, which has been suppressed and forced underground by the Christian church.¹⁴⁰ In Wicca-terminology, revelation is much more about freedom, about shedding the yoke of oppression. One can immediately see the similarities between this alleged tradition and the tradition that has been carefully created in *The Secret*. Both revolve around oppression by the establishment

Revelation thus offers a legitimization for the existence of a religious or spiritual tradition. Besides that, it also embodies a sense of salvation. In *The Secret*, salvation has a different connotation than it does in most other religious traditions. It is not about salvation that counts for the afterlife, but for this current life. By learning the secret of the Law of Attraction, one is being saved from a life of mediocrity and unfulfillment. A person can cut loose from all decisions and events in the past and start again. It is a salvation that can be collected in this life, immediately.

Reception

The anticipation around the revelation of *The Secret* was rather large - at least from the author's' point of view. The question that remains is whether the public reacted accordingly. Did they indeed feel like something of utmost importance had been revealed to them? Or did their reaction not match with the goal? In order to answer this question, I have taken a look at Dutch blogs written about *The Secret*. Not all of these blogs were written in 2006/2007, because some bloggers did not discover the book until later. Some of the blogs have been written as late as

¹³⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁹ Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London: Rider, 1954), 13.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

2017, in a response to *How The Secret Changed My Life*. However, as these blogs document their initial thoughts about *The Secret* and its views, this poses no problem.

Blogs are useful research material in this case, because they are rather similar to journals and diaries. They are an outlet for people's personal thoughts and opinions. Via this outlet we gain access to thoughts and feelings that would otherwise often remain in the drawer of the bedside table.

In studying the way the reception of *The Secret* related to its intention I have drawn inspiration from Kathryn Lofton's work on Oprah Winfrey. In her article "Practicing Oprah" Lofton describes acts that are promoted by Oprah, such as reading, visualizing and journaling. The practice of journaling is particularly interesting. She explains that the journals of Oprah's fans often contain tropes that are also found in journals of Evangelical Christians.¹⁴¹ From this, she draws the conclusion that for some people, a person like Oprah Winfrey can have a similar role as God or a religious leader have for others. The tropes follow a set pattern of contrition, humiliation, volition and exaltation.¹⁴² Contrition, the first step, is the state of remorse or feeling sinful. This feeling is followed by humiliation, being ashamed. Volition, also described as 'purpose striving', describes the human act to set his mind to something and then commit to it. Exaltation, in closing, refers to the act of elevation. A simple example of exaltation can be something like "Praise God!". Journals are, according to Lofton, an essential tool for volition, because it allows the writer to write down his or her plans, organize them and reflect on them.¹⁴³

Because the correlation between Evangelical Christians and Oprah Winfrey-fans is rather striking, I decided to use a similar technique in this study. *The Secret* preaches a very personal, practical form of revelation and salvation. Does the public receive that message accordingly?

Well, not exactly. Instead, one can trace two rather different models of reception. The first one corresponds the most with the reception the book seems to aim at. In this case, a blog starts with an explanation of how the author was triggered to read or watch *The Secret*, soon confirmed by a statement on how their lives were changed. Yet none of the blogs show a sense of humiliation.

¹⁴¹ Kathryn Lofton, "Practicing Oprah: or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 39(4) 2006: 611.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

“It has also **changed my life** in another way, in a positive way also.”¹⁴⁴

“Wow, during the movie it felt as if **my eyes were opened**: I started recognizing things.”¹⁴⁵

“I have read both books and although I am critical towards some statements (those considering sickness and health) they have **changed my life**.”¹⁴⁶

“Who has heard me speak knows that **I owe a lot to *The Secret*** and that I have been living accordingly.”¹⁴⁷

After this, the blog usually provides the reader with some background information on the book. At the end the bloggers add a personal note. For instance, they explain their most valuable lessons from *The Secret*, or how they plan on using the secret in their daily life. This is their form of volition.

The second model of reception is from a more experienced crowd. Strikingly enough, this crowd does not respond to the sense of revelation at all. They lack any form of emotion that signals being surprised or enlightened. Rather, they explain that after reading *The Secret*, they have found a label for the lifestyle they already had.

“After reading the book *How The Secret Changed My Life* I realised that I already employ this lifestyle and way of thinking for much longer than I thought.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ “Mijn leven heeft het op een andere manier veranderd, ook een positieve manier.” Lisanne van der Vaart, “Waardoor The Secret mijn leven heeft veranderd,” *Lisanne Leeft*, June 15, 2012, <http://www.lisanneleeft.nl/waardoor-the-secret-mijn-leven-heeft-veranderd/>.

¹⁴⁵ “Wauw, tijdens deze film werden mijn ogen wel al geopend en ging ik dingen herkennen.” Joyce Jacobs, “Mijn ervaring: The Secret,” *Joyce Jacobs Fotografie*, January 30, 2015, <http://joycejacobsfotografie.nl/mijn-ervaring-the-secret/>.

¹⁴⁶ “Ik heb beiden boeken gelezen en hoewel ik kritisch ben naar sommige uitspraken (met betrekking tot ziekte en gezondheid) hebben ze wel mijn leven veranderd.” Sanny Verhoeven, “Hoe The Secret mijn leven heeft veranderd,” *Sanny zoekt Geluk*, January 23, 2017, <http://www.sannyzoektgeluk.nl/hoe-the-secret-mijn-leven-heeft-veranderd/>.

¹⁴⁷ “Wie mij wel eens heeft gehoord weet dat ik heel veel te danken heb aan The Secret en hier ook naar ben gaan leven.” Marian Palsgraaf, “Hoe The Secret mijn leven heeft veranderd,” *Just be You*, date unknown, <https://www.justbeyou.nl/hoe-the-secret-mijn-leven-heeft-veranderd/>.

¹⁴⁸ “Na het lezen van het boek *Hoe The Secret mijn leven heeft veranderd* besepte ik pas dat ik deze levensstijl en manier van denken veel langer toepas dan ik had verwacht.” Dagmar Valerie, “Hoe The

“Back to the question. Does the book *The Secret* reveal a well kept secret? No, it is more like old wine in pretty new bags.”¹⁴⁹

These people already practice the lifestyle of *The Secret* and are therefore its biggest supporters. Instead of writing about their most valuable lesson of plan, they usually make their blogs around their own success stories. Usually, the texts contain a reference to the life before the Law of Attraction - and usually, these memories are negative. They explain for instance how using *The Secret* properly has made a certain dream come through, whilst it seemed to be out of reach.

I found these outcomes to be striking. Although one could identify some forms of volition, especially amongst the first group, the responses in no way match the tropes of conversion found amongst Evangelical Christians and Oprah-fans alike. Both groups refer to *The Secret* as being a (potential) lifestyle for them, which signals the grave impact the book can have on an individual level. After all, the term ‘lifestyle’ implies it is all consuming. The most striking difference with the journals studied by Lofton is that the followers of *The Secret* grant minimal authority, if any even, to the book/movie or to Byrne herself. The act of exaltation, the elevation of power, is completely absent in both models. This is interesting, because often people grant their revelation to something, or someone, as became clear from the research of Lofton. I will elaborate on the act of exaltation in chapter seven.

However, although the model created by Lofton does not properly match with the blogs, these blogs themselves seem to follow a similar trope on their own. The descriptions that the authors write about their first encounters with *The Secret* have certain similarities. This trope, which also consists of several steps, follows a pattern of discontent - revelation - empowerment - gratitude. At first, somebody feels discontent, or even disgust, about his or her life.

Secret mijn leven veranderde,” *Bydagmarvalerie*, January 20, 2017, <http://www.bydagmarvalerie.nl/books/the-secret/>.

¹⁴⁹“Terug naar de vraag. Wordt in het boek *The Secret* een goed bewaard geheim geopenbaard? Nee, het is eerder oude wijn in mooie nieuwe zakken.” Onno Hamburger, “Recensie van het boek “*The Secret*”: het geheim ontmaskerd,” *Gelukkig werken*, August 7, 2007, <http://gelukkigwerken.nl/recensie-van-het-boek-the-secret-het-geheim-ontmaskerd-959/>.

“I discovered *The Secret* when I was in college (...) after a long time full of ups and downs: my parents’ divorce, my revalidation from CVS, a broken heart after a difficult relationship...”¹⁵⁰

Next, there is revelation. The reader has learned *The Secret* and experiences it as a transformative moment in his or her life.

“Wow, during the movie it felt as if my eyes were opened: I started recognizing things.”¹⁵¹

This revelation is followed by empowerment. The reader has the feeling that he or she can take control over his or her life and actually change the situation about which they were discontent.

“The way I interpret the Law of Attraction is that we can create our own reality. It is a power of attraction that you can use yourself. We are responsible for our own thought and feelings.”¹⁵²

Finally, the reader grants credit for this transformation. They do not grant this credit to Byrne personally, but to *The Secret*, as being an entity of its own.

“It has also changed my life in another way, in a positive way also.”¹⁵³

“I have read both books and although I am critical towards some statements (those considering sickness and health) they have changed my life.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ “Ik ontdekte *The Secret* toen ik aan het studeren was (...)na een lange weg vol vallen en opstaan: de scheiding van mijn ouders, het revalideren van CVS, een gebroken hart na een moeilijke relatie... “ Dagmar Valerie, “Hoe *The Secret* mijn leven veranderde,”.

¹⁵¹ “Wauw, tijdens deze film werden mijn ogen wel al geopend en ging ik dingen herkennen.” Joyce Jacobs, “Mijn ervaring: *The Secret*,”.

¹⁵² “Hoe ik *The Law of Attraction* interpreter is dat wij onze eigen realiteit kunnen creëren. Het is een aantrekkingskracht die je zelf in werking kunt stellen. Wij zijn zelf verantwoordelijk voor onze gevoelens en gedachten.” Sophie Carleen, “*The Law of Attraction*: mijn ervaring,” *Naoki*, November 28, 2016, <https://naoki.nl/the-law-attraction-ervaring/>.

¹⁵³ “Mijn leven heeft het op een andere manier veranderd, ook een positieve manier.” Lisanne van der Vaart, “Waardoor *The Secret* mijn leven heeft veranderd,”.

¹⁵⁴ “Ik heb beiden boeken gelezen en hoewel ik kritisch ben naar sommige uitspraken (met betrekking tot ziekte en gezondheid) hebben ze wel mijn leven veranderd.” Sanny Verhoeven, “Hoe *The Secret* mijn leven heeft veranderd,”. .

It is striking that this model of discontent - revelation - empowerment - gratitude is indeed rather similar to that of contrition - humiliation - volition - exaltation. It could even be argued that the former is a less Christian version of the latter. Contrition and humiliation, focusing on sin and shame, are replaced by discontent. Volition and empowerment are rather similar concepts. Exaltation is replaced by gratitude. It is not as much a change in pattern as it is a change in discourse.

Conclusion

The Secret is presented with a strong narrative of revelation. After being 'maliciously' kept from the common people for many, many years, it has now been brought into the public. The way in which *The Secret* revolts against "the system" that has in the past hid its message strongly reminds of the similar way in which Pagan religions present their message. Revelation is important for religious movements, because it is a way of legitimizing one's message beyond any doubt. This results in a manufactured consent, which legitimizes the existence of the movement.

The narrative of revelation is received accordingly by the public. A survey of ego-documents shows that readers of *The Secret* experience the book according to a specific pattern of discontent- revelation - empowerment - gratitude. This pattern shows resemblances with Christian conversion tropes found in the journals from Evangelical Christians. This makes it clear that *The Secret* can indeed have a profound and transformative influence on people's lives.

6. Institutionalization

One of the discerning characteristics of modern spirituality and religiosity is that it is significantly less institutionalized than traditional religions. This lack of institutionalization raises some debate about the sustainability of these spiritualities. Steve Bruce for example states that “New Age spiritualities “will decline”.¹⁵⁵ The reason is that their organizational and cultural arrangements are “too fragile to fare at all well in the future.”¹⁵⁶ According to Bruce the value of individualism has led to these fragile arrangements.

It is indeed true that most modern religions, such as the New Age and spiritual movements, lack the institutionalization that is common for the more traditional religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. For instance, some of these new religious movements do not have a central hierarchy or supreme leader, nor is it common for them to have a central financial system.¹⁵⁷ Instead, groups of religious practitioners can gather and disband wherever and whenever they please. However, the lack of traditional institutionalization should not mean that there is no such thing at all.

It is important to clarify the use of the term “institutionalization” in this context. Usually this term is associated with the literal founding of institutions and its accompanying hierarchies. In the case of *The Secret* there are no such institutions. Rather, “institutionalization” should be interpreted in a less literal manner. When the term is used in this thesis, it is to refer to the organizational and marketing-related ways in which the creators of *The Secret* have tried to make the book about more than just the book. Instead, the book now represents a lifestyle, a worldview, a community even, which is being held together by this alternative form of institutionalization. In this context, I will discuss four topics: faith branding, sequels, social media and community.

¹⁵⁵ Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” 777.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Streib and Klein, “Religion and Spirituality,” 76.

Faith branding

Faith branding is a marketing tool often used by religious organizations or practitioners. The goal is to brand a particular religious message or practice in such a manner that it appeals to the consumer-oriented society.¹⁵⁸ When faith branding is done really well, the branded message will even appeal to people who identify themselves as secular or atheist. This is for instance the case with the brand of Evangelical minister Joel Osteen, whose popularity reaches far beyond his own Evangelical denomination.¹⁵⁹ According to marketing professor Mara Einstein a faith brand becomes more successful on a secular market when the religious aspect is present, but somewhat hidden.¹⁶⁰ This does not mean that the religiosity has to be absent. It can be present, but it just is not specified or affiliated.

In order to establish how faith branding is used in *The Secret* I use the model created by Einstein and also used by Rakow in her study of Joel Osteen. According to this model, faith brands are "Spiritual products that have been given popular meaning and awareness through marketing."¹⁶¹ Three characteristics that are usually found within a faith brand are a logo, a tagline and a brand mythology. Does *The Secret* fit within this model?

In chapter four it has already become clear that the book is, in fact, a spiritual product. It has been directly influenced by New Thought and Western Esotericism. Also, it shows many concurrences with New Age spirituality in general, both in the way it presents itself as a pre-Christian tradition and in its vision on personhood. However, these affiliations remain hidden at the surface, as none of these influences are directly referred to.

The external features of a faith brand - tagline, logo and brand mythology- are also present, although not all equally prominent. The tagline in particular. "Feel Good. Change Your Life" seems to be *The Secret's* official tagline, but it can only be found online. This implies that it has been created in hindsight, in order to strengthen the brand, and not at the book's first publication.

A much stronger branding feature is the logo. This logo, which can be seen in the image below, is made up of a red wax seal with the words "the Secret" written over it. The typography looks

¹⁵⁸ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith* (London: Routledge, 2008), xi.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

like actual old handwriting, almost as if it has been written with actual ink and feather. It is a typography that is strongly connected to the third feature of the faith brand, the brand mythology.



Image 1: *The Secret*-logo¹⁶²

The essence of this mythology has already been established in the previous chapters. Summarizing, it is based upon the idea that the secret of the Law of Attraction is as old as mankind itself, but that very few have yet been able to grasp it. It has been a major influence on the great names of history, such as Shakespeare and Newton. With this book, Rhonda Byrne brings this historical secret into the public eye for the first time. History is thus a very important influence in *The Secret*. It is therefore not surprising that the creators have chosen a house style that oozes historical sensation. Together with the brand mythology, the logo and typography give a sense of history and mystery, of secret societies who gather in candlelit chambers and discuss the great secrets of life.

The most interesting about *The Secret's* faith brand is the thing that it is lacking: a face. The author is present in the text: Byrne writes from her personal point of view, often starting her sentences with "I". However, despite the fact that she is the author of *The Secret* and its sequels and the creator of the corresponding brand, she is not a part of the brand. Byrne could be easily replaced by any other author without disturbing the brand. This is unusual. The faith brand of Joel Osteen, for example, would fall apart without Osteen himself. Another example is Oprah Winfrey, according to Einstein also an example of a faith brand. The Oprah brand cannot exist without Oprah.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Official logo of *The Secret*. Image via <http://www.buzzsystem.com/usingthesecret.htm>.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 93.

According to Martin Craig, authoritative figures are part of the social hierarchy, both within religious movements as outside of them.¹⁶⁴ Whether it is the president, the ayatollah, the vicar or Christ himself: every social group has someone to turn to. Craig also explains that there is a difference between present and absent authoritative figures.¹⁶⁵ Present authorities are still around. They might not always be accessible -such as a president, for example- but they are around. They can alter opinions, ethics and rules for their social group. Absent authorities are those who are long deceased, but still called upon by the social group they once belonged to. The Founding Fathers of the United States of America are an example of absent authorities, as well as Buddha or Jesus Christ. Although these figures are often called upon as an authoritative tool, they cannot defend themselves from being wrongfully interpreted. They also are no longer in a position to alter statements or views.

Interestingly enough, neither of these forms of authority seem to apply to *The Secret*. There are a few people who have being credited with some authority by *The Secret*. I will go expand on this in chapter seven. However, none of these people take the place of the single most authoritative person, such as a president or the pope. Byrne is present, but is not branded as being an authority. Apparently, the faith brand of *The Secret* is solid enough to stand on its own, without needing a charismatic face to uphold it.

Sequels

Meanwhile, the faith brand of *The Secret* reaches beyond the initial book and movie. Byrne published five sequels, all under the same banner. The first, *Daily Teachings* (2008), is similar to a workbook, which contains day-to-day wisdoms and inspiration that people can use to apply the teachings of *The Secret*. The second sequel, *The Power* (2010), is about the most important force in the Universe: the force of love. *The Power* explains how to use love and gratitude in order to make the Universe work in your favor. Some practices, such as expressing gratitude towards your water every time you drink, have made the book a topic of skepticism. However, its popularity in sales figures, translations and time on the New York Times Bestseller list equals its predecessor.

¹⁶⁴ Martin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 116.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

Sequel number three, *The Magic* (2012), has again a more practical focus. It describes how the reader can use “magic”, i.d. acts that sprout from the philosophy of *The Secret* and *The Power* into one’s daily life. *Hero* (2013) is about the individual, the reader, You. It appeals to every individual, with phrases as “You are special” and “There is something You are meant to do” being used in the promo video. The last sequel in the series is *How the Secret Changed My Life* (2016), which is a collection of success stories. What is special about this book is that every translation contains two of three extra stories, from people who are known in the country of publishing. In the Dutch edition, these two stories belong to actress and fitness guru Fajah Lourens and tv-host Catherine Keyl.

The sequels are all written from the same discourse and philosophy of *The Secret*. One could even say that are all elaborations on themes from the first book. After all, the topics of gratitude and love, how to act and the uniqueness of the individual are all covered in *The Secret*. Besides the thematic resemblances, there are also similarities in branding. All sequels are published under the faith brand of *The Secret*. For example, they all carry the same logo.

The only thing that seems to be changing about the brand is the fact that the ‘faith’- aspect seems to be less hidden throughout the years. Whereas the foreword to *The Secret* contains no mention of the word spirituality, or anything similar, latter forewords do. In the foreword of *The Magic*, for example, one can read: “I am here to tell you that the magic you once believed in is true!”¹⁶⁶

Where the focus of *The Secret* was really on the rational, scientific aspect of the Law of Attraction, its sequels do not shy direct references to spirituality. This implies that the public of the books is apparently more open to the spiritual message than it was when the first book was published, or perhaps that one dares to take more risks after the enormous success of *The Secret*. Either way, it signals a change. It implies that the targeted public has, throughout the years, become more receptive to a spiritual message, and that such a message is now easier sold than it was eleven years ago.

¹⁶⁶ Rhonda Byrne, *The Magic* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), foreword.

Online presence

The team behind *The Secret* has made very good use of the opportunities of online presence. There are multiple Facebook-groups with fans, an Instagram account and an official Twitter account. Out of all these accounts, the Twitter account is the online one that is verified. That means that this is the only account of which we are sure that it is being maintained by the crew behind *The Secret*. The Instagram account also claims to be official, but has not (yet) been verified, therefore we cannot be sure that it is. It does have 1.5 million followers though. As the Twitter account “only” has 293K followers, the claim that this Instagram account is official is somewhat believable. These accounts post motivational texts or images multiple times a day. One can also find *The Secret* on YouTube, mainly with promotional videos for the books.

Once an individual starts following one of these accounts, he will be confronted with the *The Secret* discourse every time he checks his social media-which for most people is at least once a day.¹⁶⁷ It is a very time-efficient and cheap way to continuously remind the public of what *The Secret* is and what it stands for. Also, it takes no effort from the side of the public, besides hitting the ‘follow’ button once. It is also possible to download an app, called “The Secret daily teachings” in reference to book number two. This app, which costs approximately five US dollars, allows an individual to have *The Secret* at speed dial at all times. The makers of the app have not published the exact sales figures, which makes it impossible to determine exactly how often it has been downloaded. However, formulas offered by marketing companies deliver an estimate of between five and seven million downloads.

Community

An important aspect of institutionalization is community. The community is what creates and upholds an institution. Without a community, there is no need for institutions. By the strong online presence the presence of a community is definitely implied. But how does the public of *The Secret* feel about this themselves? Can we trace a community amongst their ranks?

The blogs that have been studied for this thesis do not give any reason to believe that their authors feel connected to other people who have employed *The Secret* as a lifestyle. The same

¹⁶⁷ Danny Oosterveer, “Social Media in Nederland 2017,” *Marketingfacts*, January 23, 2017, <http://www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/nationale-social-media-onderzoek-2017>.

counts for the messages about *The Secret* on social media. This does not mean that the authors only speak about themselves. On the contrary: their social circle is an important part of the blogs and messages. Relevant topics in this case are how to attract the right people, how to erase the wrong people from your life and how to spend more times with your loved ones. These loved ones however are not necessarily followers of *The Secret* themselves. At first glance, it seems as if every individual reader of *The Secret* is only directly connected to the book and its message, not to anybody else related.

However, it would be too easy to assume that there is no mutual connection between all these individuals, a connection that goes beyond the simple fact that they all read the same book. By employing the theory of the lonely crowd, one gains a further insight in the relations in this group of apparently non-connected individuals.¹⁶⁸ This sociological theory entails that since the beginning of the twentieth century, people are increasingly trying to break free from the tradition and dogma that shaped their lives. However, people still identify themselves by comparing and referring to the people in our communities. This way of shaping identities is called “other-directedness”.¹⁶⁹ It means that men look outward in order to establish who they are or should be. However, we do not have to actually engage with one another in order to make these references. This results in a “lonely crowd”; people who all feel alone and individual, but who are in fact very much connected.

It is very likely that this same principle is valid in the case of *The Secret's* public. Firstly, because the concept of other-directedness, wanting to be loose from tradition and dogma but still needing some reference, agrees with the type of personhood established in chapter three. Everybody wants to be an individual, but apparently there is no such thing as being truly unique. This would mean that the sense of community amongst *The Secret's* public is in the fact that they need each other in order to create a lifestyle which they would think successful. Without like minded people as references, they would not be able to uphold their lifestyle. However, as these types of communities are virtually invisible, being online communities, it is difficult to establish the scale of these other-directed relations.

¹⁶⁸ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 20.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

Conclusion

The Secret has become more than just a book. It is a complete package of books and online presence, which holds a certain discourse. Rather than trying to institutionalize this discourse in a traditional manner, the institutionalization of *The Secret* can mainly be found online. Through social media, websites and apps, everybody can have *The Secret* in the back of his pocket at all times. Through this online institutionalization, *The Secret* has an immense range all over the world.

Whether this establishes a true community of *The Secret's* public is hard to determine for sure. At first glance, there is nothing that signals this. However, by combining sociological theory with analysis of *The Secret* this far, it is an almost certain likelihood that there is actually a sense of community amongst this public, in the form of a so-called lonely crowd, which is being institutionalized by the anticipated needs of a consumer-oriented society.

7. Authority

Authority is an important aspect of our society. According to textbook definitions, an authority is “a person or institution with power” or “a condition in which people listen to you because of your rank and qualities.” Since we live in societies that are built upon a system of vertical hierarchy, we have authorities everywhere: within our families, work environments, sports clubs and social relations. Hierarchy and authority are also important within a religious system. The people or institutes that embody authority determine the form and course of that particular system. They can also alter rules regarding official beliefs and practices and function as role models.

Forms of authority are something that is universally found within religious movements.¹⁷⁰ The main function of authority in this case is to create an uncontested answer to the why-question. This is called “manufactured consent”, which means as much as an artificially created consent within a social group about a certain topic. Often, researchers speak of local authority. This means that an authority is not universally acknowledged by all people, but only by a specific group.

Within *The Secret*, there are several people and objects that seem to hold authority: Byrne herself, the Teachers, and the historical tradition of *The Secret*. In this chapter, the role and form of these different authorities will be studied. Up until now, most of this analysis suggested that *The Secret* is a highly individualized worldview. How does this relate to the system of authorities?

Personal authorities

According to *The Secret*, the Teachers are people who have knowledge of the secret and who are willing to pass this knowledge on. The concept of a teacher-student relation is quite common for religions. One can find similar relations in Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. Jesus, for example, is often addressed by his disciples as “meester”, which is a Dutch word that can be read as “teacher”. Within Western Esotericism and other mystical traditions, the concept of teachership is also an important feature.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Martin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 116.

¹⁷¹ Hanegraaff, “The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism,” 27.

In the foreword of *The Secret* Byrne mentions that she has spoken with fifty-five “of the greatest teachers” in order to make the movie and later write the book.¹⁷² Curiously enough, all of these teachers lived in the United States. One can think of multiple possible causes to explain this particular success. One of the reasons could be that the message of *The Secret* strongly appeals to the American Dream-mentality, in the sense that it emphasizes freedom, success and prosperity. Also, it could have something to do with the fact that the New Thought movement originated in the United States and was also quite successful there. *The Secret* is very clearly influenced by New Thought. Therefore, it would be a logical consequence that, like New Thought, *The Secret* is particularly popular in the United States. A third reason that must be considered is that Byrne landed in a particular network of people who share a similar mindset. As she explains in her foreword, she was lead from one teacher to another. This can also explain the locality of the Teachers. Whatever the particular reason, it also emphasizes that we are dealing with an essentially Western discourse.

Out of the fifty-five teachers who have been interviewed twenty-five have been granted a place in the book. This means they are often quoted throughout the book and have their picture and biography incorporated in the appendix. The particular reasons why these twenty-five were selected are unspecified. The identities of the other thirty teachers are not to be determined, so it is unclear in which way they attributed to or contradicted the statements that are now found in the book. The Teachers’ background is quite mixed when it comes to their work. There are some spiritual trainers and practitioners amongst them, but also entrepreneurs, a philosopher and a chiropractor. One thing they do all have in common is that they are very successful in their chosen profession. In other areas, the group is quite homogenous. Out of the twenty-five teachers, only four are women, and only one is African-American. This means that the majority of the teachers are middle-aged white men. This is quite peculiar, as other studies have often concluded that women are the most drawn to self-help books.¹⁷³ One would think that middle-aged white men are not exactly a tool to appeal to more women. This raises the question whether *The Secret* has indeed a ‘typical self-help target audience’ or not.

One can draw many questions out of this age, race and gender division amongst the teachers. It seems as if the majority of the people who experienced successes with *The Secret* were

¹⁷² Byrne, *The Secret*, x.

¹⁷³ Heelas, “Spiritualities of Life,” 770.

already rather privileged, being white and male. The obstacles that they would experience from their background will not have been that intense as obstacles that occur to people from a different race or sex. However, what is more relevant than a debate about race or gender in this case is the position of the teachers in relation to the 'students', the readers. In a book that appeals to peoples' individuality and personal responsibility, what is the role of a teacher?

It is at first important to establish what the teachers are not. Firstly, they are not divine, nor do they have any essence of transcendence. They are common people, one hundred percent human and mortal. Secondly, they have no leader. There is no apparent hierarchy amongst the teachers. On the contrary, it does not even become clear whether they know each other or not. This is interesting, because people tend to create hierarchy within groups of people, also in a religious context. Think for instance of the intricate hierarchal systems of the Protestant and Catholic churches. Thirdly, the teachers do not appeal to ethics or morality. They do not formulate guidelines for what it means to be a good person. Rather, they draw authority from their own successful experiences with *The Secret*.

It is in such messages that one can find the essence of what it means to be a teacher for *The Secret*. These men, and few women, are role models. They are people who, according to modern standards, have achieved everything: they look good, they are healthy, they are rich, they have a happy family life, they ride in nice cars, they travel a lot, etcetera. They are the ultimate self-made persons. Instead of literally teaching their students, their function seems to be more to set an example for their students. One must note that this example is based upon material success and personal happiness.

Another possible authority is Rhonda Byrne herself. She has a double role in this context. On the one hand, she is of course one of the Teachers. On the other hand, she has a special role being the author of *The Secret* and its sequels.

Byrne is an Australian, who used to work as a tv-producer until her early fifties, when she started working on *The Secret* documentary. She has developed a strong therapeutic narrative, which she uses as justification and inspiration for her books. Over the years, Byrne has gained an considerable influence. In 2007, the year after the publication of *The Secret*, she was awarded the 93th place on the Most Influential People List from *Time Magazine*.¹⁷⁴ Also, she

¹⁷⁴ Jack Canfield, "The 2007 TIME 100: Rhonda Byrne," *Time Magazine*, May 3, 2007, http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1615737_1615871,00.html.

has been on the Watkins List of Spiritual Influencers since 2010.¹⁷⁵ In this list she consistently holds a top ten position, which fluctuates with several positions depending on whether she published a book the year before. In the top ten Byrne is in the company of amongst others the Dalai Lama, the pope and Oprah Winfrey.

From all the Teachers, Byrne is the only one who truly holds some authority. This authority is not so much in the things she teaches, as it is in who she selects to teach. Her personal selections determine what is, and thus also what is not, said in her books. By yielding this authority, she is really the only one who is in charge on a personal level. However, it is important to note that this is a different form of authority than the one Craig Martin speaks of when he speaks of authoritative figures. These figures are acknowledged and called upon by the social group over which they hold authority.¹⁷⁶ There is no evidence that this is the case with Byrne. Her authority does thus not seem to overreach that of any author

Is there then no truly authoritative figure in the discourse of *The Secret*? As a matter of fact, there is. As Martin describes, a text or thing can get the role of authoritative figure, when another personal authority is absent.¹⁷⁷ The example he uses is that of the Torah, which holds the position of authoritative figure in the Jewish tradition, in the absence of a personified authority. It can definitely be argued that *The Secret* has a similar role for its community. This would explain the lack of personified authority, as well as the lack of a face for the faith brand. The text holds the authority on its own. It is the book itself that is the most important authoritative 'person'.

Tradition

Another pillar of authority within *The Secret* is the authority of tradition. This is relevant for two reasons: firstly, because tradition is a thing, a tool from the cultural toolbox, from which one can draw authority. Secondly, the tradition functions as the life's story of *The Secret*, which is, as I have established in the former paragraph, the personification of authority in this case. I have

¹⁷⁵ "Watkins Spiritual 100 List," *Watkins Magazine*, February 11, 2006, <http://www.watkinsmagazine.com/watkins-spiritual-100-list-2016>. (earlier editions can be found via this link).

¹⁷⁶ Martin, *Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 116,

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

already referred to the way the secret is being traced back through time via the great names of Western history. Also, I have mentioned the logo and typography used throughout the book (and its sequels), which also trigger a sense of historical sensation. The authority of tradition, however, goes beyond this. While reading the book one stumbles upon a carefully created tradition, that goes back to the beginning of time. It is the history of *The Secret*.

On the first page of the book, before the dedication, one finds the following quote: "It's above, so below. It's within, so without."¹⁷⁸ This quotation suggests that the first mentioning of the secret was as early as 3000 BC. The location of this find, the Emerald Tablet, is perhaps even more striking. The Emerald Tablet is a rather mysterious tablet, of which the exact origins are unknown. However, it played a big part in alchemy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.¹⁷⁹ The thoughts and practices of alchemy in its turn are said to have influenced the rise of Western Esotericism.¹⁸⁰ Via the Emerald Tablet, Byrne thus creates a direct spiritual and mystical connection to ideas written down over 5000 years ago.

Next, Byrne combines pieces of different religious and philosophical systems to trace the secret through time. As mentioned in chapter four Jesus' way of teaching is taken as the example of a perfectly executed Creative Process. In the chapter "The Secret to Money", Byrne also mentions that some of the most prominent names from the Bible - Abraham, Isaac, Moses, for example - were "prosperity teachers" themselves. It is interesting that these figures are mentioned in the context of the prosperity gospel. It is common discussion whether religion and spirituality can co-exist with capitalism, or whether consumption affects the value of religion negatively.¹⁸¹ With this example, it becomes immediately clear that the creators of *The Secret* do not only think religion and capitalism can co-exist, but even that they are destined to co-exist. These referrals to Christianity are combined with referrals to the Eastern religions and philosophies. Buddha is a much quoted figure in *The Secret*. Also often mentioned is Feng Shui, which according to Byrne is a perfect physical manifestation of the secret.

¹⁷⁸ Byrne, *The Secret*, vi.

¹⁷⁹ Peter Forshaw, "Alchemical Exegesis: Fractious Distillations of the Essence of Hermes," in *Chymists and Chymistry: Studies in the History of Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry*, ed. L.M. Principe (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2007), 28.

¹⁸⁰ Hanegraaff, "The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism," 27.

¹⁸¹ Heelas, "Spiritualities of Life," 764.

This religious and philosophical authority is combined with authority of a whole different type: the natural sciences. Who has read chapter four will immediately notice how this combination is very typical for New Thought. After all, the founders of the New Thought movement also wanted to combine their Christian beliefs with then actual bèta sciences. According to *The Secret*, the most authoritative figure from the natural sciences is Albert Einstein, because of his work on quantum mechanics. He is quoted multiple times, with amongst others the following statement: "Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions."¹⁸²

Besides Einstein, *The Secret* also mentions the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. All of these men have invented something completely new. In the eyes of Byrne, that is proof that they applied the secret into their lives. The fact that they created something that was truly new proved that their ideas came from the mind. Whether these men did or did not have knowledge of the secret remains ambiguous. However, their presence in the book makes a profound statement. It shows that even the most rational and scientific men practiced the secret. This can be interpreted as an attempt to distance *The Secret* from accusations of being woolly or vague.

Conclusion

Authority is an important concept within social groups, both religious as non-religious. It is a universal characteristic of human societies to install authorities, whether they be personal or impersonal. At first glance, *The Secret* seems to know many authoritative individuals. Teachers, whose successes have granted them the right to act as role models for the new following of the book. However, when looking closely, none of these Teachers hold any true authority. They are role models, but they do not have the power to change the ideas and views presented in *The Secret*, nor are they placed on a pedestal by the readers. Author Rhonda Byrne is an exception to this rule. Although there are no signals that she has been seen as an authority by *The Secret's* public, she has in fact some power. This power is manifested in the fact that she, as author, is able to choose the Teachers. Thereby, she controls the views and practices manifested in *The Secret*. Her influence seems to reach beyond the community she built around *The Secret* brand, as she is consistently ranked amongst the most influential spiritual thinkers in the world.

¹⁸² Byrne, *The Secret*, 91.

As a result of the lack of personal authorities, *The Secret* in itself, as a message and a brand, has become the face of authority for its followers. This authority heavily relies on the created tradition and history of *The Secret*. By this tradition, the secret can be traced back over 5000 years. It incorporates every major civilization and religion known to mankind. The tradition is so broad, that it can in potential appeal to every individual in the world.

8. The Place of Men

Many people have questions about what it means to be human. What makes us human? What should our goals be as humans? What is our place in this world? These questions however do not have straightforward answers. Different views on the place of humans, their ethics, role, goals and the essence of humanity in general have been drafted by amongst others religious, spiritual and philosophical worldviews.

As I have shown previously, *The Secret* is not about morality, ethics, or human interaction. Therefore, it is not surprising that the book spends little to no time directly on these essential questions. However, the message of *The Secret* does imply a certain vision of humanity, its place in the world and its relation to the Universe. It is this vision that I will explain more elaborately in this chapter. What does it mean to be human? What is the position of humans? What are our rights and duties? What is the meaning of life? And, perhaps most importantly, how does this outlook correspond to the conclusions of chapters two and three?

What does it mean to be human?

According to *The Secret*, humans hold a real power over their own lives. Your life is nothing more than a product of your thoughts. This also means that an individual is absolutely and fully responsible for what happens in his or her life, whether that be positive or negative. This line of thought is, again, directly derived from New Thought. The idea of self-responsibility is often mentioned throughout the book:

“Your life right now is a reflection of your past thoughts”¹⁸³

“You have the power to change everything”¹⁸⁴

“You sow it, you reap it!”¹⁸⁵

This self-responsibility can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it can give the reader hope, because it means that no matter how difficult a situation, he or she has the autonomy to

¹⁸³ Byrne, *The Secret*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

change it. On the other hand it can cause feelings of guilt and even despair. How and why did one cause all this misery upon oneself? Either way, *The Secret* leaves no room for something like fate. The concept of fate suggests that there is something beyond our individual reach, which can control certain events. Nothing is beyond our reach, according to *The Secret*.

The idea that our worlds are created by our thoughts also implies that people are also responsible for bringing the most horrendous events upon themselves, such as murder, rape, or war. *The Secret* does not really pay much attention to this extreme form of negative thinking, besides in the following paragraph:

“Often when people first hear of this part of the secret [red: the part that you are also responsible for negative events in your life] they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the events. It doesn't necessarily mean they thought of that exact event, but the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of that event.”¹⁸⁶

This part of *The Secret* is perhaps the most criticized part of the entire book. That image is confirmed by the digital ego-documents used for this thesis.

If the author of one of those documents is critical on *The Secret*, it is because of this or similar ideas. Often it is considered ‘too extreme’ to say that people bring war and death upon themselves. Out of the ten blogs studied for this thesis, six of them made a critical remark about the idea that one is responsible for negative events such as sickness or death. It is one thing to accredit positive events to one's own thought process, but it seems to be a step too far to do the same for negative events.

Whether this is the case or not, whether these ideas about being responsible for negative events are true or not, they do give an interesting glimpse on *The Secret's* view of evil. Evil is not an absolute entity in this world, as it is in for example the Abrahamic religions. Rather, it is something that has been created by men and can therefore be totally diminished by men. All that is needed is that all men are made aware of the secret. As the book states: “This is the knowledge that can set us free”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 13.

The use of this specific rhetoric is quite characteristic. As Helen Lee writes in her article on MBS-rhetorics - an article which is not accidentally titled "Truths that Set Us Free" - liberation, together with transformation, is a central theme in Mind-Body-Spirit publishing.¹⁸⁸ This liberation is psychological, not physical. It is not about breaking out of an actual cell, but about the breaking free of the mind. Free from every idea, thought or habit that can hold an individual back. "The truth will set you free" and similar phrases are found all over MBS-books.¹⁸⁹

Besides the events in our lives, our thoughts control something else: our bodies. According to *The Secret* we can control the way our bodies look and work by proper thinking. Byrne presents an example from her own experience: since she started properly using the secret, she can eat whatever she wants without weight gain. Before, she would always struggle with her weight.¹⁹⁰ Mind and body are thus one, which suggests a holistic view on mankind. However, it is significant to notice that no reference of a soul or any other type of internal entity can be found in the book. The mind is completely rational and bears no sign of personality. Therefore, it seems implied that an individual can even create his or her own personality, according to taste. This is noteworthy because usually self-help and therapy focuses on expressing the 'true you'. In this case, the 'true you' does not seem to exist.

The final point I will touch upon in this paragraph is individuality. As I have mentioned previously *The Secret* strongly appeals to people's individuality. It also becomes clear from the paragraph above that every person seems to have utter control over his life. However, this idea can be called into question, especially with regards to what has been said about negative events. Please reread the following part of the quotation about negative thinking and its consequences on page 55: "(...)so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the events."¹⁹¹

This statement suggests that groups of people, whole nations or (religious) communities even, have an identical frequency of thoughts, by which they have brought negativity upon themselves. It is at odds with the idea of autonomy. An often used example by Secret-critics is that of the Holocaust. According to *The Secret*, the Jews must have collectively, yet unconsciously, brought the Holocaust upon themselves. Some even go as far as to call Byrne

¹⁸⁸ Lee, "Truths that Set Us Free," 95.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Byrne, *The Secret*, 59.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 28.

an anti-Semitic. I would not go that far, because I do not believe that her statements are made out of malice. However, it poses some serious questions as to how autonomous individuals really are in the eyes of the Law of Attraction.

Man and the Universe

As discussed in chapter four there are pros and cons against interpreting the Universe as the 'God' of *The Secret*. Personally I side with the cons: not only because of the arguments I previously mentioned in that chapter, but also because of the relation between man and the Universe. This is a relation of complete authority. Every individual can, in theory, control the Universe. You can choose whether it gives you positive or negative experiences. The Universe can do nothing without the will of an individual. It is like a computer: it will only do exactly what you tell it to do. It is this will that separates us from all other living things on this planet: "[Humans] have a mind that can discern. They can use free will to *choose* thought."¹⁹²

Duties and Rights

Perhaps related to the fact that the Universe holds no real power over individuals is the fact that *The Secret* does not speak of duty. Duty, according to the dictionary, is "a moral or legal obligation", which can be inspired by religious or ideological convictions, or simply by law. In order to create an obligation, one must acknowledge a certain authority. Otherwise there would be no one to be obligated to. However, as established in chapter seven, *The Secret* lacks any form of authority in the sense of a divine or human leader. Therefore, the whole concept of duty completely fades. I must make the side note that this does not mean that followers of *The Secret*, or any other form of spirituality that embraces individual autonomy, lack a sense of duty or moral. It only means that the book *The Secret* does not speak of it- and that that makes sense.

On the other hand, *The Secret* advocates a lot of rights. What an individual is entitled to becomes clear from the index of the book. Different chapters cover money, relationships and

¹⁹² Ibid., 20.

health. These seem to be the three pillars on which every person should be successful, and can be when properly using *The Secret*. Once you are made aware of the secret, there should be no reason why you should not be healthy, have perfect relationships and be very wealthy. After all, you can create all these things with your mind. *The Secret* concentrates most on the acquiring of money, perhaps fed by the capitalist notion that money equals happiness.

“Prosperity is your birthright”¹⁹³

In order to eliminate questions about whether it is ethical or moral to strive for one’s personal gain, Byrne invokes the book series *The Millionaires of the Bible* by Catherine Ponder. These books, which are worth a thesis of their own, state that important Biblical figures such as Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jakob were not only teachers, but also millionaires, more wealthy than we can ever perceive. This wealth is explicitly interpreted as being material. According to Byrne, people nowadays have nothing to be ashamed of when they strive for their personal goals. It is a tradition old as time.

The Secret-personhood vs the therapeutic person

The Secret thus provides its own answers to some of the ‘big questions’ of humanity. Summarizing: a person is completely autonomous and free. Everybody is responsible for all events in his or her life. The Universe is controlled by the thoughts of men and has no will of its own. Prosperity is one’s birthright, and material success the ultimate goal. Evil, fate and the soul are no entities in themselves.

This is an interesting view with regards to the frames of therapeutic culture. One can see many resemblances between personhood as it is described in *The Secret* and the so called therapeutical of psychological person. Both concepts embrace individual autonomy and believe that people can change the circumstances of their life. Also, in both concepts, the focus lies on the current life, life on earth. They make little to no reference to what might happen after death. There is one big discrepancy between the two however, a rather peculiar one. The essence of psychology and therapy is that every person possesses a ‘true self’. The goal in one’s life is to get to know the true self and to express it. The concept of the true self lies at the heart of

¹⁹³ Ibid., 109.

therapy and self-help, as is extensively covered in chapter three. However, *The Secret* makes no reference of the true self. On the contrary, it seems to suggest that people are like chameleons, who can completely transform their complete essence by simply changing their thought process. The reason that this discrepancy is peculiar is that *The Secret* is often categorized as a self-help book. Yet, it seems to have a rather unique interpretation of one thing that many studies describe as one of the essential characteristics of self-help.

Conclusion

The Secret provides researchers with a rather unique vision on the place of man in this world. One has no obligations to a divine or human authority, as is common for religions and other social movements and groups. As a direct consequence, the book does not provide its readers with a moral or ethical frame either. However, one does also not have any obligations towards his or her true self, as it the case when it comes to a therapeutic man, because the existence of a true self seems absent in *The Secret*. Rather, an individual has the power to control the Universe and making it do whatever he or she wants, without any ethical or moral guidelines provided by *The Secret*. In this way, an individual can create his perfect self, and his perfect life. The concept of men as provided by *The Secret* thus comes very close to a deification of humans, as being all-powerful and able to control the Universe.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to determine how the form, content and impact of *The Secret* are related to and represented a twenty-first century, Western form and function of religion. In order to answer this question, this thesis has been divided into two parts. Firstly, I have shown how both the form and function of religion and the perception of personhood have transformed in the past decades, and how these transformations have resulted in a new form of religion. This new form of religion is highly individualized and often rejects religious tradition and dogma, while at the same time appealing to the characteristics of a therapeutic personhood, such as the presence of trauma and the idea that one is in total control of one's life. Secondly, I have analyzed *The Secret* against the background of these transformations. This analysis has shown the relation to and representation of this new form of religion.

The materials used for this study were the book *The Secret*, its sequels, ten blogs with the function of ego-documents and academic literature. The main method used in this thesis was discourse analysis, combined with the methods of document analysis and history.

Form, content and impact

At first, it is important to determine what exactly can be concluded about form, content and impact of *The Secret*, before connecting it to a twenty-first century form and function of religion. For this thesis, *The Secret* was studied in its book form. Previously, it had been published in the form of a short documentary. *The Secret* falls within the genre of self-help. Self-help is a type of book, which aims to provide simple, accessible and practical tools for people to deal with certain problems in their lives. The genre is so broad, that one can find a book for any problem imaginable. *The Secret* is thus a commercial product. At the same time, it is a spiritual product, despite the fact that the book is not affiliated to a specific spiritual movement by the author, Rhonda Byrne.

The message of *The Secret* is that every person is capable of changing his life, overcoming his hardships and getting what he wants, simply by employing the proper thought process. Thoughts should create everything, both psychical as psychological. This process, referred to as the Creative Process, functions accordingly to the Law of Attraction. By the Law of Attraction, one can attract what one wants and simply not attract that what one does not want. This is

because the Law is embedded in the Universe, which is completely rational and impersonal. The book concentrates mainly on material success and happiness in the current life. There is no mention of proper ethical or moral values, so the reader has to fill in what these values should be for himself.

This secret is presented as a mystical and old tradition, which dates back to a least 3000 BC. The real spiritual legacy of *The Secret* can be definitively traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the New Thought movement to be precise. The ideas that mental creates material, of man as a magnet and of a rational Universe are inspired by this movement, which was based on healing through the mind and rational Christianity.

Besides the influence of New Thought, other spiritual and religious influences can be found in *The Secret*. This are not so much found in the ideas and views propogated in the book as they are in the larger discourse, the way it is being propogated. These influences are Western Esotericism, which is clearly visible in the story of revelation, Protestantism, which can be seen in the way Byrne speaks of belief and faith, and therapeutic culture, which has created a form of personhood to which *The Secret* appeals.

As self-help is highly individualized, it is not easy to determine its exact impact. One can for example tell how many copies of the book have been sold, but not how many people truly read them. However, there are several indicators for *The Secret*'s impact. The first argument are the commercial figures: the book was translated into 46 languages, selling over 19 million copies worldwide. It held a high position in the New York Times bestseller list for over two years, as well as some of its sequels. Even ten years after the first publication, *How The Secret Changed My Life* showed that *The Secret* has had a transformative impact on people's lives. These same signals of transformation can be found in the ego-documents studied for this thesis. The faith brand of *The Secret* is well known and clearly recognizable. Even though the brand is impersonal, with the text being an authority in itself, author Rhonda Byrne is an influential name in the world of spiritual movements.

Thus, it is justified to assume that the book had a considerable impact, both on a more general level of spiritual culture and on an individual, personal level. Readers of *The Secret* have indicated that they experienced reading the book, or learning about its content, as being a life changing experience. Next, the book became a tool for pursuing their goals in life, and for pursuing happiness in general. To many, *The Secret* is an object they turn to when they

experience problems in their life, an object from which they draw lessons, and an object which forms a guideline for how they live their lives. The blogs that are written about the book also show a trope of transformation, of conversion even. *The Secret*, to these people, is a book of grave importance, which should not be underestimated. It is almost like a twenty-first century Bible.

A product of its time

Transformations in the perception of religion and personhood have been essential for *The Secret* to have the success it has, or even for its existence. In chapters two and three these transformations have been explained. The changes in the perception of personhood are mainly due to the paradigm of therapeutic culture. Within this paradigm, the experience of trauma is understood as being a core characteristic of personhood. Other characteristics are the existence of a true self, and the ability that a person has to find and reveal this self, and change his life for the better. An important concept in therapeutic culture is the so-called regime of the self. This means the freedom and autonomy for every individual to do as he or she pleases.

This new type of personhood also implies that people have different religious needs. Since the 1960's, the loss of faith in the grand narratives, individualization, expressivism and a growth in human's internal forces have led to a spectacular growth in new religious and spiritual movements. These two concepts are often used as each other's counterparts, with the latter being less important than the other. However, there is a group of academics who pleads for the understanding of spirituality as being a new, transformed form of religion, instead of something completely different. I find myself amongst them.

A combination of therapeutic personhood and spirituality has resulted in the possibility for new forms and functions of religion. This combination also explains the role that a book like *The Secret* can have for people. Being a form of self-help, it appeals to the therapeutic person because of its focus on individuality, changing one's life and being successful. Also, it works as a new form of religion. *The Secret* combines multiple religious influences, thus stepping down from the idea of dogmatic and institutionalized religion. The religious influences that are a part of the book, are not affiliated or specifically mentioned. Besides that, the book offers plenty of

room for individual interpretation and personal expressivism. *The Secret* places every reader on a pedestal, giving him or her all the tools to do with the information as he or she pleases.

In the introduction to this thesis I already stated that it was not my aim to establish whether or not *The Secret* is a form of religion. Rather, I made the theoretical assumption that it was, in order to focus on the explanation for this phenomenon. However, for reasons of completeness, I feel obligated to compare the results from *The Secret*'s analysis to Tweed's definition of religion, the one used in this thesis. This definition reads: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries."

The Secret represents a worldview which has naturally developed from different cultural transformations, mainly those revolving religion and personhood. There was no up-down power involved in the creation of the book, which makes it an organic-cultural confluence. Its function is to help people to change their lives for the better, to break free from their miserable past and to achieve their goals. This correlates neatly with the function of intensifying joy and confronting suffering.

The presence of human forces is evident in the book. It clearly states that humans all have the power to control the Universe and make it work in its favor. However, this Universe is also a force in itself, despite the fact that it is impersonal and controllable. Humans might be able to demand things from the Universe, but it is the Universe itself that then provides, makes sure that it happens. As previously quoted: "How it will happen, how the Universe will bring it to you, is not your concern or your job. Allow the Universe to do it for you." Another previous quotation emphasizes the faith and belief one must have in this Universe: "Trust the Universe. Trust and believe and have faith."

As stated, it would stretch too far to think of the Universe as a deity. The book gives no indication for a theistic character of the Universe. However, this does not mean that it is not a form of suprahuman power. As it is an independent entity to which humans can turn with their faith and hopes, it is important to acknowledge that the Universe is an feature of power external to men, thus making it suprahuman.

Finally, Tweed's definition implies mobility. This can be understood in spatial terms, but it can also be understood in terms of cosmic mobility. This implies a development in ideas surrounding the cosmos, the universe and the order of things, as well as a mobility of beliefs, practices and traditions. A same form of mobility can be pointed out in *The Secret*, as it presents its reader with a confluence of different religious and spiritual ideas and practices.

The Secret thus relates to and represent a twenty-first form of religion. Its relation lies in the fact that it is a product of its time, and could not have existed within a different paradigm. The book also represents a new form of religion. It shows a spiritual system, which is highly individualized and appeals to personal expressivism. Yet, it is institutionalized, by a faith brand and an online community, and is therefore a more cohesive system than one might expect. As it averts itself from traditional dogma and institution, it appeals to the modern man. However, it comes with dogma of its own: mental creates material. Prosperity is your birthright. You can have anything you want. It is a new dogma, which places the individual above everything else.

Evaluation

No research is without its flaws, and it is important to acknowledge that. I am very much aware that in this thesis, I am guilty of three in particular, which are closely entwined. The first is the use of the term "the West". As briefly mentioned in my Introduction, I refer to Europe and the United States when using this term. This might seem as if I believe this to be a culturally identical area. I do not. Rather, it is a geographical indication of an area in which the cultural transformations described are most dominant. This does not mean that they are absent in other areas, but I have chosen to keep the focus on this particular area.

Very much related to this is the fact that I neglect a vast field of religious and spiritual movements in this thesis, in particular traditional, institutionalized religions, as I already mentioned in the beginning of chapter two. This is not because I believe that these religions are not relevant or important. It was simply the limited extent of this thesis that forced me to narrow my scope. I strongly encourage future scholars of religion to incorporate research results like the ones from this thesis into a broader spectrum of religiosity and spirituality.

Third and finally I must reflect on the choice of ego-documents. One could question why the blogs selected for this thesis are all from the Netherlands, while the rest of the thesis has an international scope. I must admit that I have pondered on this choice myself. However, I have found that using blogs from different countries would not be helpful for a comparative analysis. It would be too hard to establish whether possible differences would derive from cultural differences, or individual differences. Again, I do not wish to imply that there are no cultural differences in the Netherlands. However, I have chosen the most homogeneous group in order to establish proper comparative results.

A step towards new religious studies

The conclusions in this thesis are not only relevant for this particular case study. They are also important in the larger frame of the study of new forms of religion, or spirituality. This case study has shown that apparent non-religious objects can in fact not only be influenced by religion, but also have a religious function for people. In this thesis, this function would be to “intensify joy and confront suffering”, as stated in the used definition of Thomas Tweed. *The Secret* clearly fulfills this function, as it aims to change people’s life for the better and confront suffering, by taking charge of one’s own life.

In a time of the decline of traditional religions and the growth of new spiritual movements, it is important to continuously challenge the scholarly perception of what it means to be religious. This means that scholars will have to keep looking at different objects, worldviews and practices that can function as a religion to an individual. Whether this be a New Age religion, a tv-host, a lifestyle or a book, they should all be treated as equally relevant to people’s personal, spiritual experiences.

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