

Salvation Goods and Religious Markets

Theory and Applications

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Salvation Goods and the Religious Market in the Cultic Milieu

1. Introduction

During a visit to one of the first “esoteric fairs” in Zurich, at the end of the 1980s, an exhibitor expressed interest in our research on “alternative religiosity” in Switzerland. What particularly aroused her curiosity was to know whether a scientific enquiry could reveal to her which new themes and products might prove to have “great potential” for her commercial activities.

In a paper given in 1997 at the SISR¹ conference in Toulouse, Hildegard Van Hove explained that she had come to prefer, to the extensive use of the term “New Age”, that of “spiritual market”, referring to “independent and freely accessible initiatives constituting a ‘supply’ among which ‘consumers’ are free to make their choice”. The very use of the word “market”, she further noted, “highlights the disparity of the existing trends” – because diametrically contradictory ideas appear side-by-side (Van Hove, 1999). The metaphor of the “market of religions” sometimes provokes reactions. However, when a researcher approaches different manifestations of the *cultic milieu*, the notion often seems adequate. Indeed, to approach the *cultic milieu* results in leading the researcher to believe that the “religious market” is not merely a metaphor there but perhaps corresponds to reality. This situation turns out to be encouraged by a more general social attitude, which approaches many practices in terms of “consumption” and con-

1 Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions.

siders the practitioner as a “consumer”. This reality surpasses the subset that we will consider here, but puts it in adequacy to the contemporary environment and, as we will see further on, renders the boundaries of the *cultic milieu* uncertain. In this article, we will attempt to illustrate this functioning through a few examples chosen from the Swiss field, but equivalents of which it would be easy to find in other countries.

Perhaps more than the term “market”, the adjective “religious” could be contested. Indeed, psychological experiences, the quest for well-being, and the search for a better quality of life motivate the practitioners just as much as do sacred doctrines or a connection with supra-human dimensions. The question nevertheless becomes more complicated when we observe that these motivations are frequently accompanied by a quest for meaning. Must any quest for meaning be automatically qualified as “religious”? At what point does it become so? We find ourselves in a gray area in a field with shifting boundaries: the terms para-religion or quasi-religion sometimes spring to mind. As Valérie Rocchi has well shown, “psycho-mystical belief is more complex than the simple alternative ‘religion or therapy’”, even if she notes a clear “predominance of therapeutic activity over religious activity” in the current context of these circles (Rocchi, 2003: 179).

Moreover, the very notion of *cultic milieu* is today the object of different uses. A work published under the direction of Jeff Kaplan and Hélène Lööw applies it to radical political groups, whether they arise from environmental activism or the far right (Kaplan et al., 2002). The authors foreground the *cultic milieu* as an expression of opposition to prevalent ideas and as a social environment, where theories and speculations often considered suspect by people who do not belong to the milieu can be discussed, debated, and reformulated. The only thing that unites the participants would be a “shared rejection of the paradigms, the orthodoxies, of their societies” (Kaplan et al., 2002: 4).

It was not in the broad sense that Colin Campbell – to whom we owe the development of the notion of *cultic milieu* – understood it in

the beginning: he placed the *cultic milieu* at the point where “deviant science meets deviant religion” (Campbell, 1998: 123). Nevertheless, the extensive applications have their pertinence and may reinforce the usefulness of the concept of the *cultic milieu*. One of the characteristics of the latter is to integrate beliefs not strictly religious but claiming to break with *mainstream* approaches, which can also engage in interaction with political convictions. For example, the success of “conspiracy theories” in certain sectors of the *cultic milieu* creates bridges in this direction.

Nevertheless, we will use the concepts of cult and *cultic milieu* in their most current sense, which refers to the wider milieu to which the *cults* belong, giving them a basis of credibility and providing a potential reserve of audience members for the messages that they are disseminating. This milieu “continuously gives birth to new *cults*, absorbs the debris of those that are disappearing, and produces new generations of individuals with a propensity for *cults*"; although these cults are sometimes of a transient nature, the *cultic milieu* pre-exists them and will survive them. The vast majority of those who circulate in the *cultic milieu* will never adhere to a movement. The *cultic milieu* must be understood as a permanent phenomenon, and not one connected with a specific trend or particular historical context – which distinguishes it from neighboring concepts, such as the “mystico-esoteric network” developed by Françoise Champion, which belongs to a post-1970 period (Champion, 1990), thus representing rather *one* incarnation of the *cultic milieu*.

Referring to the tripartite typology of *cults* advanced by Stark and Bainbridge (Stark et al., 1985: 28-30), we will be interested in *audience cults* and *client cults*, that is, in situations which are those of a consumer or a client, while the third element of the typology, the *cult movement*, would represent a status of member. In an interesting field study on the *cultic milieu* in one region of the United States, Danny Jorgensen observes that, the more a group experiences a process of “sectarianization”, the less the “esoteric community” (expression used to denote its field) is likely to consider the group as belonging to it (Jorgensen, 1992: 59). The *cults*, to a certain extent, need the *cultic*

milieu, but are situated rather in its periphery, the requirement of attachment to a group contrasting with the multiplicity of successive or simultaneous experiences encouraged by the atmosphere of the cultic milieu, whose fairs and other events place many kinds of offers side by side.

Even if structured groups often attract in priority the attention of sociologists and the media, their adherents are relatively few, as the results of successive federal polls show in Switzerland (Bovay, 2004). On the other hand, the flourishing of literature and practices that convey spiritual elements outside dominant religious traditions represents a development that touches a not insignificant segment of the population, including among regular church-goers, and probably even more – even if no surveys exist that would permit confirming it – among those who call themselves “unaffiliated”.

2. Mystery Park: scientific heterodoxy or new belief?

We will first consider a theme park: Mystery Park, built in the surroundings of Interlaken (central Switzerland) on the initiative of Erich von Däniken (born in 1935). A best-selling author translated into many languages, since the publication of his first book in 1968, Erich von Däniken maintains that throughout history (notably in the remote past relegated to the order of mythological periods) beings from outer space would have visited the Earth. These events would have left traces that archeology reveals and beliefs that transformed the extraterrestrials into gods. The extraterrestrials would also have genetically modified a cell taken from an already existing hominid and implanted it in a female hominid in order to give birth to a child endowed with intelligence: this would be the famous “missing link” of evolution.

Unlike the prophets (“contactees”) of groups assembling believers in “flying saucers” around a particular message, Däniken does not appear as a messenger of the extraterrestrials entrusted with a mission.

Nevertheless, while Däniken does not establish a “flying saucer religion”, neither does he belong to the line of “secular ufology” that is limited to investigating the enigma without claiming to produce a solution. Between these two poles defined by the Danish researcher Mikael Rothstein (Rothstein, 1999: 19-24), Däniken corresponds to a third term, which is situated precisely – and here we meet again the theory of the *cultic milieu* – at the intersection of religion and science. Däniken does not claim to possess a message of salvation, yet he supplies knowledge that constantly enters into the religious field. He states further that his work contributes to the transformation of human consciousness in the perspective of a New Age: “The new world brings a new religion, the new consciousness is a cosmic consciousness, a cosmic religion”, he declares in an interview, adding that it is necessary to reject the divisions induced by religious systems (Schneider, 1990:8). He is aware of the implications that his theories have on the religious field. The Dänikenian discourse plays with religious references reinterpreted in the light of an approach that claims to be founded on facts alone. The New Age style music CD, “World of Mysteries”, put on the market in 2005, concludes with a work entitled *Reditus Deorum* (“The Return of the Gods”), sung in Latin, which is also a way to refer to the sphere of the sacred. “Because one thing is certain,” writes Erich von Däniken at the end of the brochure accompanying the recording, “these gods of ancient times have promised to return. They will keep their promise.”

The remarkable book by Wictor Stoczkowski (1999) has shown that Däniken’s work, a “strange theological concept” of gnostic type (Stoczkowski, 1999: 125, 133), was also the fruit of a lineage. Stoczkowski identifies the influence of science fiction literature, but the “Ancient Astronauts” theory also draws from the heritage of Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891) and theosophical literature: it is “a fact of tradition that belongs to the long-term” (Stoczkowski, 1999: 222). In addition, he notes, “the occultist subculture is constantly with us, always alive, changing, and creative in its way” (Stoczkowski, 1999: 281). Dänikenism is thus an integral part of the *cultic milieu*, even if Mystery Park does not claim to be either a center of esotericism or an

amusement park in the usual sense of the term (Mystery Park Team, 2003: 7).

Mystery Park opened its doors in 2003. Through several “theme worlds”, pavilions dedicated to different epochs and cultural zones, it dramatizes the theses of Erich von Däniken in an attractive and popular format, having recourse to modern techniques of multimedia presentations – to the point of seeing Erich von Däniken suddenly appear in the form of a hologram! Besides catering to the perennial fascination for the mysterious and being a place of entertainment in a tourist area (viable even on rainy days during vacations since visitors can remain in shelter and enjoy both the exhibits and the bucolic vista of the surrounding landscape), what does Mystery Park have to offer? It offers knowledge and an explanation of the world. This explanation is not constraining; the answers are suggested in the form of questions, avoiding direct statements and apparently leaving visitors the freedom to decide, even if all the information they receive is going in one direction. This explanation of the world is global, even if only a smaller circle of the convinced will accept it whole. In addition, a visit to Mystery Park appears on its own site as a sort of initiatory experience that does not identify itself:

The enigmas shown in Mystery Park and the mysteries coming from ancient civilizations and from science and research are not part of the esoteric world. This ‘mystical’ world, where people have to ‘believe’, has nothing to do with the world of ‘mysteries’, of real enigmas.

The themes of Mystery Park represent true verifiable facts. These relate to existing archeological discoveries, ancient writings and mythologies that can be studied in libraries, rituals of different cultures documented by ethnologists, and discoveries based on technology and the natural sciences.

Here, people do not have to BELIEVE anything, as is so often the case in esotericism. On the contrary, individuals may come to their own conclusions or find new interpretations and solutions through their own thought processes.²

2 www.mysterypark.ch/index.html?node=116&pageid=56& [accessed 12 April 2005; no longer accessible, June 2006]

Mystery Park does not confine itself to whispering to its visitors that our ancestors probably received visits from space messengers. A visit to the bookstore permits one to observe the presence of an assortment of not only books by Erich von Däniken, but also major titles appearing in most of the so-called “esoteric” bookstores in German-speaking Switzerland. The enchanted scientism that challenges traditional beliefs accommodates itself perfectly to the themes favored by the trends of alternative religiosity.

One of the best-sellers of the Mystery Park bookstore, to believe its website, is an *Erich von Däniken Enzyklopädie* (Dopatka, 2004). More than 450 pages long (including almost forty pages of dense bibliography), this encyclopedia gives hundreds of entries about different cultures and world mythologies, but also about people: next to a few well-known names are mentions of figures found in the movement of the controversial knowledge promoted by Erich von Däniken and his *Ancient Astronaut Society* (founded in 1973). This builds a set of references specific to this universe, enabling those who locate themselves in it to accede to an apparently coherent corpus.

Mystery Park represents a subversion of Christianity and other religions as radical as a museum of atheism would be; all the traditions are there the objects of a euhemeristic interpretation, suggesting the intervention of extraterrestrials through different civilizations and reinterpreting religious heritages in this sense. However, while a Soviet-style museum of atheism would get a chilly reception in central Switzerland, Mystery Park – despite the criticisms emitted here and there on the lack of scientific foundations of the enterprise – benefits from the support and the promotion of institutions as diverse as Swisscom (principal Swiss telecommunications company), the Federal Railways, Fujitsu, Sony, Swatch, and Coca-Cola. This poses furthermore the question of knowing to what extent the *cultic milieu*, having arrived at this stage of respectability, still stands in the status of opposition to the paradigms and orthodoxies of a society supposed to define it. The opposition certainly still remains in relationship to the Churches or to the scientific world, but arguments like those of Däniken enjoy a high rate of acceptance in

popular culture (which would not be the case if they appeared as a specific religious message). At first glance, one could hesitate to place Mystery Park within the context of the *cultic milieu*: upon closer inspection, does it not rather show how – through one of its multiple facets – the *cultic milieu* has come to a sort of institutionalization that blurs its boundaries? More than to a development of the *cultic milieu*, this appears related to the loss of ascendancy of traditional religions on the collective imagination.

If reputed and “established” businesses do not hesitate to grant support to Mystery Park, it is certainly not because their board of directors adhere to the Dänikenian discourse, but because this type of patronage is advantageous in a strategy of advertising and commerce. While Däniken certainly dreams of the possibilities of disseminating his ideas that Mystery Park provides, the latter at the same time is deliberately set within the context of leisure (choice of a tourist site) and the development of theme parks. Entrance to Mystery Park costs 48 Swiss francs for the purchase of a full rate ticket. The Mystery Park internet site enables one to purchase not only books or videos, but also shares: a certificate for 100 shares costs a little over 2,200 francs.

The functioning of the *cultic milieu* thus comes to meet market logic, and not just on a small scale, but marshalling the same resources as any commercial firm, including partnerships with reputed names. This cooperation is established on a non-ideological basis, even if the plan that lies behind the theme park has the promotion of certain theses as an objective. The initiatives of the *cultic milieu* are adapted to market logic with flexibility in a secularized environment, better than could religions with monopolistic ambitions.

3. Fairs, salons and practitioners of the *cultic milieu*

As for the “esoteric fair” mentioned at the beginning of this article, it provides an excellent example of the functioning of this “spiritual

market” defined by Hildegard Van Hove (1999). In twenty years of existence, the very name of this event has evolved, probably in part so as better to adapt to the new “market” realities. The *Esoterische Messe* is today called *Lebenskraft* (“life force”), “fair for esotericism, consciousness and health”, thus amalgamating several themes with “great potential”. The successive editions of the fair reveal a massive presence of everything that is supposed to help visitors to live better and feel better about themselves: whether this is a matter of techniques or machines, all aim to satisfy this aspiration. However, this includes a little extra: health goes together with “consciousness”, indeed with “esotericism” and everything that it implies of secret knowledge. Discussions with some of its exhibitors quickly unveil the spiritual background of what could sometimes appear to be practices based on technology: for example, the working of a particular machine having therapeutic values was revealed to its creator during the course of group meditation sessions, and so on.

Those who go through this “market” in search of attractive offers are aspiring to salvation goods that surpass earthly happiness, even if the latter is a not insignificant component of it. As in traditional religious offers, immanent and transcendent goods cannot be distinguished: the well-being provided by different techniques is frequently associated with an expectation of inner development and spiritual awakening. Unlike traditional religious offers, however, the functioning of the *cultic milieu* is largely subject to market laws: with the exception of stands representing religious movements that are present simply to spread a message and are not counting on covering their expenses, the majority of exhibitors at the same time have a commercial goal. These people make a living or hope to do so from the practice they are providing. This fact distinguishes them clearly from religious movements, in which some of the most prominent members can exercise their activity as unpaid volunteers. In two years of research on workshops or seminars providing different types of personal development experiences, Hartmut Zinser pointed out that he never met anyone unemployed (Zinser, 1988) – and with good reason, since everything necessarily has to be purchased.

Over the years, the “esoteric fair” has seen a proliferation of practitioners giving “life counseling” (which includes palmists, card readers and counselors by *channelling*): according to the stand, fees for a thirty-minute session (generally including a recording, so the client can take the cassette home) vary from 60 to 100 Swiss francs.

Similarly, new “niches” for new products appear; thus, during the 2001 edition, five or six stands offered – among other things – little pills (each one manufactured differently) supposed to counter the negative effects of radiation from mobile or cell phones. The simultaneity of these initiatives demonstrates the existence of channels of communication by which new supplies for new experiences are constantly broadcast. The technological developments of our societies thus afford as many opportunities to develop new markets: this does not mean renouncing new technologies, but rather having recourse to protective or purificatory practices for protection from their supposed noxious effects. This is accomplished by the method of techniques presented as “scientific”, which are simultaneously as many commercial products. Technological innovations enable the creation of “derived products” on the market of the *cultic milieu*, which is all the easier as this milieu is found to be in osmosis with them and does not adopt the separatism of certain sects.

The *cultic milieu* shows itself open to the constant rearrangement of ideas and practices on an individualized basis, even if the backdrop remains the same. The encouragement of non-exclusive experimentation contributes to the syncretism of the practices. An already old investigation of the “new body practices” has noted, “If each is focused on a type of practice, none of those in which I took part is ‘pure’, all include exercises and practices borrowed from other ones” (Perrin, 1985:99). The tendency is not reversed, on the contrary, in a milieu where the exclusive is disliked and where the criterion is to validate “what is good for you”. The multiplicity of techniques must satisfy both curiosity and the appetite for novelty. Let us not forget that betting on several of them at once gives practitioners more possibilities to ensure sufficient revenue for themselves: syncretism is therefore also stimulated by very material factors.

Every year, the magazine *Recto-Verseau* publishes a *Guide du Mieux-Être en Suisse romande*. The practitioners are categorized according to the techniques employed, which are grouped into broad categories (“Symbolic Approaches”, “Personal Development”, “Naturopathies”, “Psychotherapies”, “Body Techniques”, “Touch Techniques”). In attending to the names of the practitioners, one soon observes that the same names frequently appear behind several practices. Thus, the Holopsonic Institute³ established in Lausanne, offers, in addition to its “third generation psychophonotherapy”, several “options” (“the therapeutics given in each case is suggested on the basis of reading the pulse for its specificity, frequency, and duration”): chromotherapy, color-energy, geobiology, oil and vitamin therapy, etc. Again in the canton of Vaud, Keola⁴ – an effort behind which one of the many practitioners comes from the Osho movement – offers conjointly Reiki, aura-soma, crystals and mandalas, family constellations, astro-constellations, meditation, Hawaiian shamanism, and more. The examples could be multiplied infinitely, just as the possibilities to rearrange, recompose and recast the techniques are infinite.

4. “Custom-made rituals” – the market beyond the *cultic milieu*

A certain number of practices respond to expectations and needs that seem to manifest in a framework exceeding the cultic milieu. The *Recto-Verseau* directory includes in its 2005 edition the entry “Celebrancy of Life Events”, where the company Gesrituels⁵ appears, founded by Philippe H., a pastor who had been unemployed for two

3 www.holopsonic.com

4 www.keola.com

5 www.geslider.ch (this website no longer exists)

years. Philippe H. began by noticing a need for rituals in modern Western societies to mark the major life stages, even if this need is today dissociated increasingly often from the will to belong to a religious community. The observation in itself is noteworthy, since it implies that rituals are no longer necessarily associated with insertion in a stable community, but in a group constituted according to the desires of the individual and capable of being recomposed at will from one ritual to another. In the same way, these rituals will be adapted to individual development instead of providing a fixed framework.

The ritual counselors thus supply “custom-made rituals”, by constructing “a ceremony that really corresponds to one’s personal aspirations” and by abstaining from “promoting or passing on any religious message” (Herzoc, 2005). Philippe H. declares that he wants to respond to a need, while conserving his beliefs and remaining “ready to take up a Protestant ministry again”, but at the same time observing that “Christian culture has no more meaning” for many of his fellow citizens (*La Côte*, 12 January 2005). This observation is indissociable from that of the existence of a market: in the beginning, the ritual counselor was faced with the need to find a professional activity. He explained to a television journalist:

A custom-made ritual is a little like a made-to-measure suit: there is a basic structure, a basic pattern, cut to the size of the client, with variations that the client will request.

Rites of passage are no longer experienced in the same way as they were forty years ago (...) in this context, I believe that there is a market in French-speaking Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe.⁶

Is it nevertheless pertinent to associate this example with the *cultic milieu*? Yes, insofar as such an approach corresponds to a break with the traditional models for the accomplishment of rituals. In addition, the fact that the author of this initiative contributes an article about it to *Recto-Verseau* and appears in the directory published by this peri-

6 ARC telecast, “Les nouveaux rituels”, *Télévision Suisse Romande*, 5 February 2005.

odical, shows that the audience of the *cultic milieu*, without exclusively comprising the clientele of ritual counsellors, represents a promisingly rich source of it. The new ritual specialists may not all directly belong to the *cultic milieu*, but their approach at least shows affinities with the latter, starting with a syncretism of references. The case of Gesrituals is not isolated: Netzwerk Rituale has already existed for years in German-speaking Switzerland (“Ritual Network”, www.ritualnetz.ch), which assembles several “ritual providers”. There is also Fachschule für Rituale (“Specialized School for Rituals”, www.schule-fuer-rituale.ch), whose three-year training program results in a diploma in Ritual Celebrancy. Reading the biographies of some of its facilitators makes them appear like people who gained qualifications through a quasi-initiatory experience:

During a three-month stay in a cave in Crete and after that in a simple country house, she researched and experimented with different elements such as music, singing and ritual, meditating and working with the body.

From Mystery Park to ritual celebrants, one cannot prevent oneself from thinking that the themes and practices of the *cultic milieu* are spreading beyond the limits of this milieu, and – to remain in the context of our analysis – are acquiring new shares in the “market of salvation goods”.

5. Conclusion: Fusion of metaphor and reality

The logic of the market encourages the syncretism of practices and beliefs. Does this logic cause it? Everything depends here on the definition that we assign to the “market”. If we understand it in the strict sense, in a strictly commercial dimension, at the most commercial logic has the function of an adjuvant. On the other hand, if we understand the market in a wider sense, that of the search for salvation

goods, the logic of the “religious market” seems indeed to represent an encouragement of this syncretism. The functioning of the market rejects monopolies. It demands a multiplicity of beliefs and practices, chosen according to the inclinations of each “client”. The latter is free to refuse, indeed even to criticize other practices, but while accepting the principle that “everyone chooses what is good for him”. On this basis, there is no reason to confine each practice to its field; combinations and rearrangements are perfectly acceptable.

Weber stressed that, far from relating “to the ‘beyond’ exclusively or even primarily”, salvation goods relate first to this world (Weber, 1996: 345-346). From this viewpoint, the approaches that we observe in the *cultic milieu* have nothing strange about them: the salvation goods that are supplied there provide an improved quality of life and open a transformation of consciousness.

Unlike religions, the *cultic milieu* does not expect an exclusive and enduring commitment from its participants: no one, observed Danny Jorgensen in his research on the “esoteric community”, “wanted to define the qualifications for membership, especially if it meant excluding other people, their beliefs and their groups” (Jorgensen, 1992: 61). The creation of barriers is not expressed as an expectation of obedience to rules, prohibitions, a particular lifestyle or personal commitments, in other words, anything that enables a religion to create distinctions between those who belong to it and those who do not (Iannaccone, 1992: 127). The obtaining of salvation goods has another price, which often corresponds, in the *cultic milieu*, to costs in the strictest sense of the term: the ability to pay for a seminar, a consultation, or a tool enabling one to obtain the desired benefits. The payment in money here represents the toll to gain access to the salvation goods. Although one can, of course, maintain convictions characteristic of the *cultic milieu* without spending any money or practice meditation for free, for example, the fact of not paying will limit one’s access to a limited range of salvation goods.

The expression “religious market” goes beyond its commercial and economic aspects. It is generally applied to the contemporary religious situation as a metaphor to express the multiplicity of beliefs and prac-

tices in alternative religiosity, where each person becomes free to make a selection on a broadly individualized basis. Choices are individual and – with the exception of a few rigid groups – belonging requires, increasingly less, unconditional and total dogmatic adhesion.

The professionals of the *cultic milieu* can, of course, reason in terms of the market and know that they have to develop adequate strategies in order to gain market shares that will provide them with a living. By nature, they are equipped to respond to this logic. There is thus a conjunction of the metaphor and the concrete reality of a market, with its laws of supply and demand.*

UPDATE - Due to financial difficulties, Mystery Park (see part 2 of this article) was closed in 2007. Its future at this point is uncertain.

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* Translated by Christine Rhone

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